

Immersion Lab: A Practical Manual for Immersive Theatre

A Practitioner's Manual from the Immersion Lab by INCA, La Cremallera, Ribes de Freser, 2026

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INCA CATALUNYA

PHYSICAL THEATRE AND CLOWNING

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Erasmus+

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About INCA Catalunya

INCA Catalunya (International Network for Cultural and Arts) is an independent cultural association based in Catalonia, Spain, bringing together professionals from the fields of performing arts, education, and community practice. The organisation works internationally and locally through artistic laboratories, educational projects, intercultural exchanges, and collaborative creative processes that use culture and performance as tools for social transformation, dialogue, and participation.

Our Mission

INCA's activities promote intercultural understanding, inclusion, mobility, and collective learning through participatory artistic methodologies rooted in physical theatre, immersive practices, devising, and non-formal education.



Our Approach

Rather than proposing a fixed theatrical method, INCA approaches performance as a shared process shaped by relationships, embodiment, space, and social context. Its work combines artistic research with educational and community-based practices that foster active participation and intercultural exchange.

The organisation develops projects with young people, artists, educators, and local communities across different European contexts, encouraging experimentation, critical reflection, and collaborative creation.

For further information: www.inca-cat.org

Erasmus+ Framework

ERASMUS+ YOUTH ACCREDITATION · VALID UNTIL 2027

This publication was developed within the framework of INCA Catalunya's Erasmus+ Youth Accreditation. The accreditation recognises the organisation's long-term commitment to learning mobility, international cooperation, and the development of inclusive educational opportunities for young people and youth workers across Europe.



Youth Exchanges

Creating spaces where participants from different social and cultural backgrounds can meet, exchange experiences, and develop personal, artistic, and professional competences.

Training Courses

Seminars, artistic residencies, and local follow-up activities that promote active participation, democratic engagement, and intercultural dialogue.

Collaborative Learning

Non-formal education methodologies grounded in performing arts as creative tools for reflection, critical thinking, communication, and social engagement.

 The Immersion Lab process documented in this manual emerged from this broader framework of transnational collaboration, experimentation, and collective artistic practice.

The Immersion Lab is fundamentally aligned with the educational principles of the Erasmus+ Youth Programme. It actively fosters the development of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning identified by the European Union, alongside vital transversal skills such as intercultural competence, participation, facilitation, creativity, and reflective practice. Through its immersive, participatory, and arts-based methodology, participants engage in a dynamic learning process that seamlessly integrates personal growth, artistic creation, social engagement, and active community involvement.

Personal, Social and Learning to Learn Competence

The Lab strongly encourages self-reflection, emotional awareness, resilience, and adaptability. Participants develop critical self-management skills and learn to evaluate and direct their own learning journeys, fostering continuous personal growth.

Literacy and Multilingual Competence

Communication is a core dimension. Literacy is enhanced through storytelling, narrative construction, and public presentation. Multilingual competence is fostered via intercultural exchanges, multilingual environments, and the use of diverse verbal and non-verbal communication strategies.

Entrepreneurship Competence

The creative process stimulates initiative, problem-solving, and innovation. Participants engage in project planning, leadership roles, and transform ideas into collective actions and artistic outputs, taking ownership and managing uncertainty.

Cultural Awareness and Expression Competence

Through theatre, movement, sensory exploration, and collective artistic production, participants deepen their understanding of cultural identities, diversity, heritage, and contemporary social narratives, using artistic expression for dialogue and transformation.

Beyond these European Key Competences, the Immersion Lab actively cultivates a range of learning dimensions recognised within the Erasmus+ Youth field educational frameworks. These include:

- Intercultural dialogue
- Empathy and cooperation
- Facilitation skills
- Conflict transformation

- Creativity and critical thinking
- Active participation
- Ethical awareness

By transforming artistic practice into a collective process of inquiry and social engagement, the methodology empowers young people not only to express themselves creatively, but also to become reflective learners, active citizens, and contributors to more inclusive, democratic, and sustainable communities.

Chapter 1: Presence Before Performance

Theoretical Frameworks and the Body as Starting Point

1.1 Who This Manual Is For — and How to Use It

This manual is a practitioner's resource documenting the methodological framework of the Immersion Lab by INCA Catalunya — an Erasmus+-supported training process combining embodied practice with theoretical grounding. It is designed for practitioners who understand that knowing *why* a particular exercise works makes them better equipped to adapt it, to recognise when it is not working, and to hold the group responsibly.



Theatre Educators

Working in school and university contexts.



Community Facilitators

Using performance tools for social and therapeutic ends.



Emerging Directors

Devisers and curious non-specialists bringing embodied practice into workshops.

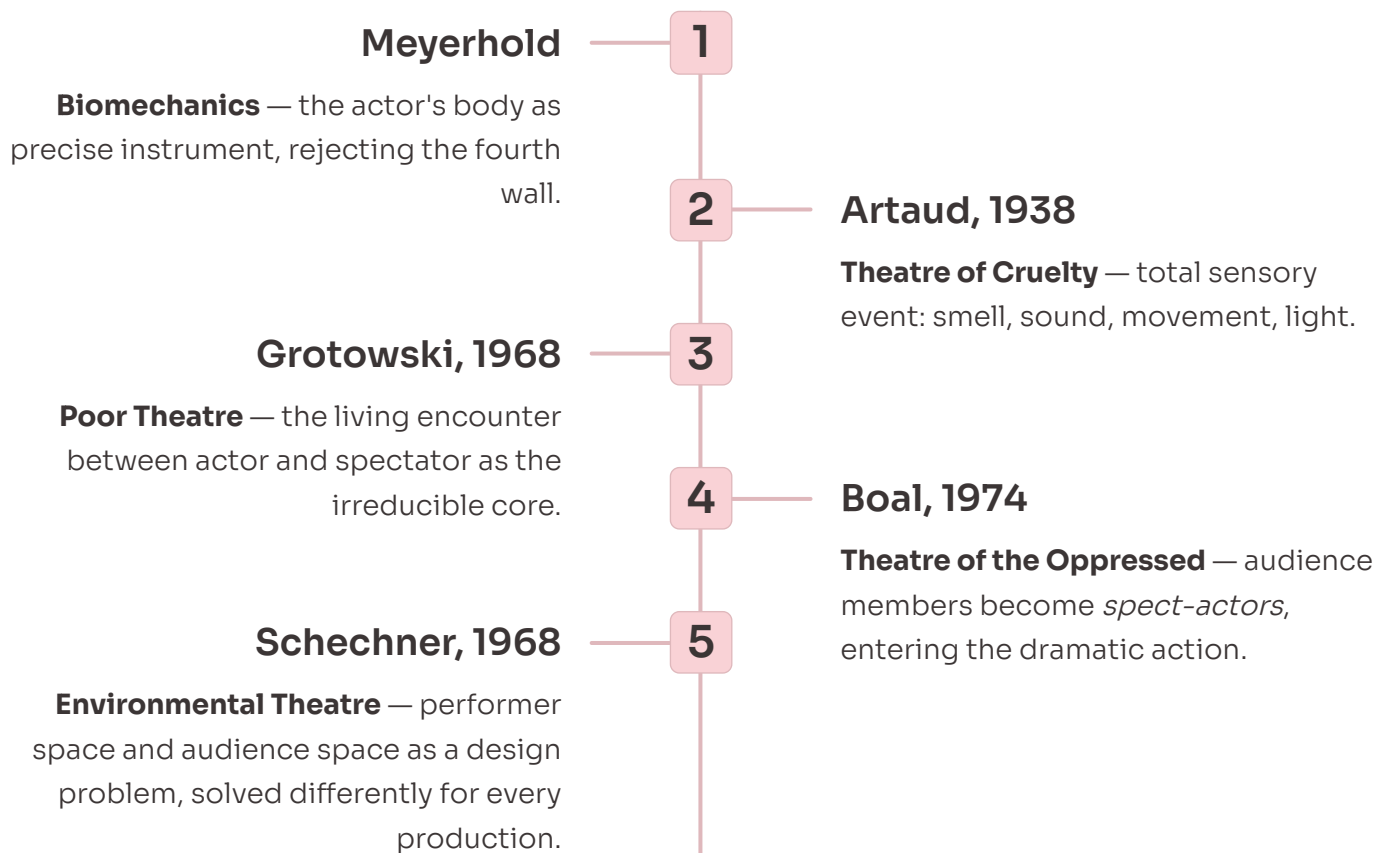
Each chapter corresponds to one thematic block of the Immersion Lab. Chapters are designed to be self-contained — a reader working specifically with object theatre or site-specific adaptation can enter at that point. Cross-references are provided where one chapter builds on another.



A note on facilitation ethics. Several exercises in this manual involve touch, sustained eye contact, and proximity that can carry emotional charge. The ethical principles governing their use are addressed fully in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2). Facilitators are encouraged to read that section before leading any touch-based work.

1.2 The Immersive Turn: A Brief Intellectual History

The dominant theatrical tradition of nineteenth-century Europe was what Brecht would later call Aristotelian theatre: a darkened auditorium, a lit stage, an audience of passive spectators consuming a story delivered by professionals. Against this model, a series of radical practitioners began arguing, from the early twentieth century onward, that the relationship between performer and audience was itself an artistic and political question.



Schechner's broader concept of *performance studies* expanded the field's object of inquiry beyond theatre to include ritual, sport, political demonstration, and everyday social behaviour.

1.3 Contemporary Companies and the Immersive Present

A generation of companies, from the 1990s onward, put radical theatrical arguments into large-scale, sustained, commercially viable practice. Understanding these companies — their methods, their dramaturgies, their contradictions — is essential context for anyone working with the exercises in this manual.



Punchdrunk

Founded by Felix Barrett in 2000. Works like *Sleep No More* placed audiences of hundreds inside enormous masked environments, roaming freely and constructing their own narrative from fragments. The performer must maintain intense, committed performance regardless of whether anyone is watching.



DV8 Physical Theatre

Founded by Lloyd Newson. Work including *The Cost of Living* and *Enter Achilles* takes as its starting point the proposition that the body tells truths that language actively conceals. Key principle: the body is not an illustration of emotion — it is the *location* of emotion.



Rimini Protokoll

Haug, Kaegi, and Wetzel developed "theatre of experts" — productions built around non-professional performers who bring genuine specialist knowledge or lived experience to the stage. Their work challenges the concept of expertise itself.



Forced Entertainment

Founded by Tim Etchells in Sheffield in 1984. Their durational, structurally exposed work proposes that the most honest relationship between performer and audience is one of *witness* — that theatre at its best creates a space in which something genuinely at stake can be seen and acknowledged.

Théâtre du Soleil

Founded by Ariane Mnouchkine in Paris in 1964. Across six decades, a commitment to collective creation, mask work, and theatricality drawing freely from Asian performance traditions. Mnouchkine argues for the priority of *playing* over introspective psychological realism.

A Note on Criticality

These companies have not operated without critique. Alston (2016) argues that immersive theatre's invitation to individual exploration and its premium ticketing can reproduce rather than challenge consumerist subject positions. Gareth White (2013) raises important questions about whether immersive theatre offers genuine agency or a scripted simulation of it. The facilitator's critical self-awareness is part of the ethics of the practice.

1.4 The Immersion Lab: Context and Approach

The Immersion Lab developed by INCA Catalunya explores the relationship between immersive theatre and site-specific performance as tools for creating meaningful encounters between performers, participants, and the surrounding environment. Artistic experiences do not need to be confined to conventional theatre spaces; instead, they can emerge in streets, buildings, landscapes, and everyday settings, where the boundaries between art and daily life become porous.



Immersive Theatre

Invites participants to step inside a narrative world and engage actively with the unfolding experience. Rather than observing from a distance, audiences become part of the dramaturgy, moving through spaces, interacting with performers, and contributing to the meaning-making process.

Site-Specific Performance

Strengthens this dynamic by responding directly to the architectural, social, and emotional characteristics of a chosen location — the site is not a backdrop but a dramaturgical agent.

Dramaturgy of Encounter

At the heart of the Immersion Lab is a structured approach to designing how attention is captured, sustained, and transformed. The emphasis is not only on storytelling, but on creating conditions in which each participant feels present, involved, and connected to the narrative and to others.

Presence and Key Theoretical Concepts

1.5 What Is Presence? The Central Problem

One concept underlies every technique in this manual: *presence*. In everyday speech, we say an actor "has presence" the way we say someone has charisma — as though it were a fixed personal attribute. This manual proposes a different understanding: **presence is a relational quality**, produced in the encounter between bodies, not located in any individual body alone.

Eugenio Barba distinguishes between an actor's *daily technique* — the habitual way most of us carry our bodies — and a *pre-expressive* or *extra-daily technique*: a way of inhabiting the body that generates heightened attention in a watching body. What these traditions share is a **decided body**: a body that has made choices, that is not on standby.

1.6 Key Theoretical Concepts

Double Consciousness

The performer retains awareness of both the fictional self and the performing self simultaneously — living the situation and observing it.

Impulse & Inhibition

Much of the first day's work concerns the gap between an impulse and its expression — going with the impulse rather than defeating it.

Non-Verbal Dramaturgy

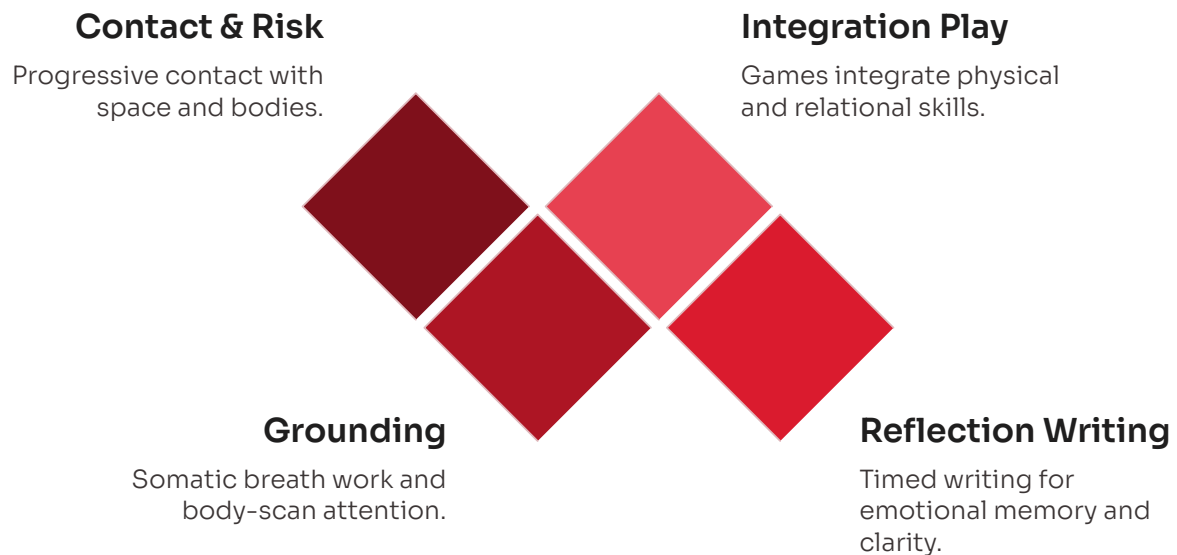
Complex, precise, narratively coherent information can be transmitted without words — with direct application in community, accessible, and street performance contexts.

Site as Co-Author

In site-specific practice, the location is not a backdrop but a dramaturgical agent — a palimpsest of layered meanings to which performance adds one more stratum.

1.7 How to Structure a Session: Dramaturgy of the Lab Day

One of the structurally important features of the Immersion Lab is the dramaturgy of the day itself — how sessions were sequenced so that each exercise prepared the conditions for the next.



A typical Immersion Lab day moved through these four phases, each preparing the ground for the next. The grounding phase shifts register from daily to extra-daily technique. Contact work expands the frame incrementally. Play integrates new skills into automatic behaviour. Reflection provides access to emotional memory below deliberation.



1.8 Bibliography for Chapter 1

Author	Year	Title
Alston, Adam	2016	<i>Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation</i>
Artaud, Antonin	1958	<i>The Theatre and Its Double</i>
Barba, Eugenio & Savarese, Nicola	1991	<i>A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer</i>
Boal, Augusto	1979	<i>Theatre of the Oppressed</i>
Etchells, Tim	1999	<i>Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment</i>
Grotowski, Jerzy	1968	<i>Towards a Poor Theatre</i>
Machon, Josephine	2013	<i>Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance</i>
Pearson, Mike & Shanks, Michael	2001	<i>Theatre/Archaeology: Disciplinary Dialogues</i>
Schechner, Richard	1994	<i>Environmental Theater</i>
White, Gareth	2013	<i>Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation</i>

Chapter 2: The Body in Space

Walking, Encounter, and the Pre-Expressive

2.1 Introduction

The Immersion Lab approach is rooted in the concept of the **pre-expressive**: the state in which the performer develops presence before any character, story, or action is introduced. At this level, the essential work consists of cultivating attention, grounding, responsiveness, and relational awareness.

Jacques Lecoq argued that most adults have stopped *moving* and started *travelling* — that the body is on autopilot, carrying the mind from one place to another, generating no genuine physical thought. The task of training is to wake the body back up, to make movement conscious again without making it self-conscious.

By walking with intention, participants begin to understand that performance starts long before words are spoken. The quality of attention brought to a simple walk across the room influences every subsequent stage of the creative process. Presence, listening, and spatial awareness become the foundations upon which immersive and site-specific experiences are built.

2.2 Setting Up the Space



Space Requirements

Clear floor area — approx. 10×12m for 12–16 participants. Wooden or smooth floor preferred. Remove all furniture to edges.



Music

Prepare a playlist in advance. Instrumental, ambient, or world music with unfamiliar linguistic textures. Avoid lyrics in participants' native language.



Group Size

Best with 8–24 participants. Below 8, the relational field is too thin. Above 24, consider two sub-groups with a co-facilitator.



Facilitator Position

Move through the space alongside participants for the first few minutes, then step to the edge to observe. Observation from the periphery is not passive.

2.3 Exercises One, Two, and Three

1 Exercise One: The Awareness Walk

Duration: 15–20 minutes. The foundational exercise of almost every physical theatre and somatic training tradition, drawing on Lecoq (2000). Participants walk through the space, progressively adding instructions: fill the space evenly; make direction changes deliberate; make eye contact with everyone you pass; register the weight and pace of others; slow to stillness. **Debrief:** one word or phrase for what they *noticed* — not what they did. Echoes Lecoq's concept of *disponibilité* — availability, the state of readiness that precedes all expressive action.

2 Exercise Two: Name on the Shoulder

Duration: 10–15 minutes. Participants walk in awareness, then write their name — one letter at a time — on a partner's shoulder blade using the index finger. The receiver tries to read the letters through touch without turning around. After five minutes, roles reverse. **Variation:** for groups with contact sensitivity, write on the palm of the hand instead. Belongs to a long tradition of tactile communication as theatrical training, related to Boal's sculptor exercises.

3 Exercise Three: The Circle Introduction

Duration: 20–30 minutes. The group walks in a loose circle. One participant enters the interior, says "Hello, my name is [name]," walks across, and rejoins. The entire group then silently incorporates that person's physical mannerisms — pace, gaze, shoulder position, rhythm of feet. Continue until everyone has passed through. **Key principle:** imitation is an act of attention and respect, not mockery. A direct descendant of Lecoq's observation exercises and Michael Chekhov's concept of the *centre of gravity*.

2.4 Exercises Four and Five

Exercise Four: Rock-Paper-Scissors Support Chain

Duration: 15–20 minutes. **Participants:** 10–30.

All participants walk through the space. When two meet, they play a single round of rock-paper-scissors. The loser becomes the supporter of the winner, standing behind them. When pairs meet, the two winners play — the loser's entire group joins the winning group. This continues until the entire group is divided into two large teams, who then play the final round.

- ❏ The dramaturgical intelligence of this exercise is its management of hierarchy. Everyone begins as an equal; the support role is assigned by chance, not by social status; and the final winner carries the energy of the entire group.

Exercise Five: The Partner Surveillance Game

Duration: 20–30 minutes. **Three escalating levels.**

Level 1 — Basic game: Follower walks behind leader at 2–3 metres. When the leader turns, the follower looks away — nonchalant, as if walking in the same direction by coincidence.

Level 2 — Escalating impulse: Follower performs small, absurd, or exaggerated physical actions behind the leader's back. When the leader turns, the follower must immediately resume a neutral, innocent walk. The transition must be instantaneous.

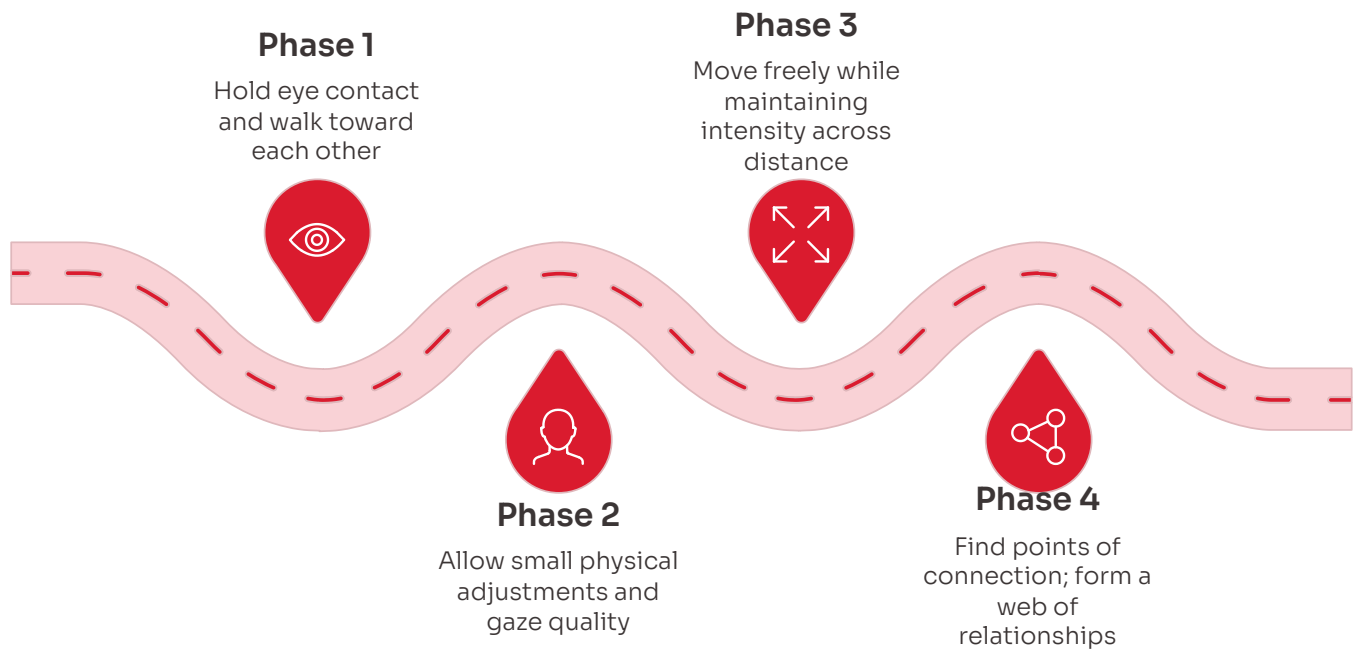
Level 3 — Freeze and rationalise: When the leader turns, the follower does not return to neutral. Instead, they freeze in whatever position they are in and immediately begin to rationalise that position internally — as if it were completely natural. This creates extraordinary physical images and forces full commitment to the impulse.

Key debrief question: What is the difference between *suppressing* an impulse and *owning* it?



2.5 The Corridor Formation

The corridor formation trains a specific and demanding capacity: **holding two different scales of attention simultaneously**. This is the spatial and relational equivalent of the performer's double consciousness — being present to your partner and to the room at once.

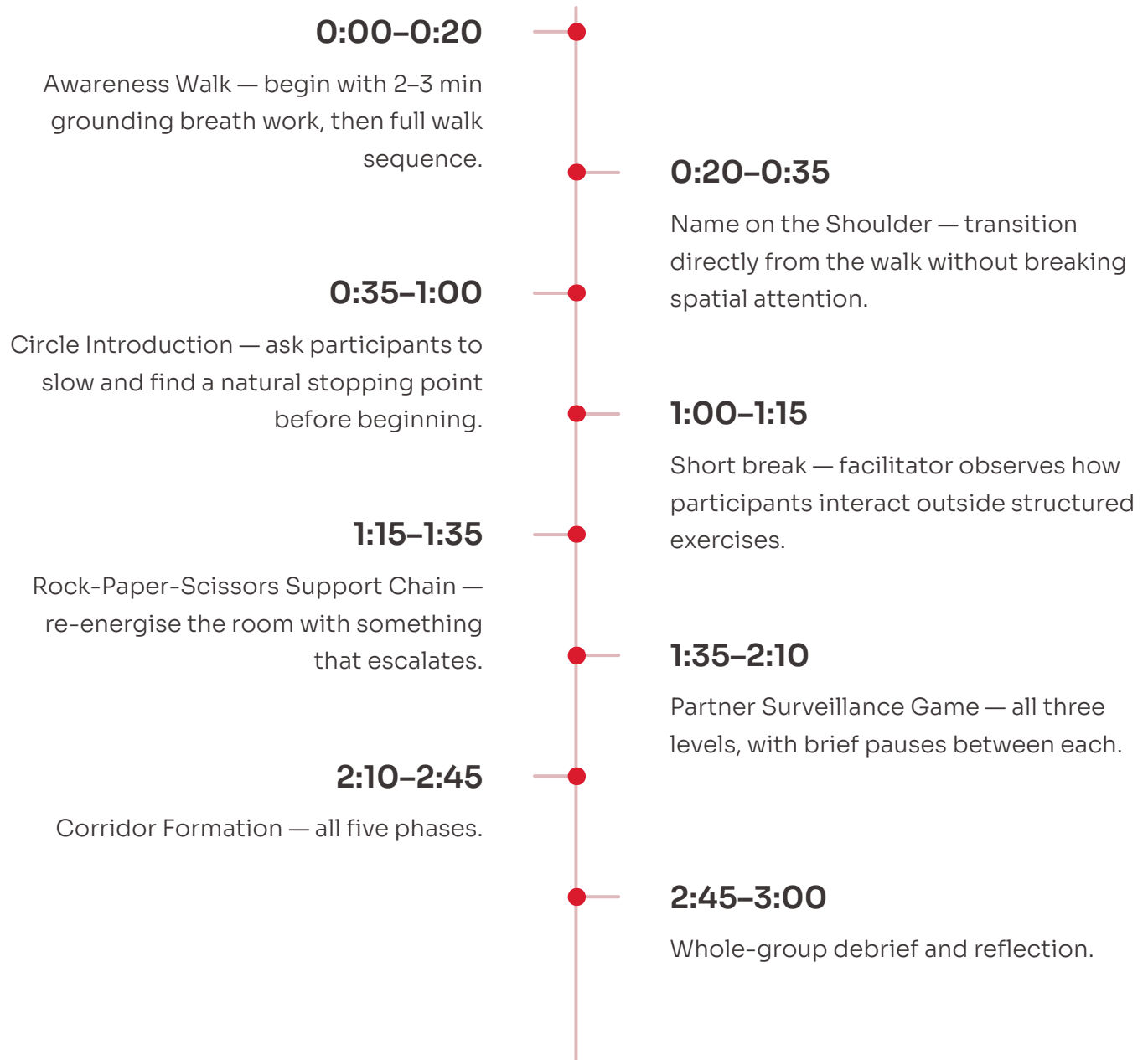


The most common difficulty in Phase 3 is that participants either become so absorbed in their partner that they lose the room entirely, or so absorbed in the room that the partner encounter becomes superficial. Both are legitimate starting points for discussion. In immersive performance, you are always holding multiple relationships simultaneously — with your scene partner, with the audience member in front of you, with the broader space and its other inhabitants.

The corridor formation is directly related to the *via negativa* principle in Grotowski's training — the idea that the performer's task is not to add expression but to remove the blocks that prevent genuine encounter. When two people walk toward each other with sustained eye contact and no other instruction, what tends to happen — laughter, discomfort, sudden unexpected emotion — is not produced but revealed.

2.6 Sequencing These Exercises: A Model Session Plan

The exercises described in this chapter are most effective when run in the order presented — each prepares the ground for the next. Here is a model session plan for a three-hour morning session:



2.7 Bibliography for Chapter 2

Author	Year	Title
Boal, Augusto	1992	<i>Games for Actors and Non-Actors</i>
Chekhov, Michael	2002	<i>To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting</i>
Grotowski, Jerzy	1968	<i>Towards a Poor Theatre</i>
Lecoq, Jacques	2000	<i>The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre</i>
Novack, Cynthia J.	1990	<i>Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture</i>

Chapter 3: Touch, Sound, and the Grammar of Physical Communication

3.1 Introduction: The Body as Instrument of Transmission

The exercises that followed the morning break in the Immersion Lab marked a deliberate shift in register. The walking and encounter work of the first session had been concerned primarily with **reception** — training the capacity to perceive space, other bodies, and the quality of one's own movement. The post-break session turned toward **transmission**: how does one body communicate precise, complex, emotionally textured information to another, without words?

1

Partner Massage with Sound

Intimate dyadic communication through touch and sound — one sensory channel opening another.

2

Car-Driving Exercise

A precise codified system of directional touch signals — a grammar as specific as any spoken language.

3

Layered Physical Score

Fixed textual and movement material transformed by emotional, physical, and environmental constraints into genuinely individual performance.

3.2 On Touch in Performance Training

⚠ Before any touch-based exercise, the facilitator must: Establish explicit consent — stated, not assumed. Offer alternatives (working through clothing, upper back only). Watch the room for non-verbal signals of discomfort. Normalise stepping back without drama or explanation. These are not bureaucratic precautions — they are the ethical ground on which genuine work becomes possible.

3.3 Exercise One: Partner Massage with Sound

Overview

Duration: 20–30 minutes. **Participants:** Any even number, 6–30. **What you need:** Clear space; ambient, textured music without strong melodic direction.

Step-by-Step

01

Partners decide who gives and who receives. Receiver closes eyes. Giver begins attentive massage of upper back and shoulders — genuinely present to the other body.

02

Facilitator plays music. Massage continues 4–5 minutes. Facilitator offers quiet guidance to givers working mechanically rather than attentively.

03

Facilitator fades music slowly. As music fades: "Make a sound — any sound — close to your partner's ear. Not a word. A sound."

04

"Follow the sound. Let it move you." Receiver, eyes still closed, begins to move in response. Giver experiments with pitch, rhythm, and spatial relationship.

05

After 4–5 minutes, both slow and stop. A moment of stillness. Then roles reverse.

Facilitation Notes

The most significant moment is the transition from touch to sound — the moment when the tactile channel gives way to the acoustic one. Participants often report heightened awareness of space and of the other body at this transition.

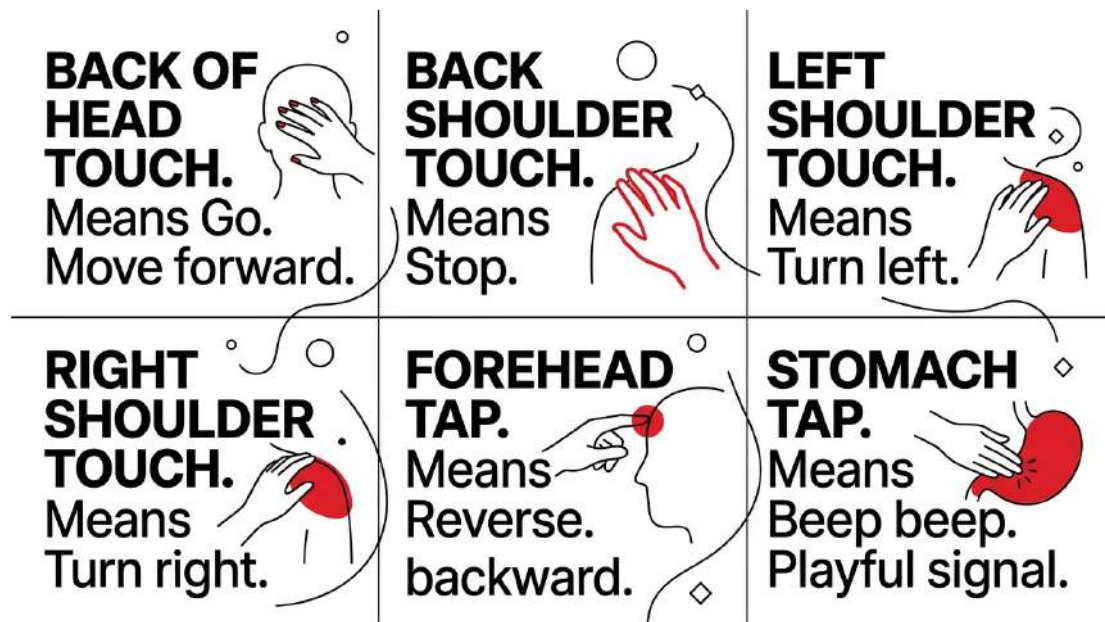
 This exercise replicates, in a controlled training context, something of the perceptual reorientation experienced by audience members with visual impairments who navigate a performance through sound and touch rather than sight.

Connections

In the broader context of immersive theatre, the exercise trains a capacity central to Complicité's *The Encounter* (2015), which placed each audience member in individual headphones, creating a binaural sonic environment in which sound seemed to come from inside the listener's own skull — an extreme version of the intimacy this exercise begins to cultivate.

3.4 Exercise Two: The Car-Driving Exercise

The car-driving exercise is a classic of physical theatre training. The version documented in the Immersion Lab is notable for its precision: a specific touch signal is assigned to each directional command, and the system is complete enough to navigate complex spatial routes. This means the exercise is not just a trust game but a genuine training in **non-verbal codified communication**, with a grammar as specific as any spoken language.



Step-by-Step

1. Teach the signal system to the whole group before beginning. Run through each signal with everyone simultaneously in stillness.
2. Participants find a partner. Receiver closes eyes or softens gaze downward. Giver stands behind or beside.
3. Begin slowly — navigate safely around other pairs, find clear paths.
4. After 3–4 minutes, invite givers to become more ambitious: find interesting routes, use the full grammar, explore spatial possibilities.
5. After 5–6 minutes, roles reverse. Advanced variation: pairs interact with other pairs — spatial encounters, near-collisions, deliberate proximity.

Connections and Parallels

The car-driving exercise is a precise practical demonstration of what semioticians call *indexical* communication — signals that point directly to their referent rather than representing it symbolically (Peirce, 1931–1958). The back-of-head touch does not symbolise forward movement; it *is* the instruction to move forward, physically delivered.

The exercise has direct applications beyond theatre training: disability-awareness workshops, team-building contexts, and therapeutic movement practice. In accessible performance contexts, it develops the sensitivity of touch and precision of physical guidance required when leading an audience member through a tactile performance environment.

3.5 Exercise Three: The Layered Physical Score

This exercise is the most complex in Chapter 3, and the most directly connected to the dramaturgy of performance. It is structured in two phases: first, the entire group learns a short narrative text and an accompanying score of precise movements; second, small groups perform this material simultaneously, each having chosen one emotional state, one physical constraint, and one environmental challenge to layer over the fixed score.

Phase 1: Learning the Score

The facilitator teaches the text to the entire group — everyone learns it together, out loud, until it can be delivered from memory. Then a sequence of precise physical movements is taught to accompany the text. These movements are choreographed in advance and taught without explanation of their meaning: the task is precise physical learning, not interpretation. Typically takes 15–20 minutes.

Phase 2: Choosing the Constraints

Small groups of 4–6 privately choose: one **emotion** (joy, grief, rage, fear, shame, tenderness); one **physical constraint** (a limp, a frozen shoulder, impaired vision, one arm immobilised); one **environmental challenge** (mosquitoes, extreme heat, a slippery surface, a strong wind). Groups have 5 minutes to feel how the constraints reshape the material already in the body.

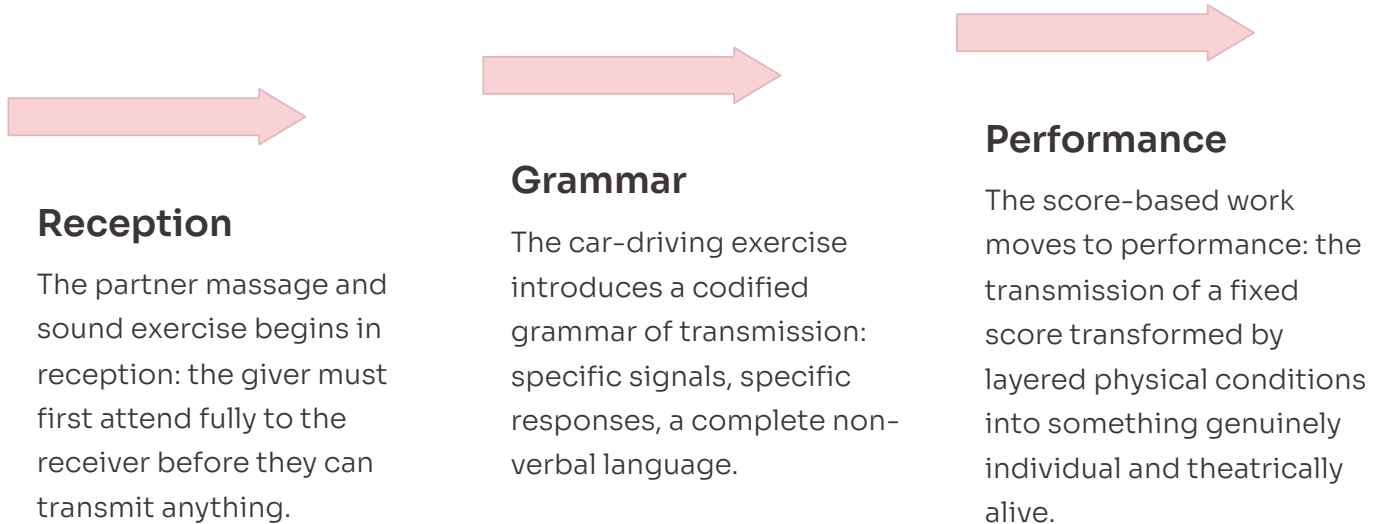
Phase 3: Performance

Two lines of participants face each other, close enough for a genuine audience–performer relationship. Each small group performs their version. No explanation of chosen constraints is given before the performance — the audience watches and then identifies what they perceived. Discussion follows: what was produced by the emotional layer, the physical constraint, the environmental challenge?

✓ **Key insight:** The fixed score is not a cage but a skeleton. The constraints live *in* the score, not instead of it. The body under constraint often becomes more, not less, expressive — limitation can be a generative condition rather than a restriction.

3.6 The Arc of the Session: From Reception to Transmission to Performance

Looking at the three exercises together, a clear dramaturgical arc emerges.



You cannot transmit what you have not first learned to receive. You cannot perform with physical specificity unless you have practised the grammar of physical action in a context where the stakes are low enough to allow failure. And you cannot understand what performance does — how it produces meaning in a body that watches — without the experience of watching others perform the same material differently.



The session's arc also models something important for facilitators working outside theatre contexts. The progression from touch to sound to structured performance is a progression from the most intimate and private register of bodily experience to the most public and shared one. Participants who might be reluctant to "perform" at the start of a session often find, by the time the physical score work arrives, that the preceding exercises have prepared them sufficiently that performance no longer feels like a frightening category of activity — it feels like a continuation of what they have been doing all morning.

Chapter 4: The Object Remembers

Material Intelligence, Embodied Memory, and the Art of Attention

"Objects are not inert matter, but residues of lived presence that continue to speak when human narration stops."

— Shaday Larios, 2018



4.1 Introduction: Why Objects?

There is a moment in the object theatre work explored during the Immersion Lab that is easy to miss but worth pausing on. The instruction given to participants is not to *perform* with an object, not to *use* an object, not even to *animate* an object — it is to explore its **actual characteristics**. The distinction is precise and radical. It proposes that the object already has something to say, and that the performer's task is not to impose meaning upon it but to listen.

Everyday Relationship to Objects

In everyday life, objects are tools — they serve our purposes, they have instrumental value, they are subordinate to our intentions. The object is a means to an end.

Object Theatre Relationship

In object theatre, this hierarchy is deliberately inverted. The object becomes a partner, a co-author, and sometimes — when the work is going well — the more interesting performer in the room. The performer's task is to listen, not to impose.

This chapter works through the complete object theatre sequence documented in the Immersion Lab — four stages moving from free exploration through freeze frame, through the emergence of personal memory, to the timed writing exercise — and sets each stage within its theoretical and practical context.

4.2 Exercise One: Free Exploration with the Object

Overview

Duration: 10–15 minutes. **Participants:** Any number, 6–30.

The Object Collection

Gather a varied collection in advance — varied in size, weight, texture, and material:

- A stone, a glass bottle, a length of rope
- A piece of fabric, a wooden spoon, a metal tin
- A book, a key, a shoe, a piece of fruit
- A clock, a mirror fragment, a bundle of dried herbs

 Avoid objects with obvious theatrical or symbolic associations — a skull, a crown, a red rose — because these tend to trigger performing rather than exploring.

Step-by-Step

01

Lay objects in the centre of the space. Participants walk around them slowly, looking without touching, for 2–3 minutes.

02

Each participant chooses one object — not the most interesting or beautiful, but the one they are drawn to without knowing why.

03

Participants take their object into the space. Instruction: play with your object. Focus entirely on its actual physical qualities — weight, texture, temperature, how it moves, what sounds it makes, how it catches the light. Do not act with it. Do not tell a story about it.

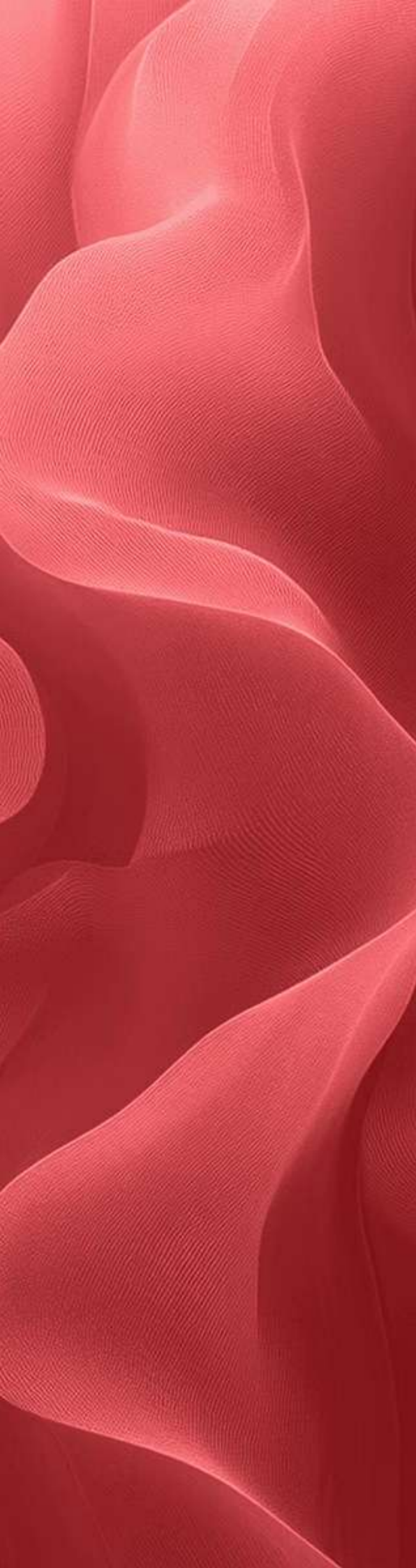
04

Facilitator moves through the space offering quiet observations — not judgements but notices: "Feel the weight shifting as you tilt it." "Notice the sound it makes against the floor."

05

After 10–12 minutes, invite participants to slow their exploration without stopping — continue attending to the object while letting the movement settle.

 **Most common failure mode:** Immediate anthropomorphisation — participants begin almost at once to give their object a personality, to make it "talk" or "feel" or "want." Intervention: "Put the object on the floor. Walk away from it. Now come back to it as if you have never seen it before. What is it, actually? Not what does it represent — what is it?"



Memory Trigger and Match-Timer Writing

4.3 Exercise Two: The Object as Memory Trigger

This stage asks participants to remain in their freeze frame — continuing to attend to the object and to their own bodily position — until the object and the position together remind them of a specific person. This instruction operates on several levels simultaneously: as an associative exercise, as a training in composition, and as an invitation to bring the performer's real life into contact with the work.

From the stillness of the freeze frame, the facilitator speaks quietly: *"Stay where you are. Keep attending to the object and to your position. Notice everything about this moment — the weight of the object, the angle of your body, what you can see from here, what you cannot see. And wait. Wait until the object and the position remind you of someone. Not a character, not a type — a specific person. Someone you know or have known. Let the object tell you who."*

-  This stage can produce unexpected emotional responses. The facilitator should hold the room gently — neither rushing toward the emotion nor retreating from it. A quiet acknowledgement — "whatever is coming up, let it be there" — is usually sufficient.

4.4 Exercise Three: The Match-Timer Writing

This stage introduces writing — specifically, timed writing against the burning of a match. A match burns for approximately thirty seconds: long enough to commit to a direction, short enough to prevent deliberation. The flame is visible, its end is imminent, and this imminence produces exactly the quality of urgency the exercise requires.



1

Why This Person

A letter to them, addressed directly. Why did you choose them? Why is it this person and not another? Light a match. Write until the match burns out. Don't think — write.

2

Compressed Phrase

If this moment — this object, this person, this feeling — could be compressed into a single phrase. One sentence that distills the feeling. Light a match. Write.

3

Tattoo Word

A word or phrase for a tattoo. Something permanent. Light a match. Write.

4

Free Letter

Write to them. Three minutes. Don't lift the pen. Don't edit. Begin. The facilitator times three minutes and holds the silence.

- ❑ The match-timer structure is important to maintain. The sequence of prompts is also important — moving from the explanatory (why this person) to the compressed (phrase, tattoo word) to the expansive (free letter) trains the writing through different registers of language and different relationships to time.

Object Theatre in Practice and Bibliography

4.5 Applications Beyond the Studio



In Devising Processes

Object work is a standard starting point for devising companies precisely because it bypasses the tendency to begin with text or narrative. Complicité's *The Street of Crocodiles* (1992) grew from an extended period of work with objects sourced from flea markets and junk shops — objects that carried, in their material specificity, the texture of the vanished world Bruno Schulz described.



In Accessible Performance

Tactile objects — objects that participants can handle, feel, and smell — are primary tools in multisensory performance design. The EIPA framework identifies object-based interaction as one of the most consistently effective tools for engaging audiences across a wide range of sensory and cognitive profiles.



In Educational Settings

Object work lowers the threshold of self-consciousness. Working with an object gives participants something to attend to that is not themselves — it provides a "fictional protection" that allows genuine feeling to surface without the exposure that explicit emotional performance demands. The match-timer writing exercise is particularly transferable to creative writing education and personal development workshops.



In Community Contexts

The use of personally significant objects — objects that participants bring from home rather than choose from a facilitator's collection — produces some of the most powerful applications of this work. Community performances built around participants' personal objects have a long history in applied and community theatre, from the Brazilian tradition of Theatre of the Oppressed to contemporary community archive projects.

4.6 Bibliography for Chapter 4

Author	Year	Title
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Neelands, Jonothan	1990	<i>Structuring Drama Work</i>
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Space as Co-Author

Site-Specific Dramaturgy and the Architecture of Encounter

Chapter 5 · Immersion Lab Manual

The Room Is Already Speaking

Every performance happens somewhere. This seems obvious — almost trivially so — until you begin to attend to what the *somewhere* is actually doing to the performance: how the height of the ceiling affects the quality of the actor's voice; how the smell of a disused factory floor saturates a scene set in a domestic kitchen; how the particular quality of light in a railway arch at dusk produces meanings that no lighting designer could manufacture in a black box theatre.

Space is not a neutral container for performance. It is an active participant in the making of meaning.

This insight — fundamental to site-specific and immersive theatre practice — took a long time to become theoretically articulable, partly because the dominant Western theatre tradition actively suppressed it. The proscenium arch theatre, which became the standard venue for theatrical performance across Europe from the seventeenth century onward, was specifically designed to make its own spatial conditions invisible: the darkened auditorium, the framed stage, the separation of performer and audience were all mechanisms for directing attention away from the material conditions of the event and toward the fictional world being represented.

The site-specific and environmental theatre traditions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have systematically dismantled this pretence. By performing in spaces not designed for performance — factories, churches, car parks, forests, shopping centres, domestic houses, public squares — these practices make the spatial conditions of the event visible, audible, and theatrically active. The space stops being a window and becomes a wall, a floor, a smell, a history, a set of social associations that the performance must negotiate, incorporate, or deliberately work against.

- ③ This chapter works through four ways of relating to site explored during the Immersion Lab — **site-sympathetic**, **site-specific**, **site-generic**, and **site-sensitive** — alongside the love-hate-neutral mapping exercise, the sensory ballroom scene, and approaches to audience integration.

A Brief History of Site

From Environmental Theatre to Immersive Practice

The theoretical history of site-specific performance has been carefully documented by scholars including Fiona Wilkie (2002), Mike Pearson (2010), and Gareth White (2013). What follows is a selective account, focused on the frameworks most directly relevant to the exercises in this manual.

Late 1960s — New York

Richard Schechner's *environmental theatre* with the Performance Group.

His "Six Axioms" proposed that the theatrical event should encompass the entire space, not just the stage. *Dionysus in 69* (1968) placed audience members on scaffolding within the performance space.

1990s–2000s — UK

Wrights and Sites — including Cathy Turner, Stephen Hodge, Simon Persighetti, and Phil Smith — produced the *Mis-Guide* series, a body of theoretical and practical work on the dramaturgical possibilities of public space.

1

2

1980s–90s — Wales

Cliff McLucas and Mike Pearson developed large-scale site-specific performance through Brith Gof. *Haeearn* (1992) — performed inside a decommissioned ironworks — engaged directly with the industrial and cultural history embedded in the found space.

3

4

2000s–Present

Nick Kaye's *Site-Specific Art* (2000) provided an early theoretical cartography; Fiona Wilkie (2002, 2004) refined the distinctions further. Immersive theatre companies including Punchdrunk brought site-sympathetic practice to mainstream audiences.

The Site as Palimpsest

A layered document in which multiple histories are simultaneously present, like text written over text on a scraped manuscript.

Pearson and Shanks's concept of the site as *palimpsest* has become one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks in site-specific practice. It proposes that the performance adds one more layer of inscription to those already present in the space: the geological, the architectural, the social, the personal.

From the 1990s onward, practitioners began to develop more nuanced distinctions between different kinds of spatial relationship. Nick Kaye's *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (2000) provided an early theoretical cartography; the work of Fiona Wilkie (2002, 2004) refined the distinctions further; and the working distinctions explored during the Immersion Lab represent one practitioner's attempt to translate these distinctions into workable categories for facilitation.

- The palimpsest metaphor reminds us: every space already carries its own dramaturgy. The performance does not arrive into emptiness — it arrives into history.

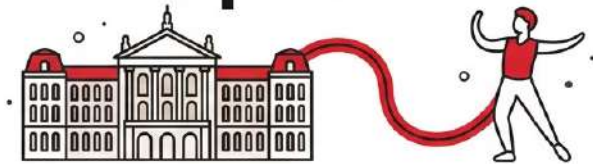


Four Relationships to Site

Working Distinctions from the Immersion Lab

During the Immersion Lab, participants explored four distinct ways of relating to site in performance. These are not hierarchical — no relationship is more advanced or more legitimate than the others — but they are genuinely different in their dramaturgical logic, their practical demands, and the kinds of meaning they make available. They are working categories rather than a formal system.

Site-Specific



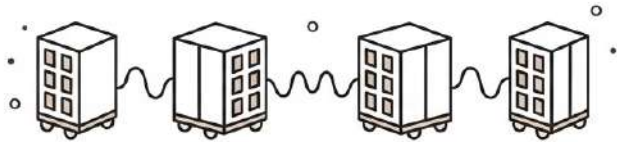
performance can only exist in this exact place, grows from its history and architecture

Site-Sympathetic



adapts to a found space that resonates with the work's themes

Site-Generic



portable across similar sites, uses generic spatial and social qualities of a type of location

Site-Sensitive



uses sensory qualities — textures, sounds, smells, temperatures, light — as primary dramaturgical material

These four categories offer the facilitator a practical vocabulary for making conscious decisions about the spatial logic of a project — decisions that will shape every subsequent creative choice.

Site-Specific

Definition. A site-specific performance is one that can only happen in the place where it is made. The performance grows from the history, architecture, social meaning, and material conditions of that particular place, and would cease to exist — not merely be diminished, but cease to exist — if transplanted to any other location.

Mike Pearson's solo performance *Bubbling Tom* (2000), performed in the fields and farm buildings of his childhood home in Lincolnshire, is a canonical example: the performance literally could not be extracted from its location, because the location was the subject, the archive, and the co-author.

A further example from the INCA Catalunya network is the Grivița immersive labyrinth performance (Bucharest, August–September 2016), developed through the project "Oameni Invizibili" — built from stories collected from the Grivița neighbourhood. The site and its human history were inseparable from the dramaturgy.

Practical Implication

If you are creating a site-specific work, your first task is not to develop a concept and then find a space for it, but to **spend time in the space** — attending to it, researching it, discovering what it already knows.

- What happened here?
- Who has been here before?
- What does the architecture say about the social relations it was designed to produce?

Site-Sympathetic

Definition. A site-sympathetic performance is one that has been developed independently and then adapted to a specific found space because that space resonates with the work's themes, atmosphere, or content. The work and the site are in dialogue, but the work could exist in other sympathetic sites.

The Punchdrunk Model

Punchdrunk's practice is largely site-sympathetic: *Sleep No More* was not created for the McKittrick Hotel in New York, but the hotel — a 1939 building with a history of closure and abandonment — resonated so strongly with the Macbeth-derived narrative of guilt, haunting, and concealment that the site and the work entered into a productive mutual illumination.

The key distinction from site-specific work is that **adaptation**, rather than origination, is what happens in response to the site.

Practical Implication

When adapting existing material to a found space, the facilitator's task is a kind of *spatial dramaturgy*: identifying which qualities of the space illuminate which qualities of the work.

- ③ The love-hate-neutral mapping exercise (Section 5.4) is a practical tool for this process.

Site-Generic

Definition. A site-generic performance is designed to be portable across similar sites — to work in any car park, any swimming pool, any school gymnasium — using the generic spatial and social qualities of that *type* of location rather than the particular history of any specific instance of it.

The Rimini Protokoll Example

Cargo Sofia — a performance in which audience members ride in the back of a lorry while a Bulgarian truck driver narrates the life of a long-distance haulier — is site-generic in a precise sense: it can be performed in any city with suitable roads, and it uses the generic spatial experience of urban road travel rather than the specific history of any particular route (Dreyse and Malzacher, 2008).

Practical Implication

Site-generic work requires the facilitator to identify, with precision, the **generic spatial and social codes** of the chosen site type — what audiences already know and feel about that type of space — and to build the performance in deliberate relationship to those codes, either confirming, subverting, or estranging them.

Site-Sensitive

Definition. Site-sensitive performance uses the sensory qualities of a space — its textures, sounds, smells, temperatures, light qualities — as primary dramaturgical material, without necessarily engaging with its specific history or generic social function. It is the most immediately physical of the four relationships.



Scent as Dramaturgy

The use of citrus scent is a precise example: smell is the most direct of the senses, processed by the olfactory bulb in close proximity to the brain's memory and emotional centres, bypassing the analytical processing that visual and auditory stimuli typically undergo (Shepherd, 2012).



Acoustic Properties

Circumstance's *A Machine They're Secretly Building* (2016), a distributed performance event that used the specific acoustic properties of multiple sites simultaneously, is an example of site-sensitive practice at scale.



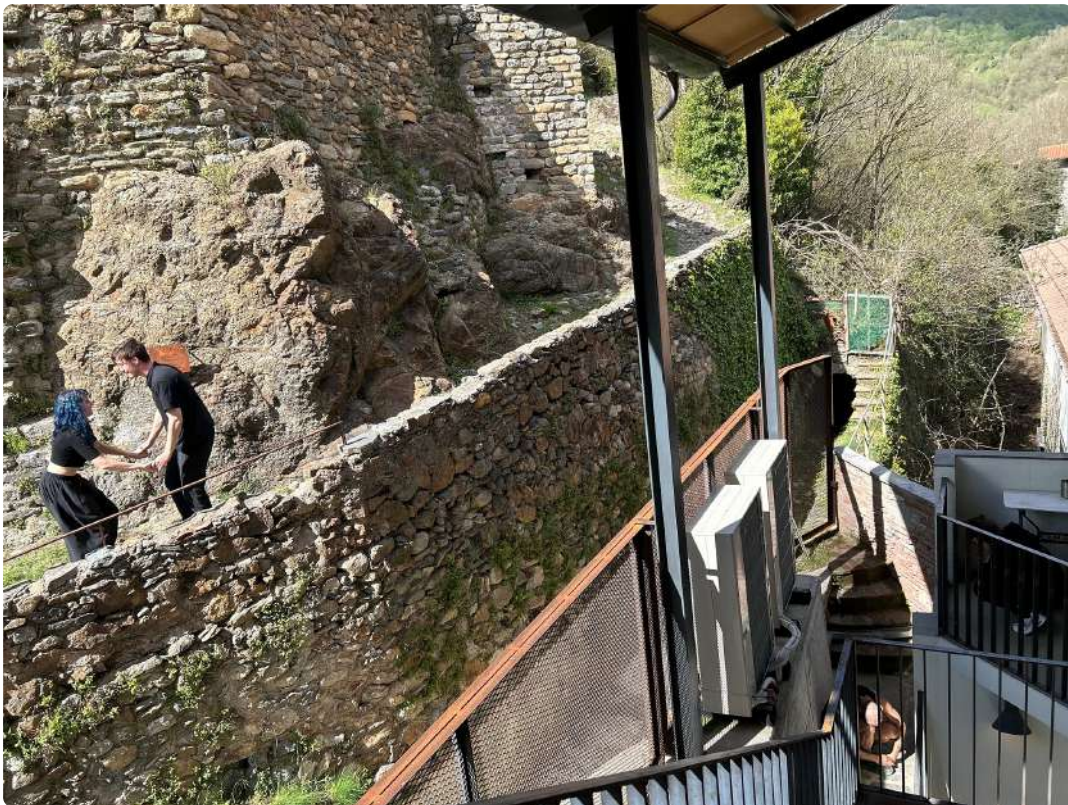
Sensory Audit

Site-sensitive work requires the facilitator to conduct a thorough sensory audit of the space before designing the performance: to spend time there at different times of day, in different weather conditions, attending to what the space sounds, smells, feels, and looks like.

The Love-Hate-Neutral Mapping Exercise

A Practical Tool for Site-Sympathetic Adaptation

Origin and context. This exercise is a practical tool for site-sympathetic adaptation: taking an existing performance or set of dramaturgical ideas and discovering which spatial elements of the chosen site are in productive relationship with the work.



The exercise draws on the concept of *affective mapping* — the systematic documentation of emotional and bodily responses to space — developed within psychogeography, the situationist practice of *dérive* (drifting through urban space in response to its affective pulls), and the spatial humanities (Tuan, 1977; Coverley, 2006). The three-way categorisation — love, hate, and neutral — produces a more nuanced and practically useful map than a simple positive/negative division.

Participants

Six to twenty-four. Best conducted with the full team working on a site-specific or site-sympathetic production.

Duration

Sixty to ninety minutes, including time for movement through the space and group discussion.

What You Need

The site itself. Paper and pens for each participant. Optional: coloured stickers or markers for annotating a floor plan.

Mapping Exercise: Step-by-Step

01

Enter the Space

Participants receive a simple instruction before entering: "As you move through this space, notice your responses — physical, emotional, associative. Classify each area, each feature, each quality of the space as: **love** (this could be powerful for the work), **hate** (this is a problem we will need to work against), or **neutral** (this doesn't seem to speak to the work yet)."

02

Silent Individual Movement

Participants move through the space individually, spending fifteen to twenty minutes in silent, attentive movement. They make notes as they go — not analytical descriptions but direct, immediate responses: *"The smell of mould in the corner — hate. The quality of light through the high window at 4pm — love."*

03

Share Individual Maps

The group reconvenes. Each participant shares their map, beginning with their strongest love and their strongest hate.

04

Identify Patterns and Divergences

The group looks for patterns: where do individual responses converge? Where do they diverge sharply? The divergences are often the most productive — they indicate spatial qualities that are genuinely ambiguous and can therefore be dramaturgically charged.

05

Produce a Collective Map

A collective map is produced: spatial elements organised under the three headings, with notes on how each might be incorporated, worked against, or transformed in the performance design.

 **Facilitation note:** The most important instruction is the one given at the beginning — respond bodily and immediately, not analytically. Redirect participants away from technical observation toward the affective and associative: "Not what you see — what you feel."

The exercise connects to the situationist practice of *dérive* — the unplanned journey through urban space, following the space's own affective pulls (Debord, 1956) — and to Guy Debord's concept of *psychogeography*: the study of the effects of geographical environments on the emotions and behaviour of individuals (Coverley, 2006).

The Sensory Ballroom Scene

Site-Sensitive Dramaturgy in Its Most Developed Form

Origin and context. The ballroom scene is a fully realised immersive dramaturgy in miniature. Audience members enter a space to find performers dancing in a circle — the ballroom scene from *Romeo and Juliet* is the explicit reference point — and are gradually integrated into the dancing, surrounded simultaneously by multiple sensory stimuli.



Scarves

Light fabric pieces placed around the shoulders of audience members by performers moving through the space.



Scent

A specific scent — citrus, floral, or herbal — introduced through diffusers, fresh flowers, or scented fabric held by performers.



Wind

Fans or the movement of performers creates a gentle wind that moves through the space and across the bodies of audience members.



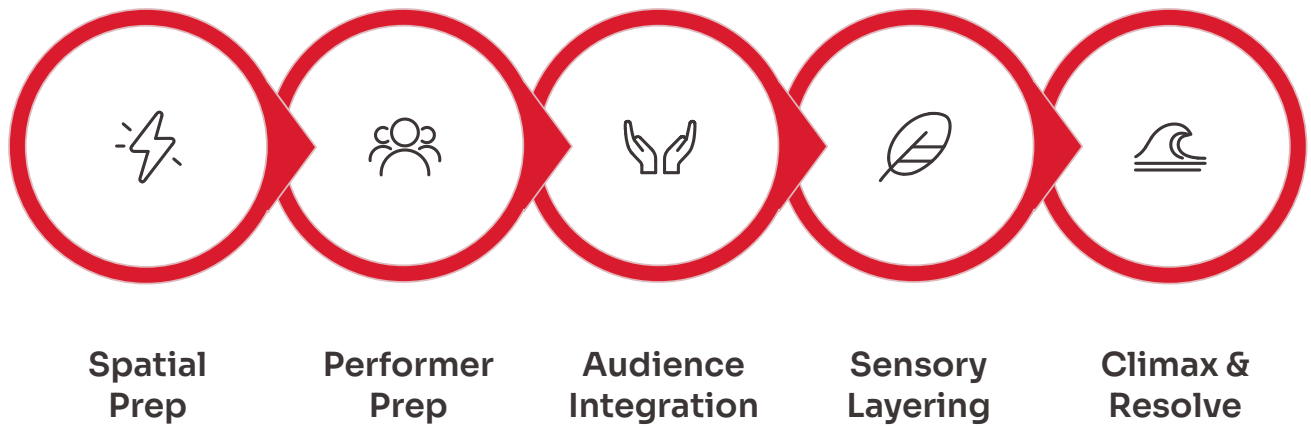
Music

The music shifts gradually from the entry music to something more intimate, supporting the deepening integration of the scene.

The narrative meaning — the *Romeo and Juliet* resonance — is carried not by text or explicit dramatic action but by the accumulation of sensory experience in bodies that already carry cultural memories of the ballroom as a site of first encounter, social display, and romantic possibility. The exercise connects to Josephine Machon's concept of *praesence* (2009) and to the practical work of companies including Punchdrunk, Shunt, and El Conde de Torrefiel.



Setting Up the Ballroom Scene



The primary facilitation challenge is managing the range of participant responses to being incorporated into the dance. Performers must be trained to read these responses accurately and to respect them — to make genuine space for participation without making non-participation feel like a failure.



The Science of Citrus

The choice of citrus scent is not arbitrary: citrus scents are associated in psychological research with alertness, positivity, and social openness, supporting the integrative social dynamic of the ballroom scene (Hirsch, 1995). The choice of scent, of fabric texture, of music — all are dramaturgical decisions that will produce measurable effects in the bodies of audience members.

Communitas

The British company Shunt used collective dancing as a regular structural element, producing a quality of *communitas* — Victor Turner's term for the temporary dissolution of social hierarchies in shared ritual experience — that conventional theatre rarely achieves (Turner, 1969). Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* includes a sustained ballroom sequence that consistently produces reports of exceptional emotional intensity.

Six Modes of Engagement

A central question in site-specific and immersive practice: what are the different ways an audience can be engaged, and what are the dramaturgical implications of each?



Sensory Engagement

The audience experiences something through the body: to feel, hear, smell, taste, or be touched. The most immediate and least deniable form — you cannot choose not to smell something in the air you are breathing. Requires the most careful ethical attention.



Spatial Engagement

The audience moves through space, choosing their own position and route. The primary mode in Punchdrunk-style production, producing what Adam Alston (2016) calls the "exploratory subject" — an active investigator rather than a passive recipient.



Narrative Engagement

The audience constructs their own narrative from fragments — active interpreters rather than passive recipients. Different audience members encounter different narrative fragments and construct different understandings, all simultaneously true.



Social Engagement

The audience interacts with performers or other audience members in ways that produce genuine social relationships rather than simulated ones. Rimini Protokoll's productions produce this consistently: the audience member is genuinely learning from a genuinely knowledgeable person.



Physical Engagement

The audience does something physically — dances, handles objects, completes a task. The mode closest to Boal's spect-actor, producing the most intense sense of agency and investment. Design must always include alternatives for those unable to participate physically.



Reflective Engagement

The audience thinks, writes, responds — processing experience through language or image. Potentially the most lasting in its effects: the reflection that happens after an experience is often where the deepest meaning is made.

The Icebreaker Chair Game

Social Dramaturgy in Action

The icebreaker chair game is a precise and elegant social dramaturgy. It establishes, within the first minutes of the session, the key relational dynamics that will run through the entire five days: the negotiation between having and not having, between holding and being held, between the public and the private register of social desire.

01

Set Up

Half the group sits in chairs. The other half stands behind a chair, each with their hands on the back of the chair they are behind. One standing participant begins without a sitting partner — their chair is empty.

02

The Signal

The partnerless participant makes sustained eye contact with someone sitting in another chair, signalling silently that they want that person to come to their empty chair.

03

The Escape Attempt

The sitting person attempts to move — to slide out of their chair and walk toward the empty one. The standing participant behind them must prevent this by gently touching their shoulders the moment they begin to move.

04

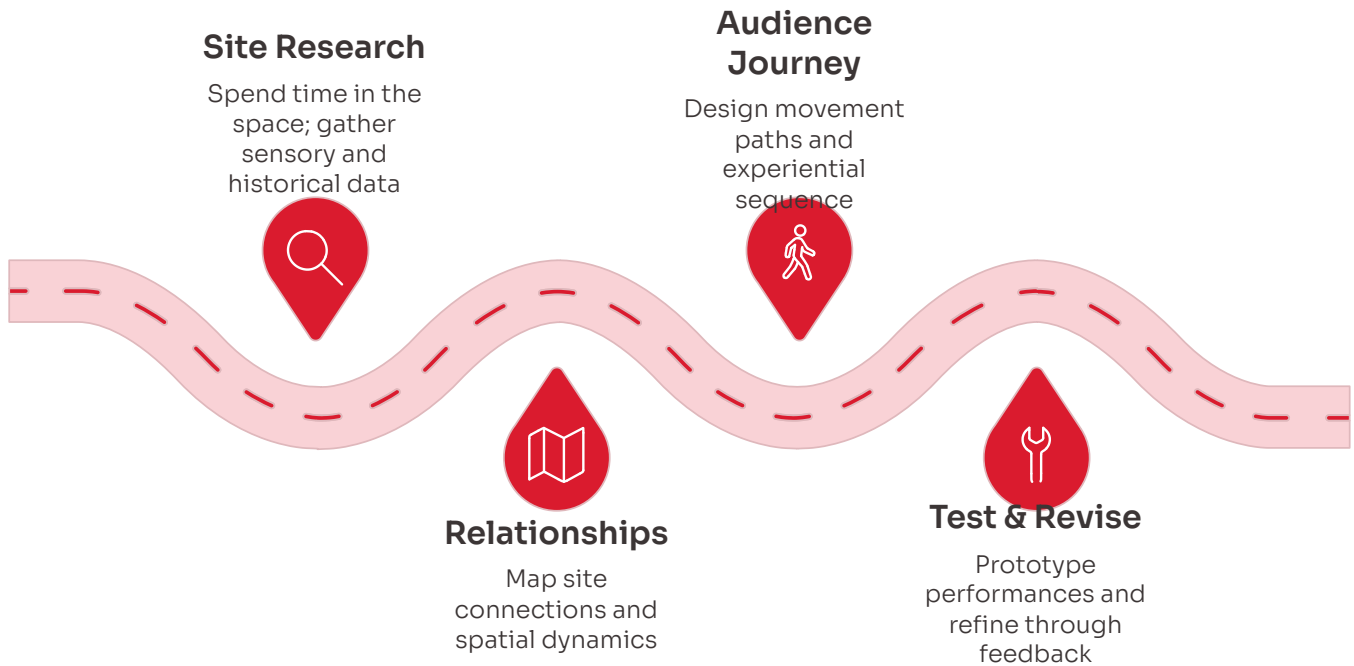
Role Reversal

If the sitting person escapes before being touched, the standing participant who failed to retain them becomes the new partnerless participant. After five to seven minutes, roles reverse: sitters become standers, standers become sitters.

- ❏ The eye contact across the space — the silent negotiation about whether to attempt an escape — is a direct training in the quality of attention required for immersive performance: the ability to make genuine connection across distance, to communicate intention without words, and to read the signals of another person's body with accuracy.

Designing for Site: A Practical Framework

Seven Steps from Research to Performance



Step 1: Site Research

Spend time in the space before any creative decisions are made. Conduct a sensory audit, a historical research (what happened here? who has been here?), and a social audit (what does this kind of space mean in the culture where it exists?).

Step 4: Design the Audience Journey

For immersive and site-based work, the audience's movement through the space is a primary dramaturgical element. Map the possible routes, the points of encounter and decision, the spatial rhythms of the experience. Where does the audience begin? Where do they end?

Step 6: Design the Participation Structure

Using the engagement categories in Section 5.6, consider which modes of participation your work might employ. How will you invite participation without coercing it? How will you ensure that non-participation remains a dignified and comfortable option?

Step 7: Test, Respond, Revise

Site-specific and immersive work requires iterative testing in the actual space. What is designed in the rehearsal room will be transformed by the site; allow for this transformation rather than resisting it.

Making Together

Chapter 6 · Devising, Ensemble Intelligence, and Collective Choreography

There is a particular moment in ensemble physical work that experienced facilitators learn to recognise and protect: the moment when a group of individuals stops being a collection of separate performers and becomes something else — a single, distributed organism capable of responding to itself, adjusting to itself, surprising itself.

This moment cannot be forced. It cannot be scheduled. It can only be prepared for, and then waited for, and then — when it arrives — carefully sustained.

The sessions documented in the final days of the Immersion Lab were concerned primarily with creating the conditions for this moment. The six-movement sequence, the emotional layering work, the lullaby massage, the flock dance, the lift exercise — these are tools for building compositional thinking in a group: the capacity to make aesthetic decisions in real time, without prior agreement, through a shared language of bodily attention and response.

Distributed Cognition

Edwin Hutchins (1995) developed the concept of *distributed cognition*: complex cognitive tasks are not performed by individual minds but by systems of minds and material artefacts working together. What a well-functioning ensemble knows — about space, rhythm, the emotional logic of a scene — is not located in any individual performer but distributed across the group and its shared practice.

Emergence and Self-Organisation

Complexity theory uses *emergence* to describe how complex, ordered patterns arise spontaneously from the local interactions of simpler components — the way a murmuration of starlings produces its astonishing aerial choreography without any individual bird having access to the pattern as a whole. The flock dance exercise is a direct theatrical application of this principle.

The Devising Director

As John Wright argues in *Why is That So Funny?* (2006), the devising director's primary task is to be "the best audience the show ever had" — to attend to what the performers are making with genuine openness, to identify what is alive and what is not, and to feed this perception back to the group in ways that enable them to develop their material further.

The academic literature on devising theatre has grown substantially since Alison Oddey's foundational study *Devising Theatre* (1994) first mapped the field. Subsequent work by Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling (2006), John Britton (2013), and Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart (2010) has refined the theoretical frameworks available to practitioners and scholars alike.

Exercise One: The Six-Movement Sequence

From the Individual Body to the Ensemble

The six-movement sequence is one of the most widely used compositional exercises in contemporary physical theatre training. It appears in various forms across ensemble and devising traditions, in training associated with Jacques Lecoq's school, and in the devising methodologies of companies including Frantic Assembly.

1

Phase 1: Individual Creation

Each participant creates a sequence of exactly six distinct movements — large or small, fast or slow, abstract or recognisable. They must follow each other in a fixed order and be exactly repeatable. Fifteen to twenty minutes.

2

Phase 2: Sharing

Participants form pairs. Each partner shows the other their sequence — performed simply and clearly, without comment or explanation. Each partner learns the other's sequence through their own body. Ten to fifteen minutes.

3

Phase 3: Merging

Find a way to put the two sequences together — alternating, layering, interrupting, or finding a spatial relationship between them. The physical content of each move should remain recognisable. Twenty to twenty-five minutes.

4

Phase 4: Group Development

Pairs join into groups of four to six, and the merging process continues. Each group develops a short group sequence from the combined material of all its members. Optional, twenty to thirty minutes.

⚠ Facilitation note: The most common difficulty in Phase 3 is the tendency to choreograph — to design the duet from the outside, thinking about what it will look like rather than exploring how it feels to do. Redirect: "Stop looking at it. Do it. What happens in your body when you put these two things next to each other?"

Exercise Two: Emotional Relationship Variations

Meaning Is Not in the Movement Itself

This exercise takes the fixed physical material developed in the six-movement sequence and subjects it to a series of relational and emotional reframings. Pairs perform their duet sequence three times, each time within a different emotional context. The physical material remains fixed; only the emotional and relational frame changes.

This is a direct theatrical demonstration of one of the most important principles in physical theatre: that meaning is not located in the movement itself but in the relationship between the movement and its context.

Variation 1: In Love

Perform your sequence as if you and your partner are in love. Not sentimentally — genuinely. The physical material does not change. The relationship does.

Variation 2: In Argument

Perform the same sequence as if you are in the middle of a serious argument. Something real is at stake between you. Again — the physical material does not change.

Variation 3: Being Silly

Perform the sequence as if you are being completely silly together. Playing. Nothing matters except the pleasure of the game.



This connects to the semiotic concept of *connotation* and to Roland Barthes's analysis of how the same image can produce radically different meanings depending on its framing (Barthes, 1977). It also resonates with the practice of Ariane Mnouchkine and Théâtre du Soleil, whose devising processes frequently involve performers exploring the same physical material through multiple emotional and cultural registers before a final form is fixed (Williams, 1999).

Exercise Three: The Lullaby Massage

Inhabiting Contradiction

The lullaby massage — a partner exercise in which one participant gives a massage while singing or humming a lullaby, alternating between sweet and aggressive delivery — is one of the most dramatically charged exercises in the manual. It works through contrast and surprise: the lullaby is a form associated with gentleness, vulnerability, and intimate caregiving; the instruction to make the lullaby sometimes aggressive, sometimes tender, sometimes frightening, disrupts the comfort of both associations simultaneously.

Step-by-Step

1. Partners establish who gives and who receives first. The receiver settles — lying on the floor or seated comfortably.
2. The giver begins massaging and humming or singing a lullaby — any lullaby, or an invented melody. Start gently.
3. After two to three minutes, the lullaby changes: more aggressive, more urgent, more strange. The massage continues.
4. Find a rhythm that moves between sweet and aggressive without announcing the transitions. Let them be sudden.
5. Return to gentleness. Let the lullaby resolve. Let the massage slow and stop. A moment of stillness. Roles reverse.

Training Value

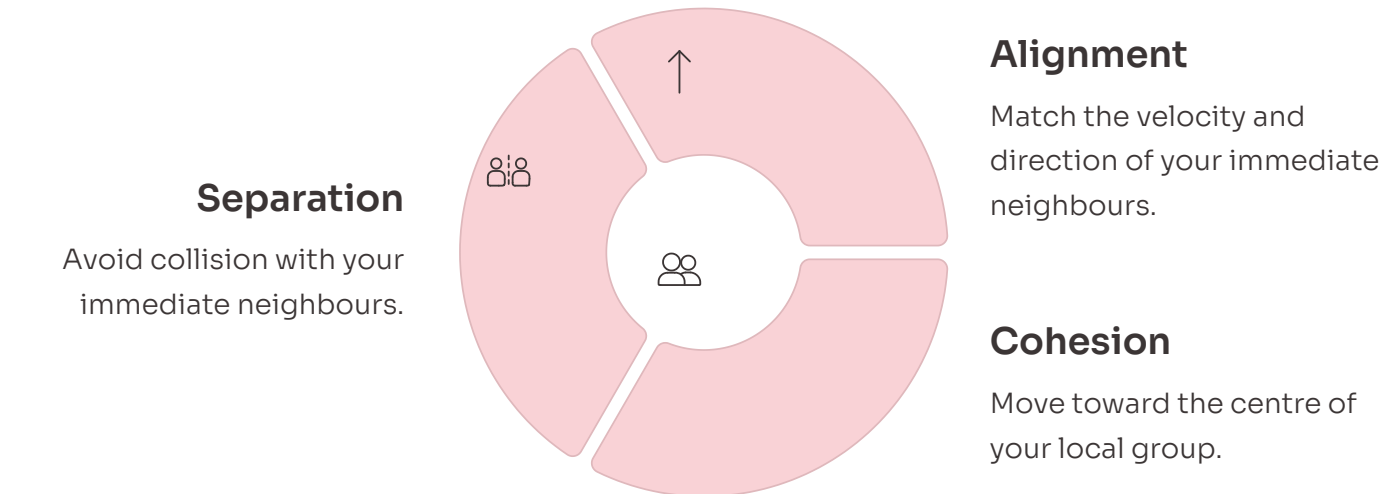
The exercise asks performers to inhabit contradiction — to be simultaneously comforting and threatening, tender and dangerous — and to find this contradiction in the body rather than in the head. This connects to the theatrical tradition of the grotesque, explored theoretically by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) and practically by directors including Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers, and the early work of Robert Lepage.

- ❏ For performers working with audiences with sensory impairments — where touch is often a primary communicative channel — this awareness of touch's tonal range is essential professional knowledge.

Exercise Four: The Final Flock Dance

Emergence and Collective Intelligence

The flock dance is the culminating ensemble exercise of the Immersion Lab. Flocking — the behaviour of birds moving in murmurations, of fish schooling, of insects swarming — demonstrates how ordered, complex, apparently intentional collective behaviour can arise from the application of a small number of simple local rules by individual agents with no access to the pattern as a whole.



These three rules — first formalised computationally by Craig Reynolds in his 1987 *Boids* simulation — govern flocking behaviour in biological systems. The theatrical application produces something genuinely remarkable to watch: a group of performers moving together with a collective intelligence that appears intentional but is actually emergent.

- ③ The flock dance sequence includes **lifts** — moments in which one performer is supported and elevated by the group — adding a further dimension: the negotiation of trust and physical risk that the lift requires is a concentrated version of the trust and risk-taking that ensemble performance as a whole demands.

Group Reflection Writing

Making Learning Transferable

The workshop documentation includes a group reflection exercise — small groups discussing their learning and remaining questions, writing on shared paper — as a standard closing element of the devising sessions. This is a deliberately designed reflective practice, grounded in the educational theory of *experiential learning* developed by David Kolb (1984) and the reflective practitioner concept developed by Donald Schön (1983).

Without structured reflection, physical experience remains tacit: it changes the body's habits without producing transferable understanding.

The Two Questions

Groups write for fifteen minutes on a shared large sheet of paper, addressing simultaneously:

1. What did you learn today?
2. What do you still not understand — what questions remain?

□ The invitation to name what remains unknown or unclear is a different and more demanding act: it requires participants to sit with uncertainty rather than resolving it prematurely. The capacity to hold an open question is one of the primary intellectual habits of good devising practice.

Applied Devising: Case Studies from the Workshop

The Roma Community Project

An immersive theatre process combining sociological research and relationship-building with immersive performance methods. Careful engagement with community social conditions before any theatrical decisions were made is a crucial ethical and practical step.

Immersive Education KA2

The cross-cultural immersive school project connecting Rome and Mataró (Erasmus+ ref. 2023-1-IT02-KA210-SCH-000165336), developed by Project XX1 with Largo Dino Buzzati, INCA Catalunya, and Institut Laia L'Arquera.

Puertas Abiertas

A free-roaming immersive performance comparable in structure to *Sleep No More* — a production in which the audience moves freely through a multi-room environment, following their own interests and constructing their own narrative.

The Ethics of Collective Creation

Power, Credit, and Care

Credit and Attribution

When a group of performers devises material collectively and that material is performed publicly or documented, questions of credit and attribution become pressing. The convention in most devising companies is to credit the whole company as co-creators, with the director acknowledged separately as director rather than author. Discuss attribution explicitly with participants before the process begins.

Power and Hierarchy

All devising processes operate within power structures, even when they aspire to be non-hierarchical. The facilitator has power — to determine the exercises, to observe and evaluate, to decide which material is developed and which is dropped. Participants from more socially advantaged backgrounds often have more confidence in contributing. The facilitator must actively create conditions in which all participants can contribute.

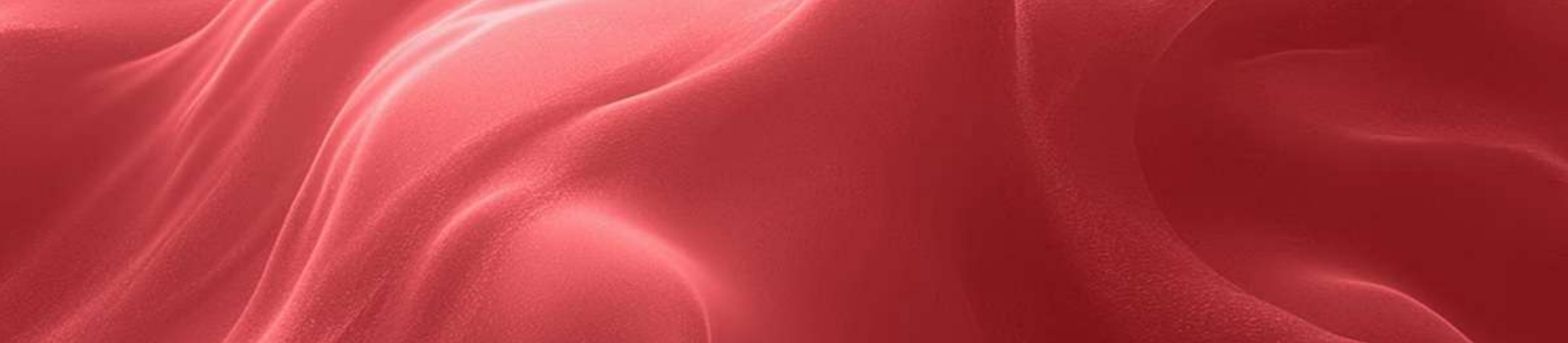
Intellectual Property

In commercial and semi-professional devising contexts, the question of who owns the material that emerges from a collective process has legal as well as ethical dimensions. In most jurisdictions, copyright in a collectively devised performance work belongs to the creators as a group, unless a written agreement specifies otherwise.

Trauma and Vulnerability

Devising processes that draw on personal material carry a specific ethical responsibility. Participants may find themselves generating material that is more personally significant than they anticipated. The facilitator must maintain a dual role: creative leader and duty-of-care holder — attentive to signs of distress, willing to slow or redirect a process that is producing genuine harm.





Immersive Dramaturgy in the World

Chapter 7 · Applied, Community, and Educational Contexts

Every exercise in this manual was developed in a studio — a controlled space with a clear floor, a facilitator with authority, and participants who have chosen to be there. The question this chapter addresses is what happens when you take these tools outside that controlled space.

Into schools, community centres, hospitals, prisons, public squares, and all the other places where people who have not chosen to be in a theatre workshop find themselves in the presence of someone who wants to make performance with them.

This is not a marginal or secondary application of the work. For many practitioners — and for many of the communities this manual is ultimately addressed to — it is the primary one. The history of applied and community theatre is as long and as serious as the history of mainstream theatrical practice, and it has generated its own substantial body of theory, ethics, methodology, and critical reflection.

Why This Community?

The question of who the work is for, and why, must be answered before any creative decisions are made.

What Is the Work For?

The purpose of the work — social, educational, therapeutic, political — shapes every subsequent decision about method and form.

How Do We Know Whether It Has Worked?

Evaluation is not an afterthought but an integral part of the ethical practice of applied theatre.

Applied Theatre: A Field and Its Debates

Section 1: The Tensions Within the Field

Applied theatre is the umbrella term most widely used in English-language scholarship and practice to describe theatre work that takes place outside conventional theatrical venues and that is oriented toward social, educational, therapeutic, or political ends. The term gained currency in the 1990s, partly through the influence of Phillip Taylor's edited collection *Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community* (2003) and James Thompson's *Applied Theatre: Bewilderment and Beyond* (2003).

The Instrumentalisation Critique

Helen Nicholson, in *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (2005), argues that the very category of "applied" theatre risks instrumentalising performance — treating it as a delivery mechanism for predetermined social outcomes rather than as an intrinsically valuable form of human experience.

Tim Etchells has made a similar argument: that theatre which knows in advance what it is for has given up something essential about what theatre can be.

The Affective Turn

Thompson himself, in *Performance Affects* (2009), revised his earlier position significantly, moving away from an emphasis on theatre's capacity to produce measurable social change toward an attention to the *affective qualities* of performance experience.

These debates have direct practical implications for how a facilitator designs a project, how they present it to funders and institutions, how they evaluate it, and how they understand their own role in relation to the communities they work with.

- ❑ The manual does not resolve these debates — they are genuinely open — but it takes them seriously.



The Roma Community Project

Research, Representation, and Relationship

The Roma community is one of the most misrepresented and most consistently excluded communities in European cultural production. Centuries of stereotyping — in literature, in music, in visual art, in popular culture — have produced a fictional "Gypsy" image so pervasive that it actively displaces the social reality of actual Roma communities: their linguistic and cultural diversity, their complex relationship with the majority societies they live within, their long histories of persecution and exclusion, and their vibrant internal cultural traditions (Hancock, 2002).

This risk was addressed through a sociological research phase: a systematic engagement with the community's actual social conditions, history, and self-understanding before any theatrical decisions were made. This approach connects to the tradition of *ethnographic performance* developed by practitioners including Dwight Conquergood (1985).

→ Enter as a Learner, Not an Expert

The facilitator brings theatrical skills and methodological frameworks; the community brings knowledge of its own life that no outsider can replicate. Begin from genuine curiosity rather than a predetermined artistic concept.

→ Research Before Devising

Spend time in the community before any creative work begins. Attend events, share meals, listen to stories, visit homes and workplaces. The research phase is not a preliminary to the real work; it is the foundation of the real work.

→ Negotiate Representation Explicitly

Before any community member's story, image, or experience is incorporated into a performance, the terms of that incorporation should be discussed and agreed upon explicitly. Who will perform the material? In what form? For what audiences?

→ Plan for Sustainability

A project that enters a community, makes a performance, and leaves has limited value. The most ethical community theatre projects build capacity within the community — leaving behind trained facilitators, established processes, or ongoing structures.

The Immersive Education Project

KA2 and Cross-Cultural Learning

The Erasmus+ KA2 project connecting schools in Rome and Mataró represents one of the most practically significant applications of immersive theatre methodology in formal educational settings. Developed by Project XXI in partnership with the school Largo Dino Buzzati (Rome), INCA Catalunya (Barcelona), and Institut Laia L'Arquera (Mataró), the project operated under Erasmus+ project reference **2023-1-IT02-KA210-SCH-000165336**.

The theoretical basis for using embodied and immersive performance in educational contexts rests on several converging arguments. Howard Gardner's theory of *multiple intelligences* (1983) proposed that conventional schooling, with its emphasis on linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence, systematically undervalues the bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences that drama and physical performance training directly develop.

Subsequent research in embodied cognition — particularly the work of Mark Johnson (1987) and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) — has deepened this argument: all conceptual understanding is grounded in bodily experience, and teaching approaches that engage the body therefore access learning processes that purely linguistic instruction misses.



- ✔ Jonathan Neelands's framework for structuring drama work in educational settings (1990) provides the most practically useful bridge between these theoretical arguments and classroom practice — identifying a range of *dramatic conventions* that translate the principles of participatory and physical theatre into pedagogically structured learning activities.

Puertas Abiertas

Community Immersive Performance at Scale

Puertas Abiertas — Open Doors — is a free-roaming immersive performance, comparable in structural approach to *Sleep No More* but grounded in a specific community engagement context. The name itself is significant: it is an invitation rather than a title, a promise of accessibility and welcome rather than the enigmatic proper nouns that characterise many high-end immersive productions.

Designing for Non-Theatre Audiences

The free-roaming format, which feels natural and liberating to audiences with experience of immersive theatre, can feel confusing and even threatening to audiences who have never encountered it before. Designing for non-theatre audiences requires building in more support structures: a clear and welcoming entry sequence; a visible spatial logic; performers who are genuinely responsive; and a clear sense of when the experience ends.

Community Ownership of the Narrative

In community immersive performance, the question of *whose stories are being told* is as important as how they are being told. The most powerful community immersive productions emerge from a sustained process of community consultation and collaborative creation in which community members are not merely the audience but the authors of the material (Kershaw, 1992).

The Dramaturgy of Open Doors

The performance is structured as an invitation rather than a spectacle. Audience members are not admitted to watch something — they are invited in to experience something together. The performer in a community immersive production must be available — in the full sense that Barba and Lecoq give to that word — to whoever walks through the open door.

Evaluation: How Do We Know Whether It Has Worked?

Four Frameworks for Honest Assessment

The question of evaluation — how we know whether applied theatre work has achieved anything — is one of the most contested in the field. Funding bodies routinely require evidence of impact: numbers, questionnaires, case studies. These requirements are not unreasonable, but they can produce perverse incentives: projects designed around measurable outcomes rather than valuable ones, and complex creative work flattened into impact reports.



Participatory Evaluation

Rather than being evaluated from outside, the project is evaluated by its participants. Participatory evaluation treats participants as the primary authorities on the value of their own experience, which is both ethically appropriate and practically more accurate than external observation.



Process and Product

Much applied theatre evaluation focuses on outcomes — what the project produced, what changed as a result. But the process — what happened during the making, how participants related to each other and to the work — is often where the most significant value resides.



Long-Term Follow-Up

The effects of significant creative experience are rarely fully visible immediately after the project ends. Where resources permit, follow-up contact with participants at six months and twelve months after a project's conclusion produces a much fuller picture of its impact.



Honest Account of Failure

No applied theatre project succeeds entirely. Evaluation that presents only successes is not evaluation; it is marketing. The most valuable evaluation reports honestly account for what did not work, what was learned from difficulty, and what would be done differently next time.



The Facilitator's Practice

Sustaining Yourself in Applied Work

Applied theatre work is demanding in ways that are not always visible from the outside. The facilitator who works consistently with communities in difficulty is exposed to a level of human suffering and complexity that takes a toll. Burnout, secondary traumatisation, and compassion fatigue are well-documented risks for practitioners in this field (Figley, 1995).

Supervision and Reflection

Regular supervision — with a peer, a mentor, or a professional supervisor — is the single most important protective factor for applied theatre practitioners. A structured reflective conversation about the work, the relationships within it, the facilitator's own responses, and the ethical dimensions of the practice.

Community with Other Practitioners

Building a community of practice with other facilitators working in similar contexts provides both practical support (shared resources, collaborative projects, peer consultation) and the sense of belonging to a field that is larger than any individual's practice.

Artistic Renewal

Practitioners who work exclusively in applied contexts sometimes find that their artistic engagement narrows over time. Maintaining a practice of artistic engagement that is not instrumentalised — attending performances, making work for non-applied contexts — renews the creative energy that sustains the applied work.

Physical Practice

Many of the exercises in this manual are physically demanding; all of them require a facilitator who is physically present in the room in a genuine rather than merely supervisory sense. Maintaining your own regular embodied practice ensures that the physical intelligence on which the work depends remains alive.

Knowing When to Stop

Every applied theatre project has a natural end — a point at which the facilitator's continued involvement becomes less useful than the community's independent continuation of the work. Recognising this point, and leaving gracefully, is one of the most important and most difficult skills in applied practice.

The Political Dimension

A Final Note

Theatre that takes place outside conventional theatrical venues, that works with communities excluded from mainstream cultural production, that insists on the creative capacity of people who are routinely told they have none — this theatre is making political claims, whether or not it announces them as such.

Creativity Is a Human Universal

Not a professional specialism. The work claims that every person, in every community, has the capacity for creative expression — and that this capacity is worth developing, protecting, and celebrating.

The Body Matters

What happens to bodies, how bodies are treated, what bodies are allowed to do and feel and express, is a question of justice as well as of aesthetics. Physical theatre is not merely an artistic practice — it is a political one.

Theatre Is a Necessity

Not a luxury that communities can do without while more pressing needs are addressed, but one of the primary human activities through which communities make meaning, build solidarity, process suffering, and imagine alternatives to the way things are.



Augusto Boal put it with characteristic directness: theatre is a form of knowledge that should also be a means of transforming society — a tool for building the future rather than merely waiting for it (Boal, 1979).



The Open Door

Conclusion

There is a particular quality of attention that develops over the course of a sustained physical theatre workshop — a quality that is difficult to name but immediately recognisable when you encounter it. It is the quality of a room full of people who have learned, over days of practice, to be genuinely present to each other: to register each other's bodies, to respond to each other's impulses, to hold the group and the partner and the space in awareness simultaneously.

The thread running through all of it is the same: the proposition that genuine presence — in a body, between bodies, in a shared space — is both the means and the end of this work.

The manual is not complete. It cannot be complete, because the exercises it describes are living practices — they change every time they are done, with every new group, in every new context. Every facilitator who uses this manual will transform it further. They will discover that certain exercises work differently with their communities — that the corridor formation produces different things in a prison gymnasium than in a retreat setting; that the match-timer writing generates different material from a group of eight-year-olds than from experienced practitioners.

These differences are not failures of the method — they are the method working as it should, responding to the specific bodies, histories, and conditions of the specific room.

✔ **The door this manual opens is not to a fixed set of techniques but to a practice of attention** — to the body, to the other, to the space, to the moment. Keep the door open. Let whoever arrives through it surprise you. That surprise — the thing you could not have planned for, the encounter you did not design — is where the work lives.

Immersion Lab — La Cremallera, Ribes de Freser

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