

The Dalloway Improv Format

Jeff Miner

This is a longform trio format that emphasizes highly theatrical interior monologues revealing the depths of the characters' psyches placed between scenes in a real world setting.

There is a specific structure to the interweaving of scenes and monologues but the climaxes of the monologues can be achieved in many ways.

The suggested skeleton format is as follows:

(Based on 3 player, approx 20+min)

The Basic Structured Version (players A, B and C)

- A, B scene
- B monologue
- B,C scene
- C monologue
- C,A scene
- A monologue

Run this sequence a second time.

It ends with either A's monologue or a scene involving any/all players depending on content.

Any of the scenes can be a 3-person scene if the content warrants it.

Scenes

The suggestion is to start with grounded, realistic scenes between characters who know each other. This will ground the surrealism of the extraordinary monologues in the everyday, which makes for good contrast. Since the monologues are the main point of interest, one might think that the scenes should be relatively ordinary, but since the monologues explore the inner life of the characters, it's important to allow for hidden depths. There is some success to be had with broad caricatures or more transactional scenes, but the fact that such scenes fail to exhibit a complex inner life for the characters makes finding depth in the monologues more difficult. Ideally, we want to create and explore interesting characters.

Monologues

The monologues have three parts.

1. To begin the monologue the character must be inspired to “go inside” and follow their train of thought rather than directing their attention outward. This could come from something in the scene hitting a nerve, raising a question, sparking a flashback memory, etc. In this first part the player continues to respond internally to the content of the scene. As an example, it could start with, “What did she mean by that? Does she know my dirty secret?”
2. The second part explores the inner life of the character more deeply, leaving behind the specific issue, extrapolating from it into a broader worldview and/or life experience to give the character depth. This segment is in a more ordinary style that one would expect to encounter in improv/theater, like a soliloquy. For example a character may explore a philosophical statement on the nature of the world as the character experiences it, e.g. “things always fall apart.”
3. The third and most **crucial** part moves beyond that into a different space, the nature of which is surreal, free associative, and even perhaps irrational, something which goes beyond the character, reaching for a different plane of existence. Let go of the rational; risk madness. (For emotional targets, see below)

The character reaches an emotional peak then “comes back” to the real world either by revisiting the first two parts of the monologue (in reverse order, of course) or more abruptly, like being woken from a dream. One way that this might happen is that once the emotional peak is reached and a “come down” is initiated by the player, they may be interrupted by the next player to start the following scene, e.g. “Pamela, could I ask...wow! I didn’t mean to startle you,” “sorry, I was lost in thought there” etc.

Emotional targets & artistic reach (Monologue part 3) - “How To Play Crazy” or “How To Let Go”

There is really no “right way” to let go, but there are techniques to try to see what works for each individual. Verbal free association can be pursued so as to evade rational sense (merkeling). The player can devolve into pure sound by picking a key word and continually getting lost in the sound and rhythm of it (see [Exercises](#): 30 Second Fart). One might use exaggerated acting and the twisting/warping of words into beautiful nonsense. Spouting non-sequiturs until all reference to the starting point is lost might also work. The aim is to achieve ego-death. To lose oneself in the depths of the subconscious. Perhaps at heart the character is an animal or a mythological personage.

The main idea is to land on a point of obsession via a process of discovery...surprise yourself.

The actors should dig deep into their psyches and meet each other on a new level, perhaps a new plane of existence, if you will.

Find a place inside yourself you have never been, and meet the actors there.

Variations on the Form

Initially these sets began as environmentally driven, and proved to be evocative, but the interior monologues were initially disconnected from each other. Throughout the process of that exploration, we experimented with connecting the monologues in different ways and found that we could create a more cohesive structure. This has led to what are deemed “variations” of the Dalloway Set. These are ideas and suggestions, not hard and fast rules.

Disconnection - Original Inspirations

The variation of no variation - the form began here where the monologues are not connected to each other in any special way. They are of course connected in the way everything is connected in a good improv scene.

[Mrs Dalloway Rides the Bus](#)

Obsession

Each character finds an obsession and continues to play it out through the scenes and second monologue. “Obsession” can be taken lightly – it need not be pathological, but it can be.

[Taking Out the Garbage](#)

[Dog Chasing Squirrel](#)

Potato-Carrot-Stew

The first monologue can go wherever it wants, but lands on a particular idea, the second monologue picks an associated concept, and the third monologue ties the other two together. For a simple example, if player A lands thematically on potato, and player B then lands on carrot, player C sees the broader world in which they all can operate (i.e. stew). On the second pass, all monologues operate from this shared perspective.

[Penthouse](#)

One True Thing

Everyone converges on one idea, even a word.

([link](#))(see/listen Quack)

[Eclipse](#)

Flashback scenes

Monologues incorporate flashbacks with other players playing characters. E.g. flashback to childhood, other actors play mom & dad or siblings

[hotel lobby](#)

[univ. campus \(bathroom\)](#)

Populated Subconscious

The other actors contribute more voices to the monologists subconscious

[Funeral/Bar](#)

The Unstructured Version

- 3-person scene
- Anyone (X) does monologue
- Scene with (X) and one or both
- Monologue
- Continue until each person has done two monologues
- Find an ending

We actually found that the structured version worked better for us. I think that having the structure freed up more energy to put into the monologues, but maybe we just didn't practice it enough

At present, having tried the unstructured version a few times, we're liking the structured version. It seems to push the character relationships more if we don't have to negotiate the scenes too much. YMMV Currently we're playing with **One True Thing** and **Potato, Carrot, Stew** - trying to settle on a preferred approach to unify the monologues. We've done a few passes at the **Populated Subconscious** and will be doing more work on that as well.

History

While working with the three-person troupe Licorice Cathedral on various approaches to surrealism in improv, we did a few sets that were location-based. At some point we wanted to lean heavily into poetic location description and did a few sets where each character would travel to a new location, describe it at length, then describe a character in that location, do a scene with them and hand off control. This allowed us each to practice doing the descriptive part, but it was also an interesting dynamic - each character handed off control to the next. That really appealed to me in some way - I saw potential there, so I started thinking about a way to make a full set out of that.

Just as 20th century theater acknowledged that people don't always (or ever!) speak in complete sentences and don't always "make sense" in a traditional way, I'm trying to display the fact that our thoughts are not always (or ever!) an orderly progression of fully realized ideas. There's a multitude within, all clamoring for attention, some talking, some grunting, some screaming.

Dali and other surrealists were trying to put the subconscious directly onto the canvas. Dali would have his wife/lover wake him in the midst of dreams, so he could go right to the canvas and capture his dreams before they faded. Pulling from his deep subconscious and throwing it onto the canvas. I'm trying to get improvisers to do something similar by exploring their own

interior worlds and blurting out whatever they find, building the improv around whatever they find.

If it's done right it can lead to very powerful sets that get away from your standard material. Adding surreal elements takes the audience to new and unexpected places. More importantly, it lets the players (forces the players to) dig deeper into their own psyches - which I find very exciting. This is a way for you to know yourself on deeper and deeper levels.

Inspirations

Virginia Woolf – Mrs. Dalloway
Lord Buckley – Subconscious Mind, Murder
Ken Nordine - Flibberty Jib, What Time Is It?, Down The Drain
Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon monologues
Lord Dunsany – King of Fairy Land, others
Twilight Zone – various
Molly Bloom's monologue
The Pandemonium Model of Consciousness