

Jessica Swale

**drama  
games**  
FOR REHEARSALS

*Foreword by Marianne Elliott*

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## FOREWORD

The rehearsal room is a secret, mystical place where magic is meant to happen; a place where a group of terrified people come together to try to be creative, bold, imaginative, original and highly illuminating – in preparation for facing the audience that will inevitably arrive in their numbers, and judge! It is, to anybody, an overwhelming place, and, at their start, rehearsals can seem an insurmountable prospect.

But in this beautiful, and very clearly written book, Jessica Swale manages to demystify various genres of writing, unleashing all manner of meanings and depths in the text, whilst finding a way for us all to be playful. She suggests techniques to help us to break down barriers, and establish the trust amongst a company that will have to be incredibly intimate over the entire process of putting on a play.

I wish I'd had this book when I was starting out as a young director. Instinctively, I knew the great benefits of play and of games, but I had not assisted any directors that used them. I set about slowly to beg, borrow, and pinch any that I could find, writing them all out in a little notebook. To this day I still use them in rehearsals, almost every day, but particularly in the first few weeks. During rehearsals for my most recent production – at time of writing, *Rules for Living* by Sam Holcroft at the National Theatre – I shall never forget Deborah Findlay crawling along the floor, screaming, to protect her 'tail' in one game, or Stephen Mangan's brow dripping with hundreds of Post-it notes during another.

Games can be used in multifarious ways: as exercises to wake the brain up, to bind the group and give it an equanimity, to generate a sense of fun

and objective, and very importantly to allow failure (without humiliation) to exist in rehearsals – because every game is about trying to achieve an objective, and every game can involve failure as well as success. The rehearsal room has to be a place where failure is allowed, is part of the process and is an instructive learning device.

But also I find games a wonderful metaphor for the text. They show how to help the actors impart the words, thoughts and concentrations of their lines. A line of text is like a ball thrown from one player to another. To throw the ball so that it may be caught requires discipline instead of sloppiness, care as opposed to laziness, and focus rather than absent-mindedness. And it demands a sense of togetherness; a sharing in the game; a sense of the whole, the ensemble.

But Jessica also finds the use of games help us to humanise Shakespeare, or Sheridan, or Wilde. She finds ways of approaching all kinds of text that has become ‘stuck’ or stale, during the last weeks of rehearsal – or even in performance. And she gives us tools to investigate what is beneath the written words. To help us all stop staring inanely at the text and find our own ways into it, through a sense of adventure and intrigue and fun.

I think this book will become my constant companion in future. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

*Marianne Elliott  
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# CONTENTS

**Foreword** by Marianne Elliott ix

**Introduction** xv

**Acknowledgements** xxv

## **Part One – GETTING STARTED**

### *In which we warm up*

#### *Physical Games – Warming Up the Body*

1. Elastoplast 6
2. Jelly Beans 7
3. Running Man 8
4. Five Rhythms 10
5. Guess-ticulate 12

#### *Vocal Games – Warming Up the Voice*

6. Four Quick Warm-up Starters 14
7. Tongue Twisters 16
8. Rhythm Ball 17
9. Lips Tips and Tongue Ticklers 18
10. Shakespeare: The Musical! 20
11. Broadway Baby 22

#### *Focus Games – Warming Up the Mind*

12. Word Pong 24
13. Ring of Masons 25
14. Alfabexercise 26
15. Chair Pairs 28
16. Plasti-Scene 29
17. Up in Arms 30

<i>Team Games – Creating an Ensemble</i>		
18.	To Be or Not to Bee	32
19.	Adele’s Super-Hugs	33
20.	Top Knot	34
21.	Falling Trees	35
22.	The Boogie Pyramid	36

## **Part Two – THE STORY OF THE PLAY**

### ***In which we get to know the text***

23.	The Listeners	44
24.	One-Pound Words	46
25.	Personal Pronouns	48
26.	Jazzercise	50
27.	Shadow Play	51
28.	The Obstacle Game	52
29.	The Rubber Duck of Doom	54

## **Part Three –**

## **THE WORLD OF THE PLAY**

### ***In which we look at the genre of the play and how to tackle it***

#### *Greek Tragedy*

30.	The Ekkyklema	67
31.	Morus Chorus	69
32.	Bryan Adams in a Toga	71
33.	Mask Play	73
34.	King of the Parthenon	76

#### *Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*

35.	Improvised Pentameter	83
36.	Bard Ball	87
37.	Knotty-pated Fools	89
38.	Stepping Stones	91
39.	In Your Own Words	92

#### *Restoration and Georgian Comedy*

40.	Pick Me!	99
41.	Tea for Three	101
42.	Pinchwife and Sons	103

43.	Marry Your Daughters	105
44.	Lady Frizzle's Feather	107

*Physical Theatre and Commedia dell'Arte*

45.	Nosey Parkers	114
46.	Commedia Amplifier	115
47.	Annabella's Bananas	117
48.	Wrong Room	119
49.	Dr Frankenstein	120
50.	James Bland	121

*Early Modern Comedy*

51.	Ha!	127
52.	Animal Habits	130
53.	Circle of Friends	132
54.	Wife Swap	134
55.	Stream of Consciousness	136

*Modern Drama and Naturalism*

56.	On Guard	144
57.	Back to Black	145
58.	The Secret	146
59.	Magnetics	147
60.	The Moon is Like...	148

*New Plays*

61.	Character Graphs	155
62.	Outside the Door	158
63.	In the River Thames	159
64.	Beat It	160
65.	Dear Pa	162

**Part Four – SOUND AND MUSIC**

***In which we create the sound and sense of the world***

66.	Record Player	167
67.	Showstopper	168
68.	Soundscape Orchestra	169
69.	Musical Mash-up	170
70.	Infectious	172

71.	Rocky and Juliet	173
72.	Foley Box	175

### **Part Five – ‘BEGINNERS’**

#### ***In which we wait in the wings***

73.	Working the Space	180
74.	The Gallery Game	182
75.	Speaking of Fish	183
76.	Waaah!	184
77.	Warming Up the Space	185

### **Index of Games**

Skills	188
Alphabetical List	191

## INTRODUCTION

‘Caress the detail, the divine detail.’

*Vladimir Nabokov*

...‘That was a great show.’

...‘What a fantastic production.’

...‘That’s the best performance I’ve ever seen.’

Every theatregoer has heard an audience gushing with praise after a particularly fine production. But what makes a ‘great performance’? We can all sense when a piece of theatre moves us, or entertains us, or excites us, but have you ever asked what makes it work? There are an infinite number of contrasting ways to play a role, so it can’t be about getting it ‘right’. I would argue, rather, that it is about *detail*.

Good acting, in contemporary theatre at least, is most often associated with truthfulness. But what makes an actor believable? It is the detail of their performance; the rigour of their observation of real life; and their ability to recreate that on stage in a way which resonates and reminds us of ourselves. Acting is, and should be, hard work. An actor must have a profound understanding of their role and have the tools to communicate it. These skills are not only learnt through practice, but through observation of other actors.

Pick up any celebrated actor’s autobiography and you’ll most likely find it peppered with anecdotes about watching rehearsals; peering from the wings while they wait to enter, spying through the crack of a rehearsal-room door or saving pennies for the bus fare to Stratford to see a masterful actor at work. The one thing that all of these celebrated actors have in common is experience. Years of hard graft. They have talent, of course, too. But they’ve also practised. And that is something we can all do – starting now.

Most technical aspects of acting can be learnt. Voice, body and mind can all be trained. This book aims to give you the tools to do that, by providing exercises to use in your rehearsal process, which will improve and encourage a greater level of detail and complexity. Each time a company begins rehearsals for a new production, everyone has the opportunity to develop their craft. Use this opportunity both to illuminate the world of the play and present the best possible production, and to come away with skills honed for the future.

I love rehearsals. The process can be a veritable playground, an adventure in which to explore the play. It is joyful work. But it isn't just fun; it also requires diligence and precision. Without rigorous preparation in rehearsal, actors are simply guessing. And guessing leads to lack of decision-making, hazy interpretations and insecure performances which wobble from night to night like a spinning top, throwing other actors off-course. If you are a director, you can prevent all this by putting the time in to prepare your actors for their roles. And actors, you can do this work for yourself too. Know the play, the role and the context. This will make your work detailed and layered. It is this belief in the importance of rigour in rehearsals which led me to write this book.

## **Games in Rehearsal: How and Why**

Think of the play like an iceberg. The script pokes up above the surface, but underneath there is a vast world to be mined. And not just the themes and the socio-historical context of the play; you must also understand the genre of the writing. How can you stage a Shakespeare play without understanding how verse works? How can you put on a Restoration play without knowing that the theatres were lit in a way which allowed the actors to see and speak directly to their audience members, hence the 'asides' in the text? What I hope to do in this book is to give you the tools to explore every aspect of your play, in detail, in order to find the layers and mine the text fully, both for you and for your audience.

## **Finding the *Play* in the *Play*: My Experience of Directing *The Rivals***

I spent a good portion of my early career directing classical plays, from Shakespeare and Georgian comedies to early modern classics. One of the first was Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals*, a Georgian comedy set in Bath, for London's Southwark Playhouse. Wondering how to prepare, I curled up with a dusty Sheridan biography and before long I was so swept up in his world that I lost all track of time. I couldn't quite believe it. This raggy old book was a revelation. This tome about the playwright's life illuminated the play in such a profound way that I felt like I'd stumbled across the 'how to direct the production' guide. The parallels between the action of the play and Sheridan's life were remarkable. He drew constantly on his own experiences. Sheridan and his protagonist were both involved in a duel for love in the fields outside Bath. Just as Lydia and Julia debate the merits of a sentimental man, so was Sheridan outraged by the frustrating fashion for sentimentalism. And as for Mrs Malaprop's obsession with learning new words, albeit incorrectly, Sheridan's father was involved in writing the first dictionary.

For the next month, Richard (we were now on first-name terms) became the main man in my life. I read the books that he read. I took myself off to Bath and spotted references to the play at every turn, pointing to details in the text I'd never considered. Mrs Malaprop amusingly (and, of course, mistakenly) compliments a character as 'the pineapple of politeness.' A funny line, yes, but it wasn't until I passed the stone pineapples adorning the grand house of Sheridan's lover that I understood the extent to which the exotic pineapple was the ultimate symbol of privilege. Malaprop's line isn't just funny, I realised, it shows her allusions of grandeur. Her faux pas is therefore doubly embarrassing as it speaks of her grappling to be seen as something she's not.

By the time we started rehearsals, not only did I feel confident in my knowledge of the text, I was eager to introduce the actors to the fascinating world I had discovered. I turned up on the Monday

morning with a suitcase of photographs, Bath biscuits and vials of the pungent 'Bath water' for the actors to try. But here's the crux. We were staging a play, not writing essays. Research is all very well, but sitting and reading won't invigorate a cast. *How could I use this research in rehearsal?* And that's when I realised. *Games!* Exercises designed specifically to explore the text in a practical way. And while we're at it, why not also use games to help the actors with other challenging aspects of performance. *The Rivals* is full of long lines with multiple clauses which are hard to play. It also features asides and plenty of verbal sparring which needs great dexterity in the playing.

So, I thought, we'll use games and exercises specifically to tackle each of these challenges.

For the direct address, we played *Tea for Three*, in which the actors learned how to play to the audience – a requirement of most Restoration and Georgian comedies. To understand the specific themes of class and marriage specific to the period, we played *Pinchwife and Sons* and *Marry Your Daughters*. To help the actors tackle the long phrases we played *One-Pound Words*, to become dexterous with the complex descriptive language we played *Personal Pronouns*, and to capture the competitive sparring between Captain Absolute and Jack we played *Ha!* These exercises, alongside energising daily warm-ups (many of which you'll find in Part One of this book), ensured our rehearsals were demanding and dynamic. The games were never time-fillers. They allowed us to understand the play and work on the text in detail. And as we did, we began to enjoy it more and more, finding a shared love for the play and great pleasure in each other's company.

Rehearsals for *The Rivals* will always remain with me as one of the most enjoyable chapters of my working life, and, as a result of the depth with which we worked, the show went down a storm.

The joy of rehearsing is bound up in the opportunity to discover another world, a period, a place, a lifestyle... for curious nosey parkers like me, it is an ideal way to spend my time. And whilst I no longer throw my life out of the window every

time I begin working on a new production, I learnt the value of contextual knowledge in understanding a text and the importance of using this knowledge in an active way in rehearsals, in order to create a layered, detailed production.

## **Games in New Writing Rehearsals: Nell Leyshon's *Winter***

Games can be equally helpful when rehearsing new plays. When I worked with the writer Nell Leyshon on her play *Winter*, about the lives of the early settlers in Newfoundland, the theatre company invited us to Canada to workshop the text at their coldest time of year, to give us first-hand experience of living in the arctic conditions the characters suffer in the play. Rehearsing in sallopettes, trudging the frozen roads and looking out over the icy sea gave us a glimpse of life at  $-30^{\circ}$ . During the workshop period we played games every day to help the actors explore the characters and to provide Nell with context for the world she was writing about. We made *Character Graphs* to plot the development of each story over the course of the play, we played musical games like *Soundscape Orchestra* to explore the use of sound in the production, and used *The Obstacle Game* to develop the relationships between characters. By the time we returned, Nell had a brand new draft, the actors had a far deeper understanding of their characters, and I had a production mapped out, ready to go.

## **Why This Book?**

This book is aimed at anyone who wants to explore a play. Whether you are teaching a playtext in English or Drama, leading workshops or directing a production, this book gives you tools to explore the play in a practical manner.

It provides starting points for your work, according to the specific genre of the play you are exploring. All too often we use the same approach regardless of the text, focusing simply on the story and the characters without much heed to the particularities of the writing style. A Restoration comedy requires

different knowledge and skills to a modern comedy, just as playing of a Greek tragic hero makes different textual demands to portraying a Shakespearean protagonist. In this book, each genre is dealt with separately. Divided into major movements and styles in theatrical history, the exercises will help you to interrogate the context of the genre and its requirements in performance. Whilst you will find plenty of warm-ups, technique exercises and creative games here too, they were the focus of my previous two books: *Drama Games for Classrooms and Workshops* and *Drama Games for Devising*, also published by Nick Hern Books.

## How to Use This Book

This book is divided into sections, from warm-ups, through character and text work, into detailed exploration of plays by style and genre, through to preparation for performance.

**Part One** of this book – **Getting Started** – provides exercises that can be used in any rehearsal, regardless of the type of play. Split into four sections, the focus is on warming up. Do always begin with a warm-up. It's a fantastic way to focus the group and leave the outside world at the door. It's essential to physical work, to ensure actors are ready for the demands of performance. It's also a way to practise skills that the actors will need when they begin working on the text.

This section includes both individual exercises and ensemble games to help actors prepare. The first section, *Body*, provides physical warm-ups to get the actors moving and engaging with their physicality. *Voice* is made up of both technical vocal warm-ups and singing games to help prepare for a long day's rehearsal. *Mind* focuses on tuning in, engaging and concentrating, then introduces the seeds of imaginative work. Finally, *Ensemble* provides exercises to build the company spirit.

**Part Two** – **The Story of the Play** – presents a series of exercises on how to approach the text. Non-genre specific, I use these games in every rehearsal process. I consider them my essential toolkit. The games help unpick a text, investigate

what is said and break the play down into manageable sections. After all, a character is a character, and whether an actor is playing a comic fop or a Greek hero, they still need to know the truth of that character, to understand their objectives and to work out why they say what they say.

The main body of the book is **Part Three – The World of the Play** – which moves through theatre history period by period, providing exercises for exploring each genre. Within each chapter there are various types of activities. Some address the *style of the text*: the demands of verse in Shakespeare, for example, or the witty repartee of early modern comedy. Some address the *common characteristics of the genre*: the use of tableaux and mask in Greek theatre, for instance, or the use of asides in Restoration. Others address the *physical style of the period*: the use of the body in *Commedia dell'Arte*, for example, or the close observational style of naturalism. Finally, there are games that address *theme*. Most periods of theatre have a preoccupation with specific issues of their time: Greek tragedies often deal with hierarchy, Restoration comedies with the marriage market, and early modern comedies with life in the upper classes. These games encourage the actors to find out more about the world of the play.

The genres are divided as follows:

*Greek Tragedy*: e.g. Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus

*Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*: e.g. Ben Jonson, John Webster, Christopher Marlowe

*Restoration and Georgian Comedy*: e.g. Aphra Behn, William Wycherley, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Hannah Cowley

*Physical Theatre and Commedia dell'Arte*: e.g. Carlo Goldoni, Molière, Steven Berkoff

*Early Modern Comedy*: e.g. George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Noël Coward

*Modern Drama and Naturalism*: e.g. Henrik Ibsen, Tom Stoppard, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Caryl Churchill

*New Plays*: e.g. ... You tell me. They haven't been written yet.

There were many possible ways of dividing theatre history and this list is by no means exhaustive. I chose these categories because they are wide enough to cover a span of time, and most plays sit with relative ease in a certain section. There are, however, plays which fit equally in two categories, and many more which incorporate elements of several styles, and would therefore benefit in rehearsal from games from several sections. Farce, for example, can be explored through *Physical Theatre and Commedia dell'Arte* and *Early Modern Comedy*. Similarly, contemporary verse plays like Mike Bartlett's *King Charles III* or plays that experiment with lyrical form, like Debbie Tucker Green's *Born Bad*, could be explored using the verse exercises detailed in *Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*.

In a sense, the more you mix sections, the more fun you can have with your rehearsal process. Be experimental. See what happens if you try the *Commedia dell'Arte* games in rehearsals for a play like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. It might help to release elements of the comedy. Any exercise will have value, even if it's helping an actor to realise how *not* to play a part!

In **Part Four** you will find games exploring **Sound and Music** as potential elements of your production. Music can be such an evocative layer in performance, and this section encourages you to think widely about how music and sound can accentuate the action. We also explore the use of sound effects (foley) and creative methods for composing, using the company to create soundscapes without instruments.

Finally, **Part Five** takes you up to the moment when the actors step out onto the boards, at **'Beginners'** (the call broadcast to actors before the performance begins, to let them know they must move to their starting places). This section includes games to help actors feel comfortable and confident in the space, and company warm-ups to help focus the ensemble.

## A Few Final Words

Relish your rehearsal time. I love the opportunity to dive into the writer's world and discover a new period and place. And, as a playwright myself, I also love the other wonderful aspect of rehearsals: the camaraderie, which I miss when I'm stuck on my own, writing. Rehearsals offer the opportunity to embark on an exploration together, an adventure as an ensemble, and that's what makes it such a thrill. Robinson Crusoe may have had some fun on his own, but really... how much better must it have been when he had Friday to keep him company?

My motivation for writing this book is to help you make your rehearsals active, engaging and rigorous. We're all too often keen to pin the text down on day one, but there's nothing like spending a little time getting the company on to the same page, sharing research in an active manner, and enthusing them about the play you are embarking on together. With deeper insight into the world of the play, each of the actors will work with greater investment in both rehearsal and performance.

Ultimately, it is this attention to detail which will make your production come to life. Be rigorous. Work hard. And use these games and exercises to ensure your production is peopled with three-dimensional characters, telling their story in a manner that honours the world of the play and the intentions of the writer. It is the most exciting adventure to put on a play, to make theatre, and I wish you the very best of luck with it.

**PART ONE**

**GETTING  
STARTED**

*In which we warm up*

Whatever the genre of play you're rehearsing, whether it's a classic comedy or a new drama, don't underestimate the value of a good warm-up. An actor has three tools to work with: body, voice and mind. Each can feel equally cold at the beginning of a long day's rehearsal. Coupled with that, if the company haven't worked together before, nerves may be running high. Either way, launching straight into Scene One won't do anyone any favours.

In this section you'll find warm-up exercises for body, voice and mind, followed by a selection of ensemble games.

*Physical Games* are warm-ups to energise the body and help players tune in to physicality in preparation for work.

*Vocal Games* begin with simple technical exercises for vocal and breath control, before moving into singing and sound games to get the vocal cords buzzing.

*Focus Games* are all about the mind and imagination. They are quick-thinking spontaneity games in which the actors move out of the purely physical into the realms of character and scenario.

Finally, in *Team Games* you'll find exercises to help bond the group, either through physical proximity (*Adele's Super-Hugs*) or through working together inventively (*The Boogie Pyramid* or *Top Knot*). If you're running a workshop specifically on ensemble-playing or trust, you could use these exercises to form the core of your session.

## Elastoplast

*A variation on classic 'It' with added physical challenges.*

### How to Play

Ask everyone to spread out and find a space. Choose one player to be 'It'. Like conventional 'It', the person who is up must try and tag someone by touching them. However, in this version players have a lifeline: plasters!

If someone is tagged, they can buy themselves an extra life by putting a 'plaster' (their hand) on the place where they were tagged. They then carry on playing, though they mustn't move their hand. If they get tagged again, they must use their other Elastoplast (their other hand) as a plaster, like the first. By this point they'll be running with the handicap of having both their hands attached to their 'wounds'.

When a player is tagged a third time, they must freeze and wait to be rescued. To rescue someone, two other players must come and lay a free hand on them, holding their hands on the frozen player for three counts. Then the player is 'healed' and thus free to go again. If, however, someone is tagged mid-rescue, then they become 'It' too. Game play continues until everyone is either 'It' or frozen.

### The Aim of the Game

To warm up the body and create a keen sense of focus. Effective play requires observation skills and quick-thinking, so it's a good warm-up for the brain too.

#### Skills

*Focus, Pace, Physicality*