

THE WIMS

Our History and Tool Box



by

Stephanie Waxman

In memory of Dale and Elinor

THE WIMS

Our History and Tool Box

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OUR HISTORY

BEGINNINGS

They are the helpers of God. Listen to them.

L.A. Weekly, April 28, 1991

We¹ gathered in The Church in Ocean Park in Santa Monica. We pushed the seats to the side, which opened up the large space, exposing its green linoleum floor. The ceiling was high. The stage was small and carpeted with a wide apron. Behind it, a curved stucco wall with a domed ceiling created a womb-like semicircular recess. We referred to this apse as The Shell. I can still hear the echoes of the beautiful sounds we made in it.

Often, when we began our evening workshops, it was early enough so that the sun, still low in the western sky, poured through the stained glass bestowing a warm light and a sense of spiritual blessing on our work. And, in a way, we were there to do God's work: we were there to create.

Our impulse came from a realization that our stories were not being told elsewhere. It came from a need to grapple with our sense of shifting identity. It came from the pleasure we took in playing together, the way children play, not censoring our imaginations. It came from the delight we took in singing together, learning new songs and making up songs to suit the themes we discovered. It came from the pleasure we took in taking risks together. Eventually, when we created theater in front of an audience, their laughter, tears, and sighs of recognition brought the satisfaction of a shared journey.

¹Dale Eunson, Elinor Graham, Susan Krebs, Betty Macias, Julie (AKA Roxanne) Payne, Betty Thomas (AKA B.T.), and Stephanie Waxman.

The Wims was something we squeezed into our lives beyond the demands of our day jobs². Each of us hungered for a creative theatrical outlet and we brought our individual experiences³ in improvisational theater and/or music.

Getting a group of women improvisers together was the brainchild of Susan Krebs, a veteran of War Babies, a high-octane collection of men and women improvisers. The men were whizzes, their onstage banter sharp, fast, witty and intensely verbal. The women held their own, but Susan wondered what would happen if there were only women on stage. Would there be that same speed, that same urgency to be funny? It is scary not to have a script, to not know where one is headed, which is one of the reasons that traditional improv companies depend on the fast laugh and matching of wits. Yet Susan was interested in pursuing a deeper exploration, which though it might include humor, did not depend on it.

In 1983, she gathered a group of nine women who met for several months, exploring various ways of creating theatre out of the stories of our lives. This group evolved into the first incarnation of the Wims: Betty T. Dale, Elinor, Stephanie, and Susan.

We were often asked what Wims stood for. “Wimmen” was a word circulating during that era of feminism, a time when so many of us were trying to re-define what it meant to be women. We liked the word “whim” because of its implied spontaneity. Susan came up with the name Wims and it stuck. (Later, we enjoyed the alternate suggestions audience members offered: “Women Inured to Menacing Societies,” “Women Integrating Madness Sanely,” Women In Men’s Shorts.”)

² Dale worked in the Santa Monica Building and Safety Department; Elinor was choir director of the Church in Ocean Park in addition to working as a book keeper; Susan and Julie were commercial actresses; Betty Macias was director of various non-profit agencies, most recently Virginia Avenue Park; Betty Thomas directed films; Stephanie wrote books and taught writing and improvisation.

³Dale and Elinor: Public Works; Julie: The Committee; Susan: War Babies; Betty Thomas: Second City; Stephanie: We Tell Stories and Public Works; Betty Macias: El Chicano and the Rudy Macias Orchestra and various Latin rock bands.

In the spring of 1984, as the Summer Olympics were headed toward Los Angeles, we learned that there would be numerous events around town using the theme of the Olympics. We decided to join the fray, offering our Olympic Cabaret, which ran for four weekends. In the center of The Powerhouse Theater in Santa Monica, we arranged five inner tubes in the symbol of the Olympics. We opened each evening with a rap written by a friend, Betty Macias.

*ALL: We're the Wims, the Wims, and we are here to say
Welcome to our Olympic Cabaret!
We're so glad to see each one of you
Have a good good time is what we're gonna do*

*BT: Well I'm big B.T., (ALL: B.T.) That's me
Betty Thomas (ALL: Betty Thomas),
Hit it, Stephanie*

*SW: Ms. Waxman is my moniker
But you can call me Stef, if you prefer
And to my right is Susan Krebs,
That's Susan Krebs of the eastern debs*

*SK: I can sing the blues and that ain't no tale
But if you don't believe me ask my friend Dale*

*DE: Dale Eunson is my name
And improvisation is my game*

*ALL: We can sing, we can dance, we can do much more
But what would we do without Elinor?*

*EG: I'm Elinor Graham glad to be alive
Cause we're the Wims, count us: one, two, three, four, five*

*ALL: We're the Wims, the Wims...
We're the Wims, the Wims...*

Various local artists, singers, and comedians performed, introducing various themes, which the Wims then used as springboards for improvising.

Feedback from the Olympic Cabaret was overwhelmingly positive and we were encouraged to have another show. During the subsequent year, we broadened our group to include Betty Macias and in 1986, Julie (AKA Roxanne) Payne. From 1984 to 1995 we gathered regularly, with and without an audience. Sometimes all seven of us were present; other times as few as four. During those years we took turns being leaders, planning the workshops and directing the work. Periodically we invited other actors

and musicians⁴ to play with us. We also imported various musicians, dancers, visual artists and directors to work with us. We were taught contact improvisation, sculpture making, dance, and percussion. We read the works⁵ of other improvisers, freely borrowing techniques. We studied dream interpretation. We also brought in teachings⁶ we had personally received.

We became teachers for each other too. Elinor taught us shape-note music and liturgical songs from her vast collection. She also taught us how to be quiet on stage; she was comfortable with silence and trusted that doing something as simple as folding a sheet was compelling to watch. Betty T. taught us opera warm-ups, which included learning how to “throw our voice” to the back wall, front wall and side wall. In one workshop, she brought in her gun collection and taught us how to operate and clean a gun! Betty frequently broke the fourth wall, turning to the audience and asking a question, waiting for the answer, then returning to what was happening on stage. Dale taught us how to connect an emotion to a metaphor, which could be expressed in language, movement, and/or a visual statement. She also taught us fearlessness, both physically—once, she actually climbed the walls of the Church—and emotionally (especially in her dying days). Despite her ability to be real and vulnerable in the moment and let the audience in on that, Susan’s irrepressible funny bone was always available. She taught us how to become a character at the drop of a hat, whether based on someone from the real world (David Duke) or based on a body part (Adrenal Gland). Betty M., with her pure tone and wide vocal range, taught us how to improvise in three-part harmony. In her less serious moments, she was ready to make a fool of herself. When she took the stage on all fours as a bug, we prepared ourselves for a sidesplitting experience. I was called Queen of the

⁴ John Achorn, Jim Lashly, Luke Johnson and Leon Martell (who called themselves “The Mims”), and Diana Tanaka; musicians Tempo, Mitchell Greenhill and Scott Breadman.

⁵ Viola Spolin (*Improvisation for the Theater*), Jerzy Grotowski (*Towards a Poor Theatre*), Keith Johnstone (*Impro* and founder of Theatre Sports). We took inspiration from Joseph Chaikin (The Open Theater), Peter Brooks (“Mahabaratah”), Paul Sills (Story Theater), Kenneth H. Brown (The Living Theater and author of “The Brig”), Steve Paxton (Contact Improvisation), Robert Pasolli (*A Book on the Open Theatre*), Rachael Rosenthal, Joseph Campbell, Clarissa Estes, Janet Bolen, and STOMP.

⁶ Paul Sills, Kenneth H. Brown, Del Close, Bella Lewitsky, Tom Jenkins, Carl Weintraub, Stanley Waxman, Rudy Macias, James Wing Woo, Victor Walker, Scott Breadman, and Frankie Armstrong.

Check-in for my ability to tell a story succinctly incorporating metaphors, which the group could then play with. I also brought in movement ideas based on my study of yoga and the Chinese martial arts (kung fu and tai chi). Roxanne taught us how to be precise in our “space work”—how to keep the integrity of imaginary objects. She also taught us word jazz. In a scene, she was a master at supplying her fellow players with information about who they were and why they were there. During one series of workshops she provided a video camera, which became alternately a prop, a character, and from wherever it was placed, a unique point of view on our work.

Our intention was to go deeper into our personal stories without turning our exploration into psychodrama. As we tried out different ways of telling stories theatrically, we began to get a sense that our stories were not only personal and psychological; they fit into bigger stories—the historical/political/collective/global story. We explored how this all connected to the religious and mythic stories that already existed. Along the way we discovered new archetypes that had never before existed, such as Black Sheep, Diva, Guru, Dancing Spirit, Tooth Mother, Mommy Dearest, Wicked Strega, and Wary Warrior. We observed and valued the images and themes that came to us in dreams. Finally, we attempted to find a place for our stories within the greater cosmic story.

Here’s how Elinor welcomed the audience one evening: “Here we are in the month of October, at the end of the millennium, on the edge of the continent, in the belly of the beast, before the fall of the empire.”

That is the kind of context we looked for in our attempt to make the personal universal. We were ambitious, and sometimes we were successful. Most often, we managed to use our personal tales to illuminate one or two of the larger contexts.

We Tell Stories⁷ produced many of our shows, which Carl Weintraub taped, giving us a record of our work. Barry Michlin took stunning photographs, one of which was turned

⁷A children’s theater company (co-founded by Stephanie), which used improvisation to explore children’s stories. Carl was its founder and Artistic Director.

into a snappy tee shirt designed by Laney Gradus. In the beginning, we were aided by Marianne Schneller's lighting, and for the long haul, the lighting of Kathi O'Donohue.

In addition to the Church in Ocean Park, we performed in university auditoriums, large and small theaters, halls for political benefits and once, at a women's prison. We sold tee shirts and Dale and Stephanie ran workshops. In our heyday, it was Standing Room Only!

On stage, we made each other laugh and we made each other cry. We hurt each other's feelings, we had fights, and we made up.

As we all know only too well, trying to come up with something new—trying to create “art”—always causes psychic pain. We can also count on the fact that the process will be intermittently frustrating, too often tedious and, at regular intervals, filled with wrong turns. I would like to urge us on as we pass through these various phases in the circle.

Dale's memo after a challenging workshop 5/12/95



The Wims — Olympic Cabaret — 1984

(From left: Betty Thomas, Stephanie Waxman,
Susan Krebs, Elinor Graham, Dale Eunson)



WIMS

Six 'snappy feminist dames' act out life's pressures

By MARK HUMPHREY

If you go to the Church in Ocean Park on a Thursday night, you may see six women sprawling, rolling, running, moaning. Is this an aerobics class gone awry? Not to worry. These are the Wims, self-described "snappy feminist dames of the '80s" whose writhings are toward theatrical ends.

"We all have done various types of improvisation," says Dale Eunson. "One member of the ensemble takes something and runs with it, and everybody explores it with sound, with movement, playing with just the sounds of words, breaking words up, trying to get more truth in it."

Truth is something the Wims find sadly lacking in most media presentations of women, and something they explore through the medium of improvisational theater. "What we're interested in is our stories," says Stephanie Waxman, "because we don't see them on TV, and we don't see ourselves represented in the media. So we have this chance to tell our stories and your stories, the stories of the people who come into our lives and into our audiences."

The Wims hosted a cabaret of performing artists at the Powerhouse during the Olympics, and invited the audiences to let them create improvisational theater from their Olympic experiences. "If you had come to the show," says Waxman, "one of us would have come up to you before the show and said, 'Hi, what's happening with you and the Olympics? Are you getting caught in traffic or do you have any experience that you'd like to share?' With your permission, we would use that story and material anybody else would give us for the evening, because our purpose was to process the experience of having the Olympics in L.A. We were telling the audience's stories, so it became reciprocal ritual theater, telling the community's stories."

"That's really the first time we've been in front of an audience," says Susan Krebs, unofficial founding mother of the ensemble. "We had a great time, and the audiences seemed to enjoy us a lot."

Krebs has been involved with improvisational theater since she was 18. "Three or four years ago I gathered some of these women together for an improvisation workshop for women," she says. "Last year I gathered a horde of women, and it has evolved into this group of six."

Dale Eunson elaborates, "Some of us worked together in a company called Public Works, where we did some shows that were improvised and then set, and then we did some purely improvisational shows. This is a new group comprised of most of the women from Public Works and some new women. That adds a whole other element to not work with men."

Which brings us to the ensemble's name. Is it an acronym for Women's Improvisational Movement? The suggestion makes them laugh. "I found myself using the word about a year ago," says Krebs, "and people would say, 'What do you mean?' I'd say, 'Well, you know, snappy dames of the '80s. To me it's a sort of snappy feminist dame of the '80s. It's a sort of new definition of a lot of women I know.' As one would expect of "snappy feminist dames of the '80s," the Wims have an activist bent, and are planning fundraising appearances for Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights and the Ocean Park Community Center. One Wim, Betty Macias, directs a shelter for the homeless in Santa Monica, and works at the Ocean Park Community Center. "My first experience with the Wims was working with Elinor and Dale at one of the Ocean Park Community Center benefits," she says. "I thoroughly enjoyed watching not just how they work but how they processed what was going on in their lives, incorporating it into theater. So I was very excited to be invited into the group. I'm learning a lot."

"One of the reasons it's so much fun to work with a group like this," says Waxman, "is you can't make too much of fool of yourself, because whatever you do will be supported. That's a wonderful feeling. If you have an idea and think, 'Oh, God, this is too crazy, I'd better not try it,' well, here you'd better try it, because everybody else is going to want to get in there and make you look good."

"One of the primary things we have to establish is our relationship to one another," says Elinor Grant, "be-

cause to function as an improvising ensemble, we have to know who each person is on that particular evening. The primary rules we use for improvisation are trust and support. In order to trust and support somebody, you have to know who they are. The work we do together is towards solidifying those foundation blocks."

One of the ways they do that is through something called check-ins. "After we do the physical and vocal warmup," says Krebs, "each of us gets to check in as to where we are that day or that week. It can just be sound or movement, we don't have to verbalize, but usually we do. The person checking in gets to leave whatever may be bothering them, so that hopefully it's not running them for the rest of the evening. Once you put it out, it helps lessen its impact on your brain and your heart that night."

Dale Eunson agrees, and adds: "We first used that as a rehearsal technique, but then we started taking it into performance, and it has consistently been our audience's favorite piece. It give them a chance to identify their lives, their struggles, with ours. If we're going to turn it into theater, we're going to play with it, and it lightens the audience up about their own troubles. We'll often work on the person's check-in, we'll jam on it."

Jam on it? "Improvise on things," Krebs explains. "We like to think of what we do as like what a jazz improviser would do — they take a theme and then they jam in all different directions on it. The more we work together, the more avenues open up. Each woman in the company is a different resource in terms of what they're working on in their careers and in their families and in their personal lives. It keeps expanding, which is exciting, it's a way to process your life in a form. We keep discovering new forms that allow us to tap into the stuff that we're all interested in."

During a recent rehearsal, they found themselves interested in a tape that Waxman had brought back from an Indian powwow. "I want to try something that seems like a very fun and scary thing to do," she said. She played a tape of Indian drumming and chanting, then produced a drum and chanted herself. The others joined in, doing a kind of ring dance, one introducing a harmony voice, another singing variations on the melody.

"There's a lot of ritual in what we do," says Eunson. "Theater, warmups, rehearsals are all rituals. We're really exploring how to make ritual accessible for people again."

"The thing about telling each other's stories as well as the audience's stories," says Krebs, "is that there's a connection we all feel with each other and with the audience that gets to be almost mythological. You end up telling myths. You see where everything becomes universal, the pains and joys that we're all going through just being. It's allowed me to take a lot more risks in my life outside, having this space with the Wims. I know that I can come in every week and share what's been going on with me, explore it creatively and perhaps learn something. It gives me much more courage going back into the world. I feel understood."

Mark Humphrey is a Santa Monica-based free-lance writer.

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Best Review Group

Wims Rather than the wham-bam-thank-you-nia'am climax punchline approach of male-influenced improv, this women's group offers a more ironical "exactly in the moment" and softer edged "wimsical humor that deals in the reality of women's issues." Betty Thomas of "Hill Street Blues," Susan Krebs, formerly of "War Babies," Stephanie Waxman of the Children's Theater, and "Public Work's" Eleanor Graham get it together at least once a month at the Powerhouse. A recent Wims evening began with anecdotal tales that brought groans of delighted recognition from the audience; "I've begun to develop a deep and satisfying relationship with my cat Buster, although I once thought he was too young for me," and the mini-saga of a harassed wife and working mother who when asked what her goals are wonders, "Does a trip to Hawaii count?" During intermission, the Wims gather real-life stories from the audience, "since we've found we got more emotional material on a one-to-one basis," and use them to fashion their human (rather than one-liner) focused skits.

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L.A. WEEKLY September 28-October 4, 1984

Best All-Girl Group

Wims Rather than the wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am climax punchline approach of male-influenced improv, this women's group offers a more ironical "exactly in the moment" and softer edged "wimsical humor that deals in the reality of women's issues." Betty Thomas of "Hill Street Blues," Susan Krebs, formerly of War Babies, Stephanie Waxman of the Children's Theater, and "Public Work's" Eleanor Graham get it together at least once a month at the Powerhouse. A recent Wims evening began with anecdotal tales that brought groans of delighted recognition from the audience; "I've begun to develop a deep and satisfying relationship with my cat Buster, although I once thought he was too young for me," and the mini-saga of a harassed wife and working mother who when asked what her goals are wonders, "Does a trip to Hawaii count?" During intermission, the Wims gather real-life stories from the audience, "since we've found we got more emotional material on a one-to-one basis," and use them to fashion their human (rather than one-liner) focused skits. *The Powerhouse, 3116 Main St., S.M.; 392-6529.*

THE *Wimms*

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Los Angeles Times

Monday, February 17, 1986

MONICA ALMEIDA



Wims, from left, Susan Krebs, Betty Macias, Dale Eunson, Elinor Graham and Stephanie Waxman.

5 TAKE IMPROVISATION ON A WIM

What exactly is a Wim? Not a whim, mind you, a Wim. Collectively, Wims. Five articulate, engaging, 35-ish actor-improvisers who get together in front of an audience every week and, as member Susan Krebs says simply, "Play."

But what play! Each time out, the Wims (Krebs, Stephanie Waxman, Betty Macias, Elinor Graham and Dale Eunson) don their neutral props—a scarf, a hoop, a basket—and leap into improv: a pastiche of

By JANICE ARKATOV

the mundane and the incredible, the silly and the somber. Following a successful run at the Powerhouse last fall, the group has recently begun a new work-in-progress at the Church in Ocean Park.

Originally organized by Krebs, the Wims (with sixth member Betty Thomas of "Hill Street Blues" currently on sabbatical) debuted during the summer of 1984, utilizing the practice of "check-ins" with the audience—at

that time they drew on the Olympic experience—then blending those impressions, with their own, into a unique theatrical shape.

Nowadays, those personal contacts (on such topics as dreams) alternate with written suggestions: When they arrive, audiences are greeted with a large empty scroll that solicits responses to lead-in lines such as "I feel great when. . . ."

It's a smart gimmick and not a

Please see FIVE, Page 7

Continued from Page 1
restricting one.

"With the theme board," Graham explained, "we try to create a question that will provide us with material that's more than superficial, something we can work on and apply right here (she tapped her chest). Otherwise, we will only skitter across the top of it and not really explore the material."

Added Eunson: "Of course, that's the problem with improvisation. So often it looks like its very limit is that it can only be off the top of your head—and we're trying to fight against that, bring it down."

They emphasize that the courage to go for those truths is knowing they've always got a safety net.

"Our primary tenet is to support each other and trust each other," said Waxman. "If I didn't trust that I was gonna be bailed out, I might not take so many chances. Because it's a big risk. You don't want to make a total fool of yourself. But if you know everybody's gonna say, 'We'll be there, we'll catch you, we'll make it wonderful' . . ."

Krebs said it's that very aspect of free-fall that is most appealing.

"For me, the nights that aren't

successful are when there's so much thinking and figuring out and analyzing that it keeps out the real muse. When you're playing and an idea or an image comes to you, if you stop and say, 'Well, I don't know. Will that be good?'—the moment's gone. So what we're trying to do is go on the impulse we hadn't necessarily thought of: going for the moment, *being* in it."

Consequently, they shrug off the notion of fear (for them, it translates to "stimulating" and "thrilling") and any female ego-bashing.

"Look, we're all bright, all have ideas," Krebs said. "We value that strength as opposed to fearing it."

Graham agreed: "A lot of that comes out in performance. I can go out there with a very clear idea of what I'm going to be doing. One night I was the decrepit bell tower on the church and Dale came out, assumed I was another element of a particular dream—thought I was a mannequin—and she named me a mannequin. So I had to not be the bell tower, because I can't say no to her. Similarly, when we're dealing in the workshop situations, if someone has very strong ideas, we have to support it—yet we have to accommodate whatever variations there may be on the same idea."

That theatrical give-and-take (and impromptu problem-solving) often takes on a very *personal* bent.

"One of the big points of our check-in (which opens the show)," Krebs offered, "is for all of us to cop to what we're feeling, give all sides of someone's day: the feeling of being discriminated against, feeling

oppressed. And during the course of that we hope to learn more about the feelings—what runs deeper than the anger. So you're not just going out there a screaming meemie." (She stresses that one angry female can't turn the show into a militant tract, "because somebody will always balance you out.")

Although women used to dominate their audiences, the gender mix has gradually become more evenly divided. "Open and gentle" is how Krebs described the young males, adding that "hopefully, we're giving them a new insight in their thinking about women."

Of course, sometimes those "insights" don't happen. Eunson recalled with a shudder one particular opening night (when the audience included both critical press and the Sisters of St. Joseph), "and one of our members starting doing bad shtick on the Immaculate Conception: real off-the-wall, the only stuff she could remember. Well, I know I personally wanted to disappear. Another member came over and kind of threw herself on the floor, begging her to stop—which she didn't."

Their proudest moment? A lyrical

piece inspired by a suggested dream of a traveler returning home to a dark, domed city, its ozone layer destroyed. Eunson provided the elevated basket/dome, Macias was the tone musician, Thomas a townsman, Waxman the dreamer and Graham a robin looking for its way back into the dead place.

With so much of the product finding value as it becomes increasingly layered, how do the players know when to stop?

"We have rules and we don't have rules," Krebs shrugged. "We all know what's appropriate for the moment. Sometimes you're lucky to have an ending; somebody comes out to start the next one; sometimes you can transform it. And sometimes you die up there."

The women laugh comfortably. They know what they are, what they can do. They are not slick. They are not homespun. They do not always agree. But they are a unit. Asked if it's individual likeness or difference that gives the Wims its spark, Waxman suggested that "we've got very similar sensibilities and very different personalities." The result is an undeniably strong, positive female dynamic.

Yet, said Krebs, "I don't want to be a separatist. And I don't think that as a collective we are preaching that. A lot of people come thinking we're gonna be very pedantic—'Right on, sister!' screaming and yelling—and they're pleasantly surprised. After all, there is something extraordinary about five women doing anything together—let alone having a great time."

THE POWERHOUSE PRESENTS:

Wims

*Stephanie Waxman Betty Thomas
Betty Macias Susan Krebs
Elinor Graham Dale Eunson*

*IMPROVISED THEATRE
WITH A
PERSONAL TWIST*



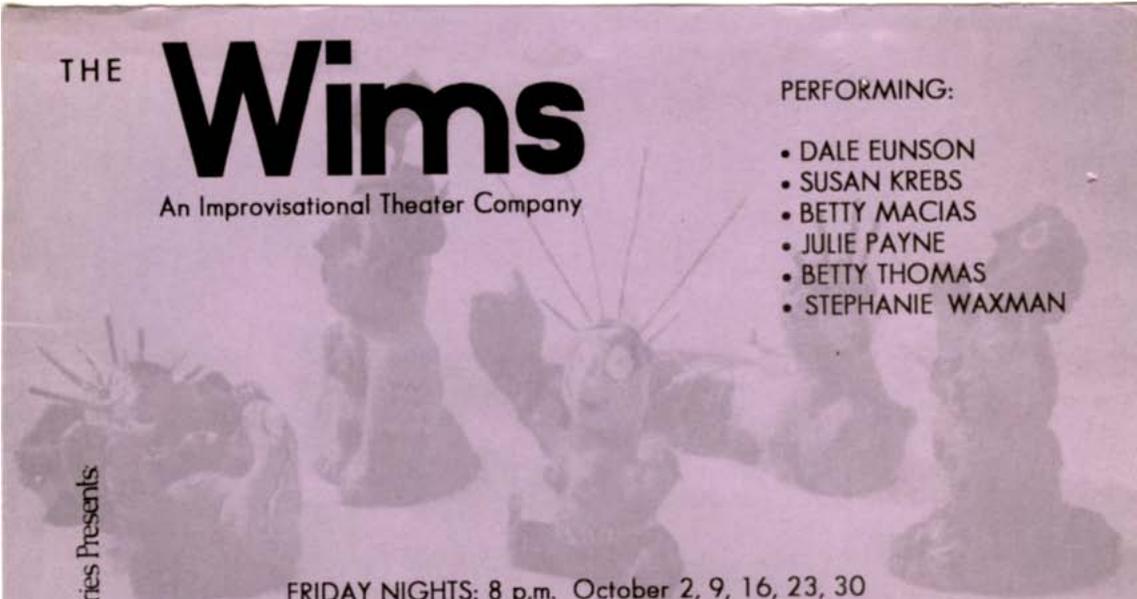
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An Improvisational Theater Company

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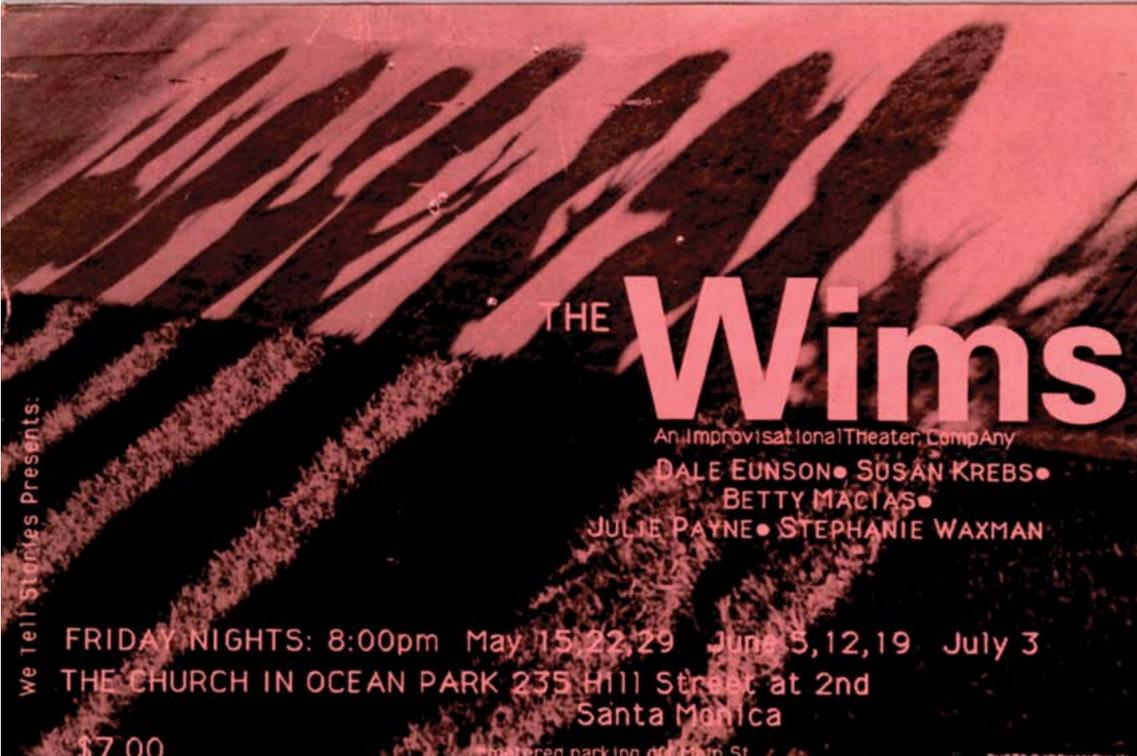
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- BETTY THOMAS
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BETTY MACIAS •
JULIE PAYNE • STEPHANIE WAXMAN**

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**THE CHURCH IN OCEAN PARK 235 Hill Street at 2nd
Santa Monica**

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We Tell Stories Presents

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Church In Ocean Park
8 Fridays: 5/15 - 7/3/92

**Dale Eunson Susan Krebs
Julie Payne Betty Macias
Stephanie Waxman**

The Wims are picking up tonight where we left off last fall, taking a look at the issues and confusions inherent at this particular time -- the end of the millenium, the decline of the empire. Convinced that the personal is political and linked to the mythic, we use stories from our own lives as well as current headlines.

The show is completely improvised with the exception of our opening song. The "Check-In" -- the solo piece which introduces each of us -- is the only part of the show we've had any time to ponder.

* * * * *

The Wims is collectively directed. We would like to thank Kathi O'Donohue for her inspired lighting improvisation, Toni Joy and Carl Weintraub and all the We Tell Stories ticket-takers and refreshment-sellers for zealous production work, Barry Michlin for stunning photographs, Laney Gradus for snappy graphics in both tee-shirt design and fliers, Dagmar Stanec and Diana Tanaka for enthusiastic assistance during the workshop process.

We've been asked, "What does "Wims" stand for?" "Wims" began as short-hand for "Women", though we've enjoyed the alternate suggestions audience members have offered: "Women In Men's Shorts", "Women Inured to Menacing Societies", "Women Integrating Madness Sanely"...

BEST BET



Los Angeles Times

Members of the Wims in file photo. Susan Krebs, left, Betty Macias, Dale Eunson, Elinor Graham and Stephanie Waxman.

Growing up, we were surrounded by women who did not miss a trick. They saw through walls, saw the wayward hand in the cookie jar, steadied us before we stumbled, heard the lie before it left the lips, felt our sadness even before our own heart acknowledged it.

And said what needed to be said.

How did they do it? We searched for the source of their power. Was it in some talisman they kept in their closet or dresser drawers? In some herb kept high on a cupboard shelf? Did it spring from the prayers they said and the candles they lighted, without fail, every week in church?

"*Forza*," our father would say.

When pressed, he would only shrug. "*Maggiore*. They're the helpers of God. Listen to them."

They made sense of our young dreams, coaxed the beautiful from the mundane, told us our fortunes, sang songs and taught us, always, to be unafraid of the truth.

□

The Wims, an all-woman improvisational theater troupe, will perform at the Church in Ocean Park, 235 Hill St., Santa Monica, at 8 p.m. Friday. Admission is \$5. For information call (213) 399-1631.

—R.D.

ENDINGS

You need medicine to cure, but you need a metaphor to heal.

Rabbi Simkha Weintraub

Toward the end of 1995, our work gradually tapered off as we were each pulled in different creative directions and went our separate ways.

Then, on October 27, 2003, Dale was diagnosed with lung cancer. Chemotherapy, two lung surgeries and metastases followed. But in the fall of 2004, the cancer had progressed to its final stages and it was clear that Dale had very little time left. Betty T. called Dale to say that she didn't know what to do with the information; that the only thing that made any sense to her was for the Wims to "jam." Dale was elated. She said, "Even if I have to make the last few workshops in a hospital bed, I'll be there." So, under her direction, the Wims (along with Dale's dear friend and fellow improviser Luke Johnson) gathered again to jam together.

What sad irony that only a few years before, Dale had developed the character of Death Mother, who appeared at a Las Vegas casino, playing the slots with an oxygen machine in tow.

We agreed we want to go deeper—deeper than we've gone before. And this may mean the inclusion of writing techniques.... We want a sense of structure—perhaps thinking of our work as music with themes will help. Perhaps a more crisp layout of the exercises. We want to do transformations. We need to slow down and not be so performance oriented; we're not performing; we're plumbing for the real meaning of this experience together. We agreed to indulge Dale's "jones" and let her direct all four sessions, but all are to give lots of feedback on where to go and what to do; not in the midst of the workshop itself, but in time set aside at the end or by e-mail or the phone during the week. Homework assignment: At least one time before the next meeting, do your own five minute timed writing on some aspect of the subject that has brought us together. Keep this writing with the writing you did at the last workshop and will do in subsequent ones. This will help you to get deeper in. (You could do this assignment every day, if you wanted to—five minutes isn't a very long time!)

From Dale's e-mail 10/1/04

Dale was weak with limited energy. But she was her usual feisty self and determined to make an artistic statement about dying. Her example demanded the most from each of us. Elinor, playing herself, took the stage and made a phone call to a friend. She was in a quandary as to what to wear to Dale's funeral. "If she dies this winter, I can wear my black dress. But if she lasts longer, I might have to buy a summer frock."

I was shocked! Dale wasn't even dead yet. And that was the point. Elinor was exposing the thoughts that we each had: I wonder how long she'll last. It was a response to Dale's no-holds barred invitation to do our most honest work.

Dale wanted to get away from the idea of check-ins and move into a new way of structuring the work. She used a stopwatch, experimenting with timed pieces (2 and 3 minute jams) and assigned us to work as a solo, a duo or a trio. She also introduced the element of writing into our workshops, both before and during, as a way of generating material.

During one workshop, Dale talked about how horrible it was to witness the changes that cancer and the treatments were causing in her body. A jam began about seeing our bodies fall apart. Then it became a competition about whose body was falling apart the most: Stephanie had age spots! But Elinor had gray hair! But Roxanne had wrinkles! We continued in the opposite direction from the expected horror of having cancer, thereby dispelling a taboo and at the same time exploring the truth of our mutual disintegration. (Nonetheless, Dale won the competition with cancer.)

After four workshops, we realized that what we were doing was so unique and compelling that others might benefit. We decided to invite an audience. As Dale said in the letter that was handed out as the audience arrived, "What you are witnessing is not a 'performance' per se, but a workshop—an example of how we work together when no one's watching."

During the four audience-attended open workshops, Dale led us in relaxation exercises, followed by two-minute writing prompts, which she invited the audience to do too. Some of the prompts were: “If I were diagnosed with a terminal illness, I would...” “What I would or would not miss if I died...” “People I knew who have died...” and “When I hear really bad news about myself or somebody I care about, I find denial is...” After the two minutes, the Wims read their work aloud.

In response to the first prompt, Luke wrote, “If I were diagnosed with a terminal illness, I would experience a sense of relief. I have been waiting for that diagnosis for 25 years, imagining what it would be, revving myself up to get the test results, waiting for them in the mail, and I've seen so many people live with them.” This idea of relief, rather than dread, gave the Wims a surprising direction to explore.

In response to the last prompt, B. T. began a two-minute solo by marching around the room chanting, “Never gonna die! Never gonna die!”

For me the written work from “People I knew who have died,” suggested a cemetery. I took the stage and carefully folded each piece of fabric into a rectangle, arranging them on the floor as grave markers. Standing over the first one, I talked about Tessa M., my dear friend who had died of breast cancer. One by one, others came onto the stage and solemnly read the names of the dead, telling a bit about them as they did. Roxanne ended the jam by reading her own name and birth and death dates. As they say, you could've heard a pin drop.

Using the large basket and elastic (for a phone cord), Elinor was on the phone, this time on the receiving end of what was apparently bad news. With only her quiet murmurings, “I see,” and “Oh, another scan,” and as she continued with similar vague but troubling responses, she slowly crumpled, until by the end she was completely in the basket. A basket case. This is precisely the kind of Wim magic that happened when all pistons were firing.

Susan pantomimed giving her mother a bath, washing her back, the way her mother had washed hers when she was a child. She noticed the wrinkled skin, the sagging breasts: the aged body.

Luke announced that the French call an orgasm “le petit mort,” the little death. In 17th England, poets called an orgasm “dying.” Suddenly, Petit Mort became a character as we explored the connection between sex and death.

Betty Macias wrapped herself in a combination of elastic and fabric and placed herself on a chair facing the audience. She took an oath to “tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” Then, on trial for her life, she proceeded to defend herself, a Carcinoma, from the accusation of ending Dale’s life. “I can’t control myself, it’s just my nature. If it pleases the court, I am an errant cell.” It was irreverent and hilarious.

As usual, each element was represented on stage: candle (fire), bowl of stones (earth), wind instruments (air), and a bowl of water (water). As a mourner, I bent over the bowl of water, trying to weep into it, to add tears. But though I was sad, my tears just wouldn’t come. Roxanne came to help me. Together we were able to get me to squeeze a few tears into the bowl. It was done in silence, except for the labored breathing of someone trying to cry. “Weeping Woman” reappeared throughout the evening, other Wims playing the part, hovering over the bowl, trying to add tears.

Betty M. sat in front of her dressing table, getting ready for an evening out, preparing the way her mother used to prepare: applying pancake makeup, red lipstick, rouge, and putting on clip-on earrings. As she did this she said, “When I was a kid people used to say, ‘Oh, you look just like your mother!’ I now see how very much like my mother I am. She died five years ago.” Betty added that when it was her turn to die: “My mother will stretch her hand out and pull me up there.” B. T. immediately climbed a tall ladder, positioning herself at the top, almost touching the church ceiling. From there she stretched out her hand to Betty M. They reached toward each other. Then B.T. looked around the room: “Who’s next?” Dale hid behind someone, shaking her head no.

Luke played with the notion of not being able to lose cancer. He attached himself to the large (moveable) blackboard and walked around the room, trying get free of it, but it kept following him, swinging around awkwardly at the end of his leg. During another moment, B.T. turned the blackboard into a hospital scanning machine.

I laid out the sheets, made a pillow, and then climbed in between the sheets, as if in bed. I closed my eyes. Elinor came over and sat by my side, keeping the vigil. She was on the phone: “Yeah, she’s still here. I’m just making a shopping list.” Then Roxanne knelt by my other side. She closed her eyes and began to pray: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If...if...if DALE should die before I wake, I pray the Lord *her* soul to take.” It expressed how we each harbor the secret hope: let it be someone else, not me. As Roxanne has said in recollecting this scene, “It was awful and real. Funny and awful and real. Probably just awful for some viewers.”

Elinor, in a singsong mocking child’s voice, sang: “Dale’s got cancer, Dale’s got cancer.” Then, in a different tone she added, “What about me? I’m the one who has a friend who’s dying!”

Dale announced, “I hate the short days of winter. How many days do I have left? Strangers don’t know I’m dying. They don’t even know they’re dying! I’m in the grocery store and the checker asks, “Do you want a bag?” I say, “Yeah, to hell with the environment!” Then, “Please, just let me live to see Ethan turn forty.” And later, “I was so beautiful once. Now my hands look like those of an 80-year-old woman. I’m returning to a skeletal state. My head looks like a skull — a figurine from Day of the Dead.”

During a two-minute solo, I stood with the two bamboo poles, slowly separating them, peering between them, as I described what had come to me as a true “Ah-ha!” realization. Just as I was about to say what this revelation was, Dale called, “Cut!” There was an audible moan from the audience. Though she was observing her strict adherence to time, it was an arbitrary cut which did not serve the moment. (Later, she apologized profusely.) I felt helpless to contradict Dale. Not only was she the one dying, she was the director,

and we were there to serve her vision. Then, Roxanne bolted to her feet and in a moment which both rescued the scene and saved face for Dale, announced, “The Senator from Illinois yields her two-minutes to the Senator from California!” The audience erupted in laughter, and I was able to complete my solo. (My revelation was that the act of dying was terribly lonely because only the dying person is dying.)

As sick as she was, Dale thrust herself on stage with total commitment. On the last evening, she listed the Kübler-Ross stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. She said how she hated when people told her how courageous she was, or how well she was handling “it.” In talking about Depression, she confessed that if she could do it again (meaning live a life), she wouldn't waste time being depressed. And then she wondered: “All the years that I was depressed wishing I could die...did all that wishing finally give me cancer?” In the Anger stage, she said with vehemence, “You all have to say good-bye to me, just one person. But I have to say good-bye to all of you.” In the end, she exclaimed, “And yet, it’s the best thing that ever happened to me. My eyes are wide open. Wow. Wow. Wow. I’m so fucking lucky...the incredible beauty of being alive...the sea of love...the three incredible human beings who are my children.” Without talking about Acceptance directly, the Wims, with the help of Kathi’s eerie lighting, created an otherworldly atmosphere and, using the bamboo poles, fabric, and our bodies, built a ship. Into it we put Dale, then rowed her across the River Styx, singing “Row, row, row your boat...” Betty M. cut this song with a mournful solo: “I Was Born on a River” (from “Been a Long Time Coming”). It is a haunting moment I shall never forget.

... And I do want to return to how truly magic this whole experience has been for me. What a gift you have given me. I thank you all from the very bottom of my heart and soul. Dale

From Dale’s e-mail 12/10/04

From some who attended the open workshops:

Tessa Hicks: These workshops brought death and dying out of the dark and into the spotlight. The Wims uttered painful, odd, naked, sad and funny dialog, which we usually have only in whispered tones. Brought to the stage in the Wim way: no filtering, raw, real, which only happens with improv. Dale dashed all the stereotypes of what dying looks like. I've always had an innate fear and hatred of death. This helped me to take it off my enemy list and to realize that okay, maybe you (Death) can be something okay. If that's what dying is like, I'm not as fearful.

Carl Weintraub: Dale was always so present whether she had the energy to get up or not. I devoured the opportunity to share the nearness of death with her and with all of those around.

Laurie O'Brien: As an audience it was useful to be writing stuff on the board; this kept it from being a "spectacle" and let the audience be vulnerable in some way since it was such an intimate exchange, i.e. audience involvement helped equal things out.

Tandy Parks: I remember the sheet was a bed, then got transformed into a shroud. I remember that despite her frailty, she had undiminished clarity, strong intention, and vitality. I was in Dale's classroom and she was in charge.

Leigh Curran: I remember Dale standing alone on stage with a quizzical look on her face that was followed by a brief silence—then she said, incredulously: I'm dying. I'm dy-ing. We all had so much disbelief and she led us, in that moment, through her bewilderment and into her new reality. I can still hear her voice—see her face—and her body, slight, small and sturdy. And I can still feel her bravery that had not an ounce of self-pity in it.

Cathi O'Donohue: I could have danced all night with your reporting. Greedy on my part, I know, but you could have kept going. I wanted that, in a way. I "NEEDED" to hear your journey and anger to know what was possible. You taught me that I have to learn to let go of the "rules." Life is not run on a timer that we can turn on and off or set for our wants. I wish there was a timer for life, though, so I could put it on pause and life around would halt in mid-breath and step while I caught my breath and could figure out where I was and where I was going. BING! Now we're back in action.

Nick Stein (by e-mail): I didn't want the day to pass without telling you how moved I was by the courageous and extraordinary work you all did on Saturday. Dale, I especially want to thank you for doing something few would ever attempt; to take such a dire prognosis and make it a healing for yourself and all those around you. Your focus and energy was mind-blowing, your commitment to the process undiminished. The work itself was mythic and you were nothing less than Amazonian.

Susan Dworski (by e-mail): I came home and David and I spent the entire evening discussing the WIMS show. So much to talk about! We were still going at 11 pm, past

our bedtime on school nights. Highlights: The a cappella song at the end, Carci Noma, the Anasazi pool of sad tears, the angrified piles of stuff, and mostly your marvelous craggy profile, pressing through the bamboo staves, so lonely.

Finalmente: Dale was incandescent.

Trudy Goodman (by e-mail): These poignant afternoons were filled with wild and creative humor, passion and beauty. Dale offered us the gift of “dana,” or generosity, giving and giving, offering her life experience of fully living her dying. She didn’t hold anything back.

Dennis Hicks: (from my e-mail to the Wims): As we lit Chanukah candles on Friday night, Dennis said, “This candle is for you and the Wims, who are in the vanguard of the community to make us all more comfortable with the arc of life.”

Dale’s friend Judith: (from Dale’s e-mail to the Wims): “... she said Jeremy, her dear husband who is so weak and so on the edge of this life, normally a shy man, just wanted to get up and work with us he was so turned on. And overall she was overwhelmed with what incredibly deep wonderful people we are—people brave enough to face up to the facts and offer our musings and ultimately our solace to the community at large.

For me, being part of these workshops was a sacred privilege. It was Dale’s parting gift.

Little did we expect at the time that Elinor’s health was quickly deteriorating. And suddenly all too soon, on November 22, 2009, she was gone too.

It is with a heavy heart that I have untaken the job of telling our story.



Evening Outlook Photos by Richard N. Levine

Susan Krebs claps hands during another WIMS improvisational acting game

TOOL BOX

WHY IMPROVISE?

Too much thinking spoils the fun and the magic. We need to take lots of time in the never-never land, the unknown, before we come back to the known.

From Dale's notes 3/11/95

My father (Stanley Waxman), a classically trained actor, was completely bewildered by the idea of improvising in front of an audience. Why, he wondered, didn't the Wims just do a play? Why stumble onto an empty stage without knowing what we were going to do? The thought baffled and terrified him.

It terrified us too at times. What we learned by leaping onto an empty stage is that out of that fear of not knowing, something is born. In Susan's words: "It is 'fearless allowing' that is a hallmark of great improvisational work: trusting—patiently—that our deeper inner wisdom will always guide, inspire and inform the unfolding work. It is as if the work is already created and we need to just get out of the way and 'allow' it to be made manifest, to facilitate the 'reveal.'" The emphasis was always on discovery and, in front of an audience, on exposing that process of discovery. We were intrigued and energized by the challenge of being in the moment and not getting ahead of the action, and we embraced the risk that that involves. We were interested in the element of chance. Surprise, and often delight, was a constant by-product of our process.

OUR SECRET

We were often asked how we did it. When we were working at the top of our game, we had a shared vision, a shared sense of humor, a shared sense of timing and a shared sense of theatrics. Many times, the work was so smooth, so well orchestrated, and our timing and way of reading each other and what was happening on stage was so acute, that the show did not look or feel improvised. But—with the exception of the check-ins and songs that we had practiced—it always was.

So how did we do it? How did we weave an evening of theater out of snippets of stories and songs? How did we eventually tackle something so terrifying as death as one of us was actually dying, and find not only the fear and deep well of sadness, but the humor as well? How did we create what felt to us, and to many in our audiences, like magic? How did we do it in a way that looked so effortless?

Part of the answer lies in the unique chemistry that over many years developed between us. There was also that unique bond between ourselves and the audience—we produced a kind of theater that a particular audience responded to. The rest of the answer lies in the fact that we were willing to throw caution to the wind and trust our process. Our belief: Leap and the net will appear!

In addition, through the years of working together, we evolved our own language. And we depended on certain rules. Besides the impulse to make discoveries in the moment as a way to tell our stories, we had a set of guiding principles, which we expanded as the years went by.

In addition, we allowed for something to happen on stage that didn't happen in social conversation. EXAMPLE: Following Dale's story about her three children, Betty Macias took the stage and said simply, "I never had a baby." She was then joined by Roxanne and Susan, neither of whom had children. What resulted was a tender improvised song in 3-part harmony about being childless. It erupted out of a deep place and was expressed and explored artistically in the moment. Later, Betty told me that she had rarely shared the experience of being childless.

Always our watchword was: Go deeper. There was a willingness to expose who we were and to let the audience in on our process. Over the years we developed the chops to make it into art.

SHARING THE PROCESS

Throughout the years, Dale and I led many Wims workshops, some as co-teachers, and many separately. We had a shared sensibility about the work and our co-teaching experiences were great fun. We took copious notes and endlessly discussed the best way to lead people into the work. But to date, nothing has been written about our unique process. Can it be labeled, pinpointed, analyzed, or described? Is it even possible to translate the synergy that happened between players and audience by writing about it? It was always our intention to expose the process as much as possible.

Improv is an ephemeral experience. It exists in time and space and for the benefit of those people in the room. It's difficult to capture lightning in a bottle, something the Wims did frequently. But it's even more daunting to write about something which so depends on the combination of elements in a theater at any one time: the weather, the socio-political context, the mood of each player, our chemistry together, the tilt of the head, the inflection of the voice, the size and composition of the audience. Nonetheless, I feel compelled to try.

The EXERCISES described in the following pages are the same ones the Wims used and which I have taught throughout the years to professional actors as well as inner-city children, rabbinical students, members of ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics), teenage girls in halfway houses and inmates at Norco prison. I've taught in places as far flung as Nicaragua, Alaska, Hawaii and Amsterdam. These exercises are for anyone interested in bringing stories to the stage through improvisation, Wims-style.

I feel Dale hovering as I write this, urging me on.

***“They tell the truth and they
make you laugh.”***

“Made me want to be a woman.”

“A great place to meet people.”

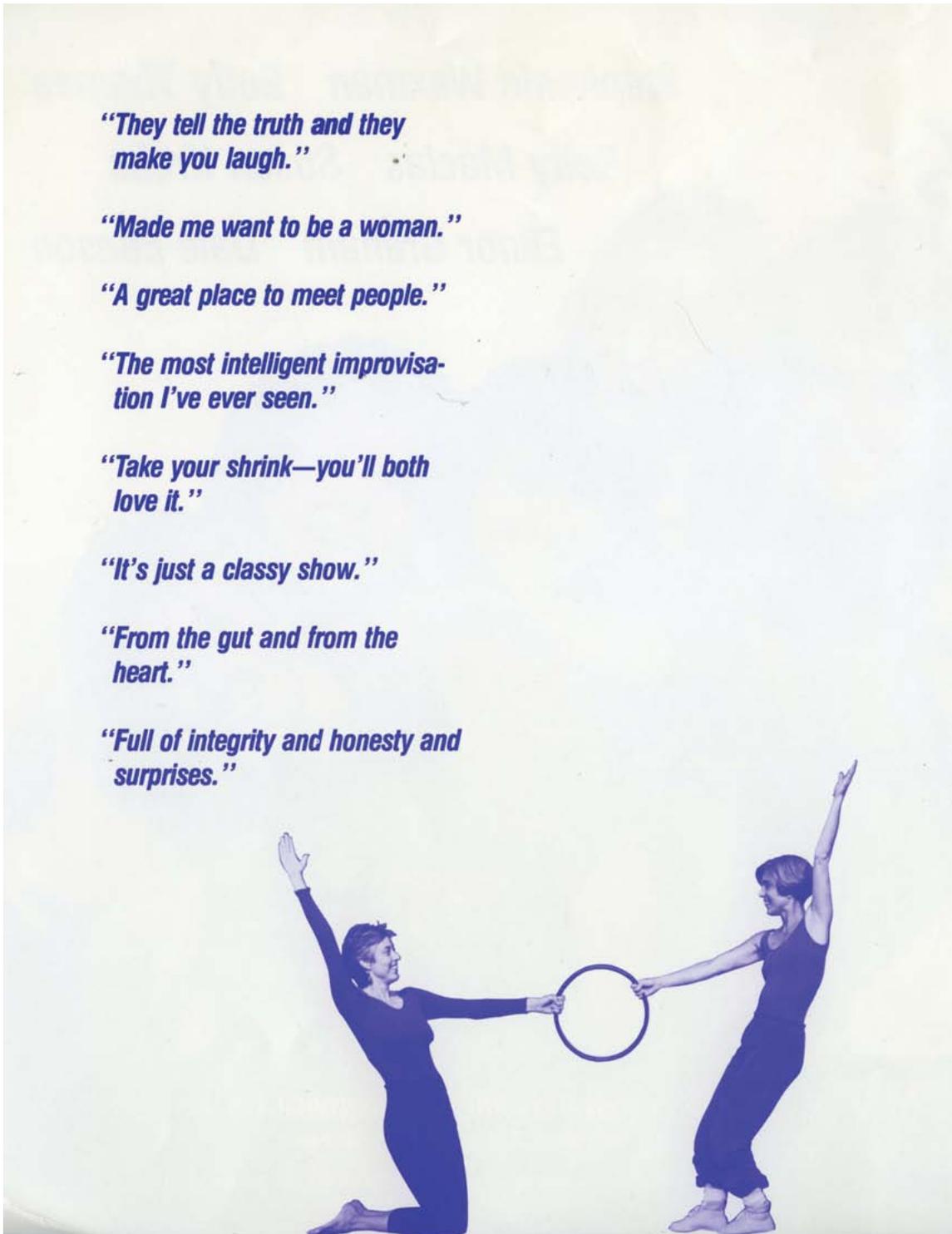
***“The most intelligent improvisa-
tion I’ve ever seen.”***

***“Take your shrink—you’ll both
love it.”***

“It’s just a classy show.”

***“From the gut and from the
heart.”***

***“Full of integrity and honesty and
surprises.”***



TERMS AND GUIDELINES

We have rules and we don't have rules.

Susan Krebs, L.A. Times, 2/86

IMPROVISATION

Something performed or done without preparation or text.

WIMS IMPROVISATION

The process of being true to the moment on stage and including whatever fellow players offer, adding to it and often expanding and/or transforming it.

OBJECTS

Rather than use recognizable props and costumes (book, telephone, jacket), the Wims created props and costumes out of abstract objects.

- The Ring (made by artist Tom Jenkins) is our most prized object because of its beauty and simplicity. The size of a steering wheel, the Ring is covered in black tape and has been used over the years to represent many things, including a life preserver, skirt, wedding ring, moon, diaphragm, and halo.
- Fabric: white sheets of varying sizes and shapes hand painted by the Wims; filmy, sheer fabric in different colors, including black, red, and yellow, white.
- 2" Black elastic, as long as the width of the stage.
- Clothespins.
- 2 Boxes: large enough to stand on and crawl into, small enough to stack.
- Seven 8' bamboo poles.
- Large Basket: big enough to sit in, light enough to wear as a hat.
- Cutout characters: these were done over the years, initially as part of our warm-up. We outlined one of us on large butcher paper. Then, in silence, we filled in the outline with crayons—a kind of collective, meditative reflection of the moment. What emerged each week was a different character who we named and who became our Muse for that

workshop. At some point, Betty T. cut them out and mounted them on foam board so they could appear on the stage to welcome the audience.

THE ELEMENTS

Theater is a form of ritual and in that spirit all elements are represented on stage:

- Fire: before each workshop or performance, we light a candle.
- Earth: a bowl of rocks or sand.
- Water: a bowl of water.
- Wind: the wind is caught in the fabric or in one of the wind instruments (bamboo flute, whirling hose).

INSTRUMENTS

- Hand drum
- Wood blocks
- Triangle
- Shaker
- Maracas
- Bamboo flute
- Bell
- Tambourine
- Plastic hose (which made a whirring sound when whipped in the air).

TRUST AND SUPPORT

As Keith Johnstone says (*Impro*): “An improviser has to understand that his first skill lies in releasing his partner’s imagination.” What a beautiful and generous concept! My job is to help you realize your idea. And your job is to help me realize mine. I don’t have to agree with your idea; I just have to help make it happen. The kind of improvisation we did meant supporting each other’s ideas at all times, trying to help each other tell the story our sister Wim was struggling to tell.

TRUST

- Trust your instincts, especially your first idea, or first “flash.”
- Trust your intelligence: don’t play dumb.

- Trust that your fellow player will keep you safe.
- Trust that your fellow players will support your choices.
- Trust that *something* will happen; you don't have to make it happen.
- Trust the physical reality—the walls, the floor, the bowl of water, the fabric.
- Trust your fellow players to do the work; don't hog the stage.

SUPPORT

- Take care of each other.
- Make the other player right.
- Don't hold too tightly to your own ideas.
- Support each other's work as if it were your own: "your work is my work."
- Support someone else's flash even if you don't understand it or like it.
- Support whatever work is being done on stage with sound, movement, or whatever else might be helpful.
- Watch and listen with all your attention.
- Support each other by doing your share of the work: if there are seven people in the group, your responsibility is to carry 1/7 of the work.
- On the other hand, notice who is "hot." Usually one or two people will be in "the zone." Follow them!
- Jump in to serve the piece.
- Jump in to serve each other (not to serve yourself).

YES, AND

Take whatever is given (even if it's just a musical note or a gesture) and add to it by matching, transforming, or building on it. The opposite way of describing this is: "No denial"—whatever is given is received. EXAMPLE: A player may offer something as subtle and simple as a sigh. Her fellow player can match that with the same sigh, and add to it by making her sigh larger. Now they have something to play with: a sigh, and like playing ball, they can now bounce it back and forth and see what it evolves into. Maybe a competition between two sighers. Maybe a way of one person offering comfort to another by sighing as if to say: I feel your sigh. Maybe words will be added to suggest a reason for the sigh (in which case a scene has begun).

CAVEAT:

Though actors must agree on what the situation and what the “problem” is, as characters they can disagree. Dramatic tension is about conflict. Conflict happens when characters don’t want the same thing.

LAYING ON: TELL, DON’T ASK

Asking a question of a fellow player puts that person on the spot. Giving information to your fellow player helps her know what the scene is about.

EMBLEM

Emblems are perhaps the single most important clue to Wim work. As Dale defined emblem: “The emblem of a king’s power and authority is the crown he wears.” Emblems are the part that tells the whole. They are tangible. From the sidelines we look for the emblems in the check-ins and group work, which we can then explore, expand on, and tie in with other work. Emblems often point to a theme.

METAPHOR

We attempt to see the larger metaphor in the personal situation. **EXAMPLE:** If a character says, “Winter is coming,” we might attempt to connect this notion to the winter of one’s life.

THEME

Themes emerge from an emblem or a connection between emblems. **EXAMPLE:** In the previous example, “winter,” might emerge as a theme on aging.

TRANSFORMATION

A transformation is when we take one thing—a word, gesture, movement, sound, character, or scene—and change it into something else. We can do this alone or with others. (Though the more people, the more difficult it is to find agreement.) In this way we can weave an entire piece without having to cut between ideas with a black out (which is typically used in traditional improv work). It’s up to others—not you—to

transform what you've offered. Though occasionally, if everyone is on stage at the same time and no one steps forward to cut, it is up to anyone to transform.

JAMMING

The way jazz musicians jam on a musical theme, the Wims jam on concepts, themes, emblems, words, movement, characters, and places. A jam is the unfolding of the work through various techniques. When we went from a “flash” off a check-in to an exploration of the emblem, then that evolved into a pattern—all together, that was a jam.

STAGE PICTURE

Though the lighting designer can direct attention to one part of the stage by throwing a spot here or there, when the entire stage is lit, the audience sees the whole picture and it is up to the Wims to make sure it is exactly what they want the audience to see. We each have to be visual artists looking at the colors, patterns, levels, and three-dimensionality.

INSTALLATION

The purpose of an installation is to create a stage picture, usually but not always, suggested by a theme that's just been introduced. Installations are made using objects and/or players. An installation is a slow transformation of the stage set, created slowly. This gives the players and the audience time to absorb what's gone before and to watch it become something new.

SPACE WORK

Space work is about keeping the integrity of imaginary objects. When you hold an imaginary object in your hands you must leave room for that object. When you put an imaginary glass on an imaginary table, everyone must maintain the level of the table and the size of the glass. Space objects must be “seen” by fellow players and the audience. The player holding a book must feel its size and weight and leave space for each page as its turned.

PERSONAL MATERIAL

Since Wim improvisation is about making personal material theatrical, these guidelines are essential. Once you've told a story, it belongs to the group; it is no longer your story. Trust them to take care of it. EXAMPLE: If I tell the story of my mother's final days, I have to trust the group to take care of this story. At the same time, by telling it, I am giving permission for them to work with it. Someone might jump on stage in the character of my mother and tell the story of giving birth to me. This could expand on the theme of birth or generations of women or on the theme of life and death.

TEXT

Even though Wim work is about improvisation, the reading of a piece of text can be used to good effect, either by elaborating on a theme or introducing an idea from which to work. It could be a clipping from the newspaper, an historical (or other) fact, a short poem, a snippet of an essay, a notice from the IRS, etc.

DIRECT ADDRESS

When we break the fourth wall and talk to the audience.

SOUND

In addition to the use of percussion instruments, we hum, supply rhythm by clapping, or sing. We sing either a known song or an improvised one, to lead stage work or to support it. We use off-stage sound to support what is happening on stage. However, sound (on or off stage) may or may not be accompanied by on-stage action.

SILENCE

We tend to be anxious to "make something happen," so the challenge is to trust silence. Silence is part of the rhythm life. It can be a backdrop to non-verbal work being done on stage, or it can simply be a silent, empty stage. Silence creates dramatic tension. As Dale wrote in one of her last e-mails during the Death and Dying workshops: "I [am] reminded of the amazing eloquence of silence, the power of stillness and the enormity of meaning that exists in the most mundane of gestures and events...I believe, in the midst of our

fast-paced, often word-filled style—which I adore—a few breaks into quiet and pure gesture could be incredible!”

FREEZES

From Betty M’s e-mail during the Death and Dying workshops: “[I am] reminded of our dream work and our silent rhythmic use of the ring, bamboo, sheets, basket etc. Sound and movement, slow dancing, stomping to the sound of bamboo on the floor...creating images with the objects and freeze framing for a few seconds before moving on to the next form...very lyrical and not necessarily legato.”



WARM UPS

Two candles were lit. We each did a short, individual vocal and physical warm up. The points of focus were on getting ourselves into our bodies and getting our bodies here—AND doing all this as if in a dream space.

We held hands in a circle: centering and grounding, individually and as a group. We touched in, concentrating on images: Stephanie has a fast beating heart; Susan sat on a cushion of hope and wonder; Julie was a failure with a droopy face; Bette was unplugged; Dale was both flying and about to be crushed.

From Dale's notes 3/9/95

PHYSICAL RELAXATION

The aim of the Wims' warm-up is to connect to the present, and to each other. We meet at what is the end of a work-a-day world and need to be physically and vocally ready to enter the world of imagination and play.

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING: Lie on your back; sink into the floor as if it were warm sand at the beach. Notice the breath, how the inhale makes the stomach rise slightly; on an exhale, the stomach softens. Follow the breath. Without tensing, make the exhales last longer.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION: Scan the body for tension, then release it. Make sure that the jaw is relaxed, the hips are relaxed, the pelvis, etc.

VOCAL WARM UP

Still in a relaxed position on the floor, allow the throat to open; feel that the mouth is spacious. Let a sound come with an exhale, soft at first, then gradually growing in volume. Let the sound play up and down your vocal range sliding up to its highest register, then sliding down to its lowest.

VARIATION: HA HA BELLIES

On the back, knees bent, feet in the air. Begin laughing from deep in the belly and let the laugh take on a life of its own. In a group, laughter is contagious. The collective laugh grows and grows and as individuals, we feel a physical release.

THE CHORD

On the back, listen to each other's breathing. Put just a bit of sound on the exhale. That turns into a low drone. Then, a hum. It rises and gets louder, then falls back to a soft dissonance. Find the communal chord. End on breathing.

SOUND-SCAPES

One by one, the players offer up a sound. Players build on what is offered so that there is support for each sound. Once a rhythm is established and each sound is heard, words can be introduced to help flesh out the scene. Various scenes lend themselves to sound-scapes. **EXAMPLES:** haunted house, a day at the beach.

VARIATIONS:

- Current events sound piece.
- One word check-in song while on backs.
- Themes: War, Love, Jealous Rage, etc.

VOCAL ARTICULATION

Retaining the relaxation, stand and feel your connection with the earth through your feet. Open your mouth wide; stretch it as wide as possible. Then squeeze your face into a tense prune face. The mouth, lips, teeth and tongue have a lot to do with getting words out. Playing with words helps to make us more aware of forming our words with care. We also want to hear the music of the vowels and the crispness of the consonants.

ELINOR'S SINGING WARM UP

Feel where these sounds are in the mouth:

Ma Na La Tha (as in “the” not “throw”) Va Sa

Don't close your mouth except for Ma and Na. Speed up. Then switch vowel sounds:

May Nay Lay Thay Vay Say
 Meh Neh Leh Theh Veh Seh
 Mee Nee Lee Thee Vee See
 Mo No Lo Tho Vo So
 Moo Noo Loo Thoo Voo Soo
 My Ny Ly Thy Vy Sy

Activate your lips saying these sounds:

We Way We Wo Wu

Now place different consonants in front of those same vowels:

Be Bay Be Bo Bu
 Fe Fay Fe Fo Fu
 Pe Pay Pe Po Pu
 Ve Vay Ve Vo Vu
 Me May Me Mo Mu

TONGUE TWISTERS

Repeat these phrases as quickly as possible, taking care to articulate each word.

- Dugga gudda gudda dugga
- Unique New York

- Toy boats
- Rubber baby buggy bumper
- She sells seashells down by the seashore.
- Peter Piper sold a peck of pickled peppers. How many pickled peppers did Peter Piper sell?
- Black bugs bleed blue blood. Blue bugs bleed black blood.
- Sweaty Sam's sweet heart Susie swears she's sick of sweaty Sam. Sweaty Sam says Susie's silly so he's swell to Sally Ann.

STRETCHING

In a circle we “pass the stretch.” EXAMPLE: I touch my toes, instructing as I do so, “Bend at the waist and, relaxing your knees, let your upper body hang.” Everyone does this, then the person next to me transitions out of this stretch into something new, narrating what she is doing as she guides everyone through the next stretch

MASK MAKING

Contort and limber facial muscles and relax into neutral. Each player says a line that conveys a sharp attitude or strong emotion. “The world is awful,” or “The sunshine is lovely,” and slowly, allows the face to reflect the feeling.

PASS THE MASK

Sitting in a circle, one player makes his face into a mask, then turns to the person next to him. The second person matches the mask, then transforms it into a new mask. He turns to the next person, and so on.

ONE WORD CHECK-IN

In a circle: one begins with a word which best describes how she is feeling, what she is bringing to the moment. As she says this word, she makes a movement. The way she says the word, together with the way she moves, expresses what the word means to her.

EXAMPLE: I throw my self into the middle and crumple to the floor into a tiny ball as I squeak the word, “Insignificant.” I do this again twice as the group mirrors my movement and exclamation.

WRONG NAMING

We walk around the room pointing to things and “wrong-naming” them. EXAMPLE: I point to a door and say: “Ladder.” I point to a chair and say, “Hammer.” This mind scramble lets your subconscious know that you are in the business of setting your mind free! It is permission to be outrageous, silly and to confuse the rational impulse.

TRUST EXERCISES

- Circle Trust: someone in the center of a circle falls backward. Group catches her.
- Blind walk: Partners face each other and touch fingertip to fingertip. One person closes her eyes; the other guides her around the room, just by the gentle touch of her fingertips.
- Blind Running: Partners hold hands. One closes her eyes; the other leads her in a run.

BALL THROW

- Standing in a circle, an imaginary ball gets tossed around the room. Feel the ball; agree on the size and weight of it. If someone throws a baseball, the person catching must catch a baseball, not a beach ball.
- After tossing the ball around for a while, yell out a word with the toss of the ball. The person catching yells a word as the ball is caught, then yells a different word with the next throw, etc. The challenge is to stay out of one’s logical, rational response and let whatever word bubbles up in response to the word given. The “ball” helps by making us concentrate on an imagined physical reality.

OBJECT EXPLORATION

It is a duet between you and the object. Pick an object (real, such as a piece of fabric) and explore what it can do, what its properties are, how you can relate to it. Don’t try to make something happen. Don’t act; allow. Follow the object. See what the object makes you do. The object is your scene partner.

SOUND

It looks like you were having a lot of fun, but you weren't making music.

Percussionist Scott Breadman

SONGS

After our physical and vocal warm up and everyone's brief one-word check-in, the Wims sang together. Elinor, Susan, Betty Macias and Roxanne, experienced musicians, offered leadership. We practiced many songs, which became part of our toolbox: something that might get plugged into a show. **EXAMPLE:** When David Duke (a former Grand Wizard of the KKK) was campaigning to be governor of Louisiana in 1991, the Wims put him in a scene at Starbucks. It was light and funny and he was a buffoon. Then, shifting the tone and grounding us in the sad reality of racism, Betty Macias cut the scene by taking the stage with a baby wrapped in a blanket. She then sang a heart-wrenching rendition of "Brown Baby."

RAP

I won't say that the Wims invented rap, but in the 80's we were improvising our stories with a back up beat that often rhymed. (Maybe we did invent it!) In any case, it became a way of "checking in" in a free form way with the support of other players holding down the beat with vocal sounds.

IMPROVISED SONG

One person begins with a word or phrase, making the rhythm pronounced and leaving room for other parts. Another player either supports what is being done (by matching exactly) or begins a second part using a different phrase, keeping the same rhythm. A third part can be added, or someone can take a solo as the others continue with the rhythm.

PULLING TWEED

We learned "Pulling Tweed," a call and response exercise, from Frankie Armstrong, a blind English folk singer with a particular interest in women's lives as illuminated

through song. In Scotland, pulling the wet wool out of the water takes many hands. They pull it, and then push it to squeeze the water out. EXERCISE: A line is formed and in unison we pull, then push; pull, then push. As this motion is being done, one person becomes the caller with the first of what will be four calls of nonsense syllables.

EXAMPLE: Caller: “Hey! Ho!” Responders (everyone else) repeat. Caller: “Gabagabaga!” Responders repeat. Caller: “Yippidee Yippidee Day!” Responders repeat. “Gabbadee!” Responders repeat. Then the next person in line begins with a call. The important thing is to keep the beat, to maintain the rhythm, which is made simpler by the act of pulling and pushing the tweed. It doesn’t matter if it’s just a grunt, as long as it comes in on the beat.

VARIATION:

Call and response with a phrase instead of nonsense syllables. EXAMPLE: Caller: “I’m beat.” Responders repeat. Caller: “Wanna take a nap.” Responders repeat. Caller: “Can’t be done.” Responders repeat. Caller: “Oh damn.” Responders repeat.

ORCHESTRA

By making the vocal sounds of close approximation, each person “plays” an instrument. One person is the conductor and points to the players, featuring various players and bringing the volume up or down. Begin with a tune everyone knows, and then proceed to an improvised sound piece.

VARIATION:

The orchestra expresses in sound what the conductor expresses in movement. The conductor leaves the orchestra and begins to move and the orchestra follows his movement with the appropriate accompaniment.

SOUND JAM

Percussionist Scott Breadman ran a workshop for the Wims in which he invited us to jam together while he listened. We each chose from our basket of percussion instruments. We played enthusiastically for several minutes. After we finished, feeling proud of our “jam,” Scott spoke. “It looks like you were having a lot of fun,” he said. “But you weren’t making music.” At which point he handed each of us a 3 X 5 card. On it was our “score.”

1 2 3 4 were the beats. Circled on each card were two numbers: our “score.” My card had the 1 and the 2 circled; Elinor’s had the 1 and the 3, and so on. We studied our music and began, clapping on our “note.” We heard the difference: when we each stayed with our own beat, we complimented each other and the piece had coherence. After experimenting with the clapping, we did it with instruments, then with vocal sounds.

After practicing with our cards for a while, we practiced without cards, listening to the beat established by whoever began, then finding our place in the rhythm and staying with our own part. It was in this way that we learned the structure of a shared rhythm. We learned that building rhythm was similar to the way we built machines or scenes or installations: one person began with a rhythm (sound or word, or movement) followed by other players adding, one at a time, her own rhythm (or sound, word or movement).

VARIATION:

A sound jam can also be built using a sound or a word or a phrase instead of an instrument. After the sound (and rhythm) is established, someone else offers a different sound (or word). The piece is built by adding one at a time. There is always room for players to support each other by joining exactly what someone else has begun.

STOMP, a theatrical troupe, wowed us all with their unique combination of percussion, movement and visual comedy. Using paper bags, newspaper, sticks, brooms, trashcans, and the sound of their shoes on the floor, STOMP inspired us to use everything we had at our disposal to make rhythm.

WORD JAZZ

Each player chooses an “instrument,” something they can replicate with their voice. Working with a theme or a word, one person begins using the rhythms and intonations of jazz. EXAMPLE: The theme is death and dying. In Word Jazz, someone begins with the sound of a snare drum and repeats in a rhythmic way, “Gonna die, gonna die...” The next player, on her instrument, a tenor sax, plays, “Never! Never!” And so on, with give and take, until the jazz combo has played out the riff on the theme. Roxanne explains it this way: “This really takes off as people take solos, which enables them to elaborate on

whatever is on their minds about their subject. Otherwise it's just a rhythm piece. Also, the syllables of the players' words must really coincide with the striking of their instruments, so that they seem to be “playing” them.”

MADRIGAL AND OPERA

Instead of using jazz, we use the madrigal and opera as the form and therefore we have a melodic line to build against with harmonies as well as rhythm. As in Word Jazz, we build the piece in the same way, adding one part at a time. It is good to have more than one person holding down one part.

MOVEMENT

If we pick up a piece of ice from the ground, our whole body must react to this movement and to the cold. Not only the fingertips, not only the whole hand, but the whole body must reveal the coldness of this little piece of ice.

Jerzy Grotowski (*Towards A Poor Theatre*)

GROTOWSKI WALKS

Each of us has a walk that to us is natural. You can understand others better if you move the way they do. The Polish theater director, Jerzy Grotowski, taught this as a method for getting to know a character. The American version is, “You can’t know someone unless you’ve walked a mile in his shoes.” We can explore character walks by isolating different body parts.

ISOLATIONS OF THE FOOT

walk on your heels
walk on outside of feet
walk backwards
skip sideways
slide backwards
baby steps backwards
walk on knees
be light on your feet
make circular motions

walk on your toes
walk on inside your feet
walk in slow motion
walk on tiptoe backwards
giant steps in slow motion
walk on hands and feet
walk close to floor
be heavy on your feet
make angular motions

Walk leading with:

your chin
your ear
your hip

your stomach
your head
your chest

VARIATIONS:

- Walk on the tiptoe of your right foot as you lead with your nose (or other body parts).
- Zigzag leading with your stomach (or other body parts).

MOVING THROUGH SPACE

stretch
shake
hop

slither
slide
spin

twist
jump
bolt

skip	tiptoe	run
zigzag	crawl	jog
twirl	giant steps	baby steps
glide	flop	soar
drift	swing	fly
flip	swoop	dive
slither		

IMAGINARY ELEMENTS

Feel how heavy or light the element is. Feel where your body ends and where the element begins. Use your entire body. (Don't ignore the arms.)

Walk as if:

you're moving through water	you're moving through butter
you're moving through outer space	you're moving through a cloud
you're walking on grease	you're walking on hot coals
you're walking on ice chips	you're on ice skates

Walk as if:

you're cold	you're hot
you're sleepy	your foot hurts
you have a cold	you're sleepy
you're hungry	you just woke up
you have to go to the bathroom	you're thirsty
you have fleabites	you ate too much
you're walking on broken glass	you're late for an appointment
a beach ball is between your legs	you've got a glass on our head
walk through a narrow opening	the room has a low ceiling
everyone adores you; make eye contact	you've received bad news
someone is following you	your lover has just dumped you
you're about to ask your boss for a raise	you've just been given a raise
people are whispering about you	

Physicalize these objects:

fetus, pretzel, snake, starfish, Swiss army knife, safety pin, glove, key, pillow, ball of yarn, fork, hairbrush, table, chair, ipod, telephone, etc.

Physicalize these colors:

barndoor red, cotton candy pink, swimming pool blue, etc.

Physicalize these nouns:

beggar, creator, cloud, commander, beginner, punishment, crime, war, science, art

Physicalize these verbs:

abolish, brag, collect, share, comfort, desire, protect

Physicalize these adjectives:

wild, cruel, comic, courteous, silly, serious

VARIATIONS:

- Move with your elbow stuck to your toe.
- Find another creature and communicate without words. Form alliances.
- See other people, but don't let them see you (put on mask).

MOVEMENT VOCABULARY

Take inventory of all the movements that your body knows. EXAMPLES: running, skipping, hopping, playing tennis, etc. Then, one by one, perform these moves.

Exaggerate the movement. Slow it down. Pay close attention to how and where the body is in space.

SPACE WORK

Keep the integrity of each object, making sure to leave room for that object in your hands. Feel the weight, shape, and texture as you perform the following activities:

hang laundry	wrap a present	sew on a button
build a camp fire	decorate a Christmas tree	change a tire
open a present	build a sand castle	make a sandwich
make a bed	paint fingernails	paint a picture
wash a car	pack for a trip	rake leaves
wash windows	wash dishes	put on a band-aid

VARIATIONS:

In pairs, make a bed, set the table, fold a sheet, wash a car, etc.

TREASURE CHEST

A player removes something (imaginary) out of a large toy chest. By using with it, he lets the others know what it is. When someone thinks she knows, she identifies it and then it's her turn to find something in the treasure chest.

MAKING A DANCE

Take a movement that involves an object and exaggerate it. When repeated, it has transformed into a new movement, a dance step. EXAMPLE: I am ironing a shirt. The movement gets larger and larger: the sweep of the iron goes up as I shift my weight. By repeating this action, I've created a dance step, which only vaguely has to do with ironing.

VARIATION:

Let this movement come out of a story. I'm ironing my daughter's wedding gown. After I arrive at the "dance" step (or steps), someone matches me, while someone else tells the story that gave rise to it.

MIRRORING

One person is the mirror and one is the person looking into the mirror. Move slowly. Don't turn your back; your partner must see you to duplicate your movements. After awhile, switch who is the leader and who is the follower.

VARIATION:

Do it again, this time with no leader and no follower. See if you can really "read" each other. It requires concentration to be able to move in total sync with someone else.

VARIATION: FUN HOUSE MIRRORS

Workshop leader shouts out various everyday activities; partners react by performing these activities in slow, exaggerated motion, as it would appear in a fun house mirror.

THE DIAMOND

The Diamond builds on the mirror exercise by adding other people. Four people form a diamond shape all facing the same way. Whoever is in front is the leader. Everyone follows the moves of the leader. When the leader turns and faces another direction, she has instantly given up the leadership because she no longer is in front. As the diamond keeps changing, vary the levels and movement. The whole floor can be used. There is a lot of non-verbal communication demanded in this exercise.

VARIATION:

Though more than four can play, people inside the Diamond don't have the fun of leading the group when there are more than four people.

THE GRID

Imagine there is a grid on the floor: lines going across and lines going down. You are allowed to only walk on the imaginary lines, no diagonals. There is a grid in space, too, going up. So if you wanted to change the vertical grid, you'd have to get lower or make yourself taller. Everyone moves on the grid. If you encounter someone in your path you will have a negotiation: climb over or go under, but don't leave the grid. Don't forget to use your whole body. Vary the size of your steps and how fast you move. Change up the tempo. Maintain eye contact. Move on the grid using the different walks. Move in slow motion. Move backwards.

VARIATION: GRID WITH RHYTHM

Work out your style of movement. Keep in mind levels, tempo. Select a destination.

Begin to move to a count of 8. When you reach 8, freeze for the next 8, then begin again. You don't have to take a step on each beat. Each player begins on a different number but maintains his count of eight.

VARIATION:

If someone makes contact with you first, you must give up your destination and stay with them until they freeze.

ATOM WALK

Eye contact, no physical contact: explore the space; move through it as if you were an atom in space, making contact with other atoms with your eyes, then gradually, with your bodies, allowing the atoms to explode.

BOUNDARIES

We are all sharing the same area. Where do I end and where do you begin? How close can I get to you (and you to me) before you feel invaded? Observe these different boundaries:

- Put your arm out in front of you. That is as close as someone can get. Put your arm down, but everyone observe the same arms-length boundary.
- Observe a six-inch boundary between you and others at all times.
- Walk as close as you can to other people without touching them.

(This is a natural segue into Contact Improvisation, where all boundaries disappear and both bodies can touch all parts.)

PHYSICAL CONTACT

This exercise is designed to cross physical boundaries and make physical contact. In general, contact should only be made with the agreement of the person being touched. In this case, we make a collective agreement that we can touch each other within the stated perimeters of the exercise. Also, it's important that each individual be responsible for the safety and comfort of her own body: if I have back trouble, it is my job to let people know they can't put weight on my back.

- Shake hands.
- Shake hands with your left hand.

Make physical contact without hands as you say the other person's name.

HEAD-TO-KNEE

This exercise is done in pairs. The workshop leader calls out two body parts. Without discussing it, the partners glue those parts together. EXAMPLE: "Head to knee," means that the head of one person gets glued to the knee of the other person. The rest of the body stretches away from the parts that are glued, as if there's a magnet holding the glued parts together and everything else is being pulled in the opposite direction by another magnet. When the next body part is called, the first parts are unglued and the next two are glued together, with every other body part stretching in the opposite directions. The workshop leader can speed up the directions as the ability to focus and match body parts without talking happens quicker.

knees
shoulders
fingers
toes

wrists
hips
thighs
elbows

ears
backs
stomachs
butts

VARIATIONS:

- In partners, develop a walk that is dependent on each other.
- Add rhythm with sound (snapping, vocalizing, pounding feet, etc.)
- With a partner or in threes (without talking) become:

umbrella	scissors	sunglasses
can opener	chair	Swiss army knife
ice cream cone	pretzel	bicycle

GLOB AND SPLIT

This is the first of several exercises where together in a group, we build some new thing that has a life of its own.

No more than eight people at a time. They stand together, arms by their sides—so close their bodies touch—facing the same way. They have now become one organic Glob. As this Glob, they move. The workshop leader guides the Glob around the room by facing them, walking backwards, or by calling out directions.

After the Glob has become accustomed to moving as a unit, the workshop leader steps out of a leadership role as the Glob moves on its own, exploring the room. Whoever is facing front are the leaders. If the people in front turn, then the front of the Glob changes. In this way switching of leadership functions the same as in the Diamond. The way the Glob moves, how fast, the size of its steps, plus the sound it makes, gives the Glob its personality.

VARIATIONS

- The idea of a freeze is to catch the body in mid-action and suspend it in time. The freeze position therefore shouldn't look relaxed. It takes control to hold a freeze just as it takes control to move in slow motion. The workshop leader uses a drum to guide the movement. As soon as the workshop leader hits the drum, the Glob splits apart quickly, like an atom bursting into space. When the drum is hit again, everyone freezes. The freeze positions should be strong. When the drum is hit again, the players return in slow motion to the Glob. Then the Glob moves again, until the drum is sounded.

- The workshop leader removes the drum cue and the Glob splits and comes back together just by sensing itself.
- When the cue for coming back together happens, two Globs emerge instead of one. Without talking, the group will have to decide how to divide itself. Then there will be two organic units. These two Globs can move about the room, can interact, can split and reform into a different combination of players. One glob may be made up of two people, and the other made up of six (or any other combination of numbers).

CONTACT IMPROVISATION

Contact Improvisation, originated by choreographer Steve Paxton, is usually done as a duet and involves moving in and out of physical contact while rolling, spiraling, springing and falling. The movement is totally improvised as each player supports and follows the other's movements. The movement is inspired by the physical and energetic contact the partners share, and by the physical laws that govern their motion: gravity, momentum, and inertia. The wall and floor are seen as partners in this "dance."

To begin to explore this kind of improvisation, each partner touches the other's (pointer) finger. Feeling the energy between their two fingers, they let that energy flow into other parts of the body so that gradually there is a give and take of weight. It's as if the point of contact were a piece of mercury moving between the bodies. As people become comfortable with this weight exchange, the movement can get faster and more energetic.

SOUND AND MOVEMENT

We are not our “personalities”...the imagination is our true self.

Keith Johnstone (*Impro*)

CONCENTRATION

Think of three separate actions EXAMPLE: brushing teeth, skipping rope, typing.

Perform them in sequence.

VARIATIONS:

Tell a story while doing an action.

Tell a story while someone else is performing three actions and also telling a story.

WALK, TURN, FALL

After the exploration of movement, individually, in partners, and in groups, this exercise explores the idea of choreography—the orchestration of movement with a specific goal.

Three moves are choreographed: a walk, a turn and a fall. Having explored many ways of walking, it is time to introduce different ways of turning and falling.

Turn:

- in a circle, slowly
- in a circle, quickly
- with arms extended
- with arms by ones side
- as if you were weightless
- as if you weighed 300 pounds

Fall:

- quickly, like a heavy rock
- slowly, like melting ice
- sprawling, covering a great space
- crumbling in a heap

Partners now discuss how to choreograph a piece that has a walk, a turn and a fall in it, not necessarily in that order. The duo must move in exactly the same way at the same time. They can face each other, moving toward each other; or they can start out side by

side, but they have to do the same thing. It can't be too fast or out of control since it must match exactly.

Rhythm and sound can be added, but not words. Partners may touch or not. Each finished piece will have a beginning, middle and end. Some pieces will tell a story. The choice of sequence can change the feel of the piece as well.

VARIATIONS:

- Without coordinating movements, each player completes a walk, turn and fall in relation, but not mirroring, the other's walk, turn and fall.
- Rather than pre-plan, two players improvise a walk, turn, fall.

INSTALLATION

An individual begins by setting an object on the stage. One by one, players add to the "stage picture" with other objects in relation to the first objects, keeping in mind: planes, levels, bigger/smaller, volume, where it is on the stage, and what it might suggest thematically. The installation uses all levels and may include players either doing a movement or simply holding an object. Sound can be added by voice or musical instrument from off stage or from on stage. Once a picture is complete, a character may enter and use the installation as a backdrop to a scene. Or, a player may add herself to the installation to complete it or become active (speaking) part of it. This might turn into a scene or a physical pattern. An installation can be an abstraction; but for even greater effectiveness, it can be created off of a word or a theme. Installations have been created off such themes as: "House Guests," "Dying Nephew," and "Traffic Jam."

SCULPTURE

Whereas an installation is made using objects and/or players, a sculpture is built with bodies only, one at a time. The goal is to use bodies to form shapes which, taken together, create a sculpture. A player takes an active position and freezes. Someone else will take an equally active position in relation to the first person, adding to the sculpture, and so on, until the sculpture is complete.

Players should choose shapes that are round or angular, being aware of the negative space (the shape of the space between them), choosing to make vertical and horizontal lines and using all levels. They may touch, or not, depending on what they feel will work sculpturally. What should be considered: the over-all picture, balance, counterpoint, support, and repeatable pattern.

VARIATION:

Everyone resumes a neutral position before forming a new sculpture, or the sculpture can transform into another sculpture. As with an installation, sculpture can be inspired by a theme. EXAMPLE: Out-of-town visitors, Death at an early age, etc.

MACHINES

Sculpture is art. But sculpture is not designed to fulfill a function the way a car is. Machines, buildings and cars, while also sculptural, have other functions, too. They usually have moving parts that are essential to their function. Often they make sound.

Similar to sculptures, machines are built by adding one thing at a time in relation to what has already been established. The end result should have the quality of the machine, i.e. it won't look like a sewing machine, but it will have "sewing machine-ness." At the same time, it should retain the elements, which we look for in sculpture: over-all picture, balance, counterpoint, sound, support, and repeatable pattern.

A player puts her body in a position to represent her idea, then announces which part she is. EXAMPLE: "I am the engine of a Jaguar." Once she is firmly in position, the next player enters and places herself in relationship to the first player, identifying herself: "I am the steering wheel." If a player needs help to realize her vision she can ask for it: "I need someone to help me form the roof of the car."

VARIATIONS:

- Other machines: sewing machine, piano, roller coaster, etc.
- Abstract machines: Sadness machine, Joy machine, Anger machine, etc.

I SEE, I IMAGINE, I FEEL ON THE GRID

A verbal pattern is formed when these three elements are repeated: “I see, I imagine, I feel.” While moving on the grid:

Player #1 names something he actually sees: “I see a crack in the wall.” As soon as he begins speaking, everyone freezes. Player #2 names what that seen thing makes him imagine: “I imagine a monster lives in the wall and he breathes through that crack.”

Player #3 completes the pattern by saying how he feels, based on what has been suggested thus far in the pattern: “I feel scared that the monster might escape!”

Immediately following the last declaration, movement begins in reaction to what has just been said (fear of the monster escaping), taking care that everyone stays on the grid.

The moment someone begins a new pattern with “I see,” the others freeze.

This can be a fun and funny experience or it can be sobering, as in the following EXAMPLE (from one of my workshops exploring ancestry): Gerald (African American): “I see a man hanging from a tree.” Armando (Hispanic): “I imagine he’s not the only one.” Diana (Japanese): “I feel like praying.”

The grid can also be used as a background for a verbal pattern. EXAMPLE (from another ancestor workshop where the emerging theme was about growing up as a first generation American): Diana: “I learned how to not speak Japanese.” Armando: “I learned how to not speak Spanish.” Gerald: “I learned how to not speak so I wouldn’t get whipped by my father.” He then covered his mouth. That transformed into everyone on the grid trying to keep from speaking by covering their mouths.

FACE CONVERSATIONS

In pairs, players decide on a topic. Using only the face (including the mouth but without words), they have a conversation. Slowly add shoulders, then arms, torsos, legs and finally, their voice (sounds, not words). Then, they subtract their voices but make sounds with their bodies: vocalizing, slapping, snapping, stomping, etc.), all the while staying on the topic of the conversation.

OPPOSITES

A player, working alone, expresses one quality with his voice and an opposing quality with his body. EXAMPLE: writhe in agony while singing “I Whistle A Happy Tune.”

SOUND AND MOVEMENT WITH PARTNERS

Two players respond to a line of dialog based on a clear feeling, such as, “The boss gave me a raise.” Together they discover a sound and movement, which expresses the line.

VARIATION:

Two players each take a different line of dialog and develop a sound and movement, which expresses it. EXAMPLE: “Mother loves me,” or “Tomorrow I get paid.” One player takes his sound and movement to the other player, who responds by showing his own. Together, they find a meeting point in their “dialogue,” altering their individual sound and movement to create a new one.

WORD TRANSFORMATION

The objective is to parse all possible meanings from one word. To begin, a player says a word. Her partner repeats it. As if they are pulling apart a piece of taffy apart, they tease apart the word letting it suggest movement and/or meaning. EXAMPLE: “Exhaustion” becomes “exhaust,” which becomes “ex,” which becomes “tion” (shun), and so on. As each syllable or sound is said, it suggests an emotion or action, which the players may explore until a new sound or syllable is said.

OBJECT TRANSFORMATION

A player uses an (imaginary) object and transforms the movement into use of another object. EXAMPLE: Using space work, I hammer a nail, letting the movement get larger and larger until it transforms into a new movement, which has nothing to do with hammering. Someone matches my new movement, (I drop out) and transforms my new movement into yet another movement, which eventually becomes literal, such as applying nail polish or buttoning a shirt. She must take care to let the new space work with an object evolve from the movement, not from an idea in her head. It may take awhile. This is an exercise in patience and allowing.

MATCH AND GO

One player begins a movement. Another joins and mirrors (or matches) the movement. Together they transform it. When it has become something new, another player taps player #1 and matches what player #2 is doing. Then they transform that movement into something new, and so on. The rest of the group may support with percussive sound or melody.

VARIATION:

A player says a word using her entire body to give it expression. Another player matches and together they transform both sound and movement. When it's become something new, another player taps out first person and matches what person #2 is doing, then they transform to something new, and so on.

HAIKU

A haiku has 17 syllables and usually references nature. We have taken the spirit of haiku and introduced it into improv as a moment for a poetic reflection with minimum words. Two players meet each other on the stage face to face and bow. There are a total of 3 lines. The first person says a line, the second person responds with a line; the first person says the last line. Together they have created a "haiku." Don't expect logic or rhyme; it is created in the moment and should reflect the connection between players and/or what's gone before.

EXAMPLE:

Player 1: "The sun rises high in the sky."

Player 2: "I yearn for winter."

Player 1: "My stomach growls for lunch."

EXAMPLE:

Player 1: "Snow flakes fall into my eyes."

Player 2: "Despair must yield to re-birth."

Player 1: "Tonight I will get laid."

CHARACTERS

Characters are always part of a bigger story. They are coming from somewhere and going somewhere for a reason. How they feel about where they've been and where they're headed affects how they move. Inexperienced actors are anxious to show the audience how they feel. In fact, acting is just the opposite. An actor should focus on doing a task (walking somewhere, for instance), not showing the audience the feeling inside the task. The actor's job is to feel the character's feelings, not act out those feelings.

In improv a character must appear fully born without time for thought or research. The player must quickly assign him or her an age, a way of moving, of talking, and of behaving. His dialog can reflect his history, memory as well as his desires and fears.

It is always an option for two or more players to create a character. When this character talks, Shared Narration is a good option. EXAMPLE: Wrapped in a sheet, Dale and Roxanne together created the character of a flower, Azalea. Later in the theater piece, the character went to an Azalea self-help group.

When a player does something that seems to define a character, that character can then be brought back. In the Death and Dying workshops, when I was trying to cry, that action suggested a character: Weeping Woman, who was later brought back by someone else, thus providing repetition of a strong image and emotion.

BUILDING A CHARACTER

Chose someone you know and have observed (the receptionist in your dentist's office, your father, etc). Using sense memory, how it would be to be in his body? The weight of his hands. His height? When did you last shave? How does he stand, sit, and move? Begin to explore his physicality.

VARIATION:

Build a character based on an object, such as a purse, coffee cup, car, etc.

THE INTERVIEW

Though we are breaking the “don’t ask questions” rule, in this case questions are allowed because the character is not in a scene, he is in an interview. EXAMPLE: One of my students assumed the shape and weight of a colander that had been in her family for generations. She told a bit about her life (i.e. Pastas which had passed through her over the years, etc.) Other players asked questions to pull out more of her story: “Where have you lived?” “How did you get so banged up?”

P.G. AKA THE PSYCHOLOGICAL GESTURE

EXAMPLES: Sitting with crossed legs, swinging or jiggling one leg; biting one's nails; playing with one's hair. To unpack what it means we go from the outside in: we take that gesture and make it bigger and bigger, letting it grow to absurd proportions. Now I’m standing and kicking wildly! It makes me think of my boyfriend who I’m furious with. Going from the inside out, think about what feeling is driving you in your life right now. By playing with the largest and smallest expression of the gesture we discover content and find a new way “in” to the story.

VARIATION:

Begin with the large gesture and scale it back down to its smallest gesture.

ANIMAL TO HUMAN

Lie on floor in relaxation. Visualization: It is a warm spring day. You're out in nature—desert wilderness, mountains, by the sea. Feel the sun warming your body. You see an animal. It could be a bird or creature of the sea—not a fantasy creature, something real. As you get closer, the definitions of its body become clear. See it very specifically. Its shape, colors, patterns, eyes. Hoofs, feathers, belly, fur, etc.

Now back up the story and take it from the point of view of this creature. What do you see? How does the sun feel on your body? Consider the characteristics of this animal. Are you aggressive? An observer? Nocturnal? What kind of sounds do you make? Explore your breathing. Find your voice. What's your mating call? (Don't be too literal; consider the feeling, don't try to mimic the exact sound.) Call to get another animal's attention. Call to scare away another animal.

When you move, what part of your body do you move first? As you're making your sounds, begin to move. Keep your face involved. Pay attention to how your paws or wings move.

Gradually, let everyone else in. As you continue to move and make contact with others, let this animal gradually take on human characteristics: just 25% human. Now 50%. Now 75%. Finally, 100 % human. What sex are you? How old are you? What do you do for a living? As this human with these animal qualities, enter a nightclub. Interact with different people, letting them know something about you. (Instead of laying on, in this instance, tell them about yourself.)

VARIATION:

In a scene, one transforms into her animal counterpart and her scene partner must follow.

EXAMPLE: I am no longer a troubled divorcee; now I am a lion, and so you transform from my therapist into a chipmunk.

MYTHS, FAIRYTALES, LEGENDS

Myths, fairytales and legends are maps: this is the stuff of basic life experience. They take our every day experience and make it bigger than merely human. When we present our personal stories we look for the mythic implications. EXAMPLE: When I was having trouble with my teenage daughter, I brought in "Snow White" and used the jealous Queen to help tell my story.

TYPES OF MYTHS:

- Creation myths, the myth of the fall, the myth of the dying god, apocalyptic myths, the myth of the flood, the myth of metamorphosis, resurrection myth.
- Gods represent all nature in human forms and point out to us: The origins of humankind, man's destiny, man's power/powerlessness, man's hopes/desires.
- Gods can be Jehovah, Jesus, Greek Gods, Allah, etc.
- Gods can be God of War, Goddess of Commerce, Goddess of High Fashion, etc.

SOURCES FOR CHARACTERS

- Characters based on inanimate objects: EXAMPLES: the wind, a spatula.

- Characters based on a movement observed in the world. EXAMPLES: the movement of a door closing; the movement of a leaf stirring in the wind; an umbrella opening. Begin with this movement and let it determine how this character moves and from that a character will emerge.
- Characters based on a word. EXAMPLE: “survival” or “broken.” Let that word inform how the character moves and the sounds she makes.
- Characters based on mythical or fictional characters. EXAMPLE: Snow White; Toto.
- Characters based on animals.
- Characters based on photographs.

WIMS CHARACTERS

There are myriad characters that have shown up on the Wims stage and we kept a list of them so that they could re-appear. EXAMPLES:

- Characters based on animals: Sam the Dog.
- Characters based on inanimate objects: Pay Toilet.
- Characters based on other things: Daffodil, Compost Heap, Cancer Cell.
- Characters based on Jungian archetypes: King, Warrior, Lover, Magician.
- Characters based on universal archetypes: Beauty, Crone, Beast (scary and dark), Fool, Coyote/Trickster, Nymph (child spirit), Black Sheep, Diva.
- Characters which emerged from our personal stories: Captain, Bird Woman, Raja, Guru, Dancing Spirit, Harmony Hunter, Tooth Mother, Carnie, Mommy Dearest

GIFT GIVING

It’s helpful to begin exploration of scenes without dialog. This exercise is done in gibberish. One person offers a “gift” to another. The only thing the first player has control over is the size and weight of the gift by how she holds it and offers it. The second player responds with a “yes” by accepting the size and weight offered, then adding to the process by unwrapping the box and looking inside. She removes something. It is up to the “yes, and” back and forth which follows that determines what the gift is, what it’s function is, if and how it smells, how it feels to the touch, etc. The gift need not be something recognizable, but in any case both parties value it. It could be a large,

fuzzy, hot, thing that makes a sound when it's spun around. It could be a tiny long strand of things that are eatable.

SCENES

A helpful acronym is CROW = Character, Relationship, Objective, Where. We need all four in any given scene. When a character is on stage a scene is immediately suggested, therefore a place and a reason for the character to be there are essential and must be supplied by someone.

Every scene has a place, a period (era) and characters that interact in some way. Each character should have an objective, even if it's only to open a door. Conflict often arises because someone wants something that the other(s) can or cannot supply. Kurt Vonnegut urges: "Make sure that every character in every scene wants something, even if it's only a glass of water."

In the Wims performances, we found that back-to-back scenes rarely worked; it's good to break up that kind of storytelling with silent work, movement, a song or rhythm, or a monologue.

CAVEAT:

For the sake of the story, the audience, and your fellow actors, DO NOT set the scene in a mental hospital or in a rehearsal for a play.

LAYING ON

Asking a question of a fellow player puts that person on the spot. Giving information to your fellow player helps her know what the scene is about.

EXAMPLE: If you enter a scene where another player is jumping rope, and you say, "What are you doing?" you are putting the player on the spot. Instead, your job is to supply her with information. You have to make an assumption, to "lay on" who she is and why she is doing what she is doing. It's all in the spirit of continually thinking of what you can offer to another player: a physical object, a gesture, a word, a sound, an idea, a name and/or a purpose. So, in the above example: if you instead say, "Mother,

why on earth are you jumping rope on the roof in the middle of the night?” though you are supplying information, you are also forcing the other player to come up with an answer. Whereas if you say, “Oh Mother! Here you are again in the middle of the night on the roof,” you are supplying the other player with who she is and where she is. Then she can build on this information by saying, “Ralph, not so loud! The neighbors think I’m stomping grapes.”

CAVEAT:

The converse of this rule is that as the player on stage you may think you know who you are and what you are doing, but the minute another player “lays on” you, your obligation is to drop your idea and embrace what is being offered. However, if you come on stage and announce who you are, the other players have no need to tell you who you are.

EXAMPLE: I tell a story about falling in love. Julie comes on stage driving a patrol car announcing: “Love Police!”

THE WHERE

The Where, or the Place, can be discovered together by being in it, one person at a time. It is always helpful to be doing something while in a scene. It gives each player time to think, time to consider what and how to say something. EXAMPLE: I am washing the dishes. Someone joins me by drying. After we have established this what and where, someone can begin the scene by talking. The objective is to allow something real to develop between scene partners. It always makes the scene richer to reference the weather, the smells, the sounds, and other sensual realities.

EXAMPLE: I push a grocery cart onto stage. I choose something to put in my cart. I sniff it, decide it’s good, and then put it in my shopping bag. Someone else joins the scene and goes to a different section of the “store” and steals something. A third person enters mopping the floor. All of this is done in silence. We have agreement on the place and we each know who we are and why we are there.

VARIATION:

- The scene described above may not need dialog. It may have its own climax when someone steals something. Or, once the situation is clearly established, then the characters can begin to speak.
- After the scene has progressed (or finished), players have the option to replay it by moving the action backward (what happened just before) or forward in time.

IMPROV GAMES

Some of these are borrowed from other sources, some we made up. All are meant to sharpen the ability to be in the moment and take risks.

- **SCULPTURE INTO A SCENE**

A player strikes a position and freezes. Another player puts herself in relation to the first person and says a line which lets the other person know who they are and where.

EXAMPLE: One player is holding his arms out and leaning back, his head tilted back too. Player two stands over him and looking down says, “Open wide, let me get the anesthesia, then you won’t be so scared.”

- **WHO AM I?**

Player #1 is the only one on stage who does not know who she is. Everyone else gives clues by their attitude, statements and behavior. The scene ends when the player can identify herself.

- **BEGIN AND END**

The scene must begin with an action and end with one.

EXAMPLE: Begin: leap from a chair. End: lie down, open a book.

EXAMPLE: Begin: Put on make-up. End: collapse in tears.

- **OBJECTS**

A group of three, each player with a different object, creates a scene in which each object is used. The objects can’t be named.

- **ROTATING WITHIN THE SCENE**

Someone starts a scene by doing an activity. Someone else enters and helps define the who and the what and the where. When a third person enters, the first player has to

find a motivation for leaving the scene. A fourth player enters with a reason to be there; the second player must find a reason to exit.

- **INSIDE/OUTSIDE**

While a realistic scene is going on, other players may act out in sound and movement the subtext of the scene.

- **TOUCHING**

A player must touch everyone she addresses. In other words, she must find a reason to touch every time she talks to someone.

- **INTER-CUTTING SCENES**

Two scenes are happening simultaneously on stage, but each scene freezes when the other comes to life. It is useful to cut a scene on a word that applies to both, or a gesture.

- **HAROLD**

This is a long free-form improv developed by Del Close, which we adapted for our own uses. Working around a theme, scenes can be cut and then picked up later; there can be two scenes going on simultaneously.

- **5-LINE SCENES**

This is a good exercise to train us to quickly define the who/what/where of a scene. With two players on stage, and only a few lines of dialog between them, an entire scene must be created. Such limited parameters force us to take our time and to rely on listening and space work.

EXAMPLE: From the Ancestor workshop, this scene emerged after a story was told about the bitter relationship between a daughter and her dying mother.

MOTHER: You're a terrible daughter.

DAUGHTER: I'm one of three.

MOTHER: Let me go home.

DAUGHTER: Will you take some broth?

MOTHER: I want to die.

- **FAMILY PHOTO**

This is another way to amplify part of a story that's been told. It begins as a formal photograph of a family. Each person steps out of the freeze (pose) to tell about her

life in one or two sentences. Then she steps back into the photo, and so on until each person has spoken.

EXAMPLE:

Player 1: “When Margaret died, the responsibility for raising the children fell entirely to me. I spent all my days in grief and panic.

Player 2: “I had to drop out of school to help father. Maybe I’ll never learn how to read, but I do know how to wring the head off a chicken.”

Player 3: “I’m always hungry. Mama sang to me at night. Will she ever come back?”
(Continue with as many players as there are members of this “family.”)

DREAMS

As with the check-ins, the moment a dream is shared it will belong to all of us. We will approach it not to find out what this dream means about you, the dreamer, and your particular psychology, but rather as if we each had the same dream. With this in mind, we will endeavor to uncover what the dream is telling us about our collective predicament at this point in history and in our lives as a people.

Dale’s notes 2/13/95, on a series of workshops on Dreams

After the Wims had worked on dreams in our workshops, we tried to figure out how to put them to work in a show. Betty Thomas asked the intriguing question, “What if we could, each evening on stage, dream that particular audience’s dream, for that particular moment in time?” So we not only solicited dreams from our audience but we thought of the entire evening as the audience’s dream, which jumped us into the dream state.

STORY TELLING

Storytelling is the essence of our work. A story has characters, a sense of place, images, language, dialog, and the use of all the senses. A story has a shape and a point of view. When someone else is telling a story, I ask myself: How is her story my story? What about her story reminds me of a story from my own life?

Wims stories often grew out of check-ins. EXAMPLE: Susan’s check-in is about finding “a real steal” at the mall, a silk scarf from China, probably made by underpaid workers. Another steal is a blouse from El Salvador, probably made by underage children. Her conclusion is that she is part of an “International Chain of Looters.” Betty M. follows up

with a personal story about her cousin who has worked in the L.A. garment district for 25 years. She has expanded Susan's story by adding the worker's point of view.

Once we have told a story, there are myriad ways of playing with it.

EXPANDED MOMENT

Every story has a catalytic moment, or a moment that propels the story in a new direction. We take a moment from a story already told, and unpack it, stretch it out, thus expanding it. **EXAMPLE:** Dale tells a story about her mechanic's announcement that car repairs will cost \$200, which she doesn't have. Later, Elinor re-tells the story in the third person, expanding on the moment. "His eyes were blue, his name tag read 'Paul.' 'Paul,' she said, looking into his blue eyes, 'I don't have \$200...' He smiled." and so on.

SHARED NARRATION

- Facing the audience in direct address, you and I (and maybe one other) will create a story: I begin, you take over. We try to make it as fluid as possible, as if we both know the story and are only repeating it, as opposed to making it up on the spot (which we are doing). This technique also works well when together, two players create one character.

- **VARIATIONS:**

After someone has told a story, two others tell the same story in shared narration, keeping to the story beats but freely expanding on the emotion.

- Two people tell a story in shared narration. Another duo tells a different story in shared narration. They cut each other, trying to find the places where each story intersects.

VARIATIONS ON STORY TELLING OR RE-TELLING:

- Tell the story without words.
- Tell the story with sung words only.
- Tell the story backwards.
- Tell the story, moving it forward in time.
- Tell the story from point of view of different characters.

- Go into a character's experience that wasn't told in the original story.
- Tell the same story as if it were the funniest, the most tragic, etc.
- Using an operatic form to "sing" the stories.

THREE FLASHES ON AN EMBLEM

We agree on what the emblem is then one at a time we do something to express or expand on it. One of the flashes must include the Where.

MINI CHECK-IN

Tell a short anecdote. Be very subjective: how it felt, not how it was objectively. Use your entire body and voice. EXAMPLE: Dale said, "Today I held a newborn baby." As she said these words, she slowly, lifted an imaginary baby high into the air. The movement expressed her feeling of exaltation.

THE CHECK-IN

A friend had a business card that gave her name and simply the word "Traveling." We were enchanted and inspired by a business card that named a concept broader than a profession! We imagined what it would be like if we each could have a card for every day of the week, a card which truly reflected who we were in that very moment. Would it create more understanding of us and of each other? Thus was born the "check-in," a brief solo using words and/or movement and/or sound to dramatize who we were in the moment. The punch line of these solos was a presentation of our "calling card." A calling card might be "Dale Eunson, Dog Lover," or "Julie Payne, Composter."

Like any good story, the check-in has an arc: a beginning, middle and end. What makes it theatrical is that the storyteller can use her entire body and vocal range, can sing part of it if she chooses, or tell the entire story in gibberish, using words only for the calling card.

The check-in became the only part of our work that wasn't strictly improvised.

We arrived at each workshop or performance having thought about what was going on in our lives and what metaphor best expressed it. Using visual and sound support, we told

the story with the hopes of supplying our fellow players with themes, metaphors, places, and/or character(s).

HOW TO FIND A CHECK-IN

- Look for a moment of contact with a person.
- Look for an "aha!" moment, a moment of recognition, a moment you felt really awake.
- Ask yourself, "What are the big issues in my life right now?"
- Begin physically, using a metaphor that says how you're feeling. EXAMPLE: "Trying to get my feet on the ground."
- Write a list beginning with the phrase: "I am..."

QUESTIONS TO TEST YOUR CHECK-IN

- What is this check-in about?
- How is the story in my check-in universal?
- What are the mythic implications of my story?
- How would I jam on this material?
- What am I giving the company to work with?

FINDING A CALLING CARD

- Look for ways to turn the feeling of the check-in into a character or archetype. EXAMPLE: Instead of "Overwhelmed," choose "Captain Overwhelmed."
- Use the calling card to introduce a place. EXAMPLE: "Victim of a Memory Bank Robbery."
- Use the calling card to establish relationship to the place. EXAMPLE: "Locked out of the Memory Bank."
- To find the calling card, look for ways to introduce a character.

EXAMPLE: TIGER MOTHER

Prowling around on stage as a tiger, here is what I tell the audience in 1991: "Men have been looking at my daughter. Men have been looking at my 15-year-old girl. Men have been looking with their greedy eyes at my baby's womanly breasts. I want to poke out

their eyes. I want to lock her in a tower in the middle of a forest and swallow the key. My calling card: Tiger Mother.”

I have supplied the group with a theme (protection of children, a mother’s fear), with characters (men, 15-year old girl, Tiger Mother), with places (forest and tower), and with emblems: greedy eyes, womanly breasts. From here the company can jump on stage and begin to jam.

JAMMING

After a story has been told, we de-construct it, searching for places, characters (or implied characters) themes and especially emblems. EXAMPLE: Dale told about bursting into tears when her mechanic announced the price of a new alternator. “I was sobbing at the gas station,” she said. “I completely lost it.” In the jam, Elinor took the stage looking for “it,” that thing that Dale had lost. I joined Elinor to help her to find it. Susan supplied us with what “it” was, offering to sell “coping tools” out of the big basket.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

We want to be working “at the top of our brains.”

Del Close (as recalled by Dale)

LIGHTING

Wims performed in many situations where the lighting was neutral. But when we performed at night in the Church in Ocean Park, lighting designer Kathi O’Donohue worked closely with us to achieve the appropriate mood, to help us segue into a new scene and—perhaps most important—to know when to cut a scene. Most often, Kathi used a “cross fade” instead of a black out. She often used scrims to create shadows or silhouettes of leaves, etc. Kathi was keenly sensitive to the moods we wanted to create on stage. She was really the eighth Wim, so integral and essential was she to the spirit of our work.

AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT

We try to break down the fourth wall, but never by embarrassing anyone or putting anyone on the spot.

EXAMPLES:

- We often asked for help during a performance. Susan, setting the mood for her story, asked the audience to give her the “sound of wind.” Another time, Elinor asked Kathi to create a hiding place for her on stage. Kathi made everything dark except a tiny spot on the furthestmost corner of the Shell. That’s where Elinor put herself. She just sat there in the semi-darkness and silence.
- During one series of Wims performances, from the stage we solicited dreams from our audience and then used that material to jam on and weave into the other themes we had previously discovered. Other times, meeting people in the lobby at intermission, we asked if anyone had a dream they wanted to share, and then on stage the Wim re-told the dream in first person, present tense: “I am in a large garage with my mother...” and the Wims then proceeded to incorporate that dream into our work.

- Many times a Wim would ask a question from the stage. Elinor once began her check-in by asking: “How many of you wear sunscreen?” In another performance, I asked the audience, “I want to see a show of hands. In this room tonight, is anyone actually in love?”
- Often we used a blackboard, which invited audience members to answer a question when they entered. We tried to keep the question personal in a way that didn’t feel threatening. The answer could be literal or abstract. Each question was meant to provoke thought and suggest a theme for us. As soon as someone added their suggestion to the board, they had entered into dialog with us.

EXAMPLES:

- “What I am carrying with me today...”
- “What holds me together is...”
- “The last big change I made was when...”
- “One thing I’ll never change is...”
- “The physical pain I carry today is...”

HOUSEKEEPING

Because we are responsible for the stage picture, we have to be good housekeepers, keeping on the stage only those objects that continue to support the work being done. The stage picture is the “set design” and nothing should be there unless it’s being used. We don’t let the stage get messy with old ideas.

LEVELS

We use all levels available: vertical, horizontal, front and back. Get low; get high (stand on a chair; stand on each other). Use down stage and up stage to help fill out the three-dimensional picture.

RULE OF OPPOSITES

We consider going against the expected, using counterpoint to play against the obvious. It is a way of underscoring the theme or changing the energy, the focus, or the pace.

EXAMPLE: If one player is performing the act of getting dressed, another can perform the act of undressing.

EXAMPLE: In 1992, it seemed possible that Roe V. Wade might be overturned. The Wims were jamming on this with a variation on “Row, Row, Row, Your Boat.” Dale cut with, “I don’t care if I’m losing my childbirth rights because I’m not in my chilled-bearing years!” It was a shocking comment and went against the expected sentiment.

REPETITION

By repeating a physical gesture, sound or word in various parts of the show, we provide an echo that gives shape and meaning to what’s gone before. It’s a way of pointing an arrow to something that we feel is important. We often bring back a word or phrase, a musical motif, an image, or a character. As the show is developing, we look for physical, emotional, thematic, verbal, rhythmic patterns that can be repeated. As Dale said in one of her last e-mails during the Death and Dying Workshops, “Look for patterns—particularly when working on an ending. Though we need to be careful not to let a pattern diminish the work, but rather deepen and enhance it.”

GIVING FEEDBACK AND DE-BRIEFING

The best way to evaluate improv work is to have someone take notes. In the Wims, whoever directed the workshop did this and after the workshop, or some part of the workshop, she used the notes to explain what happened in any given scene or jam. During a performance, we asked someone else to take notes. After a show, we often met somewhere (The old Azteca restaurant in Venice being a favorite) to drink margaritas and review what we did: who did what when and why; when something worked or didn’t; if/when we felt heard or ignored, and when we did or did not give support.

RESISTANCE

Feeling anxious, self-conscious or critical are all forms of resistance. The best way to deal with these feelings of alienation is to get outside of yourself, focus on what the group is doing or on what another player is doing and what is needed on stage. The ongoing question to ask: “How can I help what’s happening on stage right now?”

HELPFUL HINTS

The pearl is in the oyster. And the oyster is in the bottom of the sea. Dive deep.

Kabir

- Be willing to make a fool of yourself. EXAMPLE: The subject is money—how to invest it, how to manage it. I know very little about this subject but a Teacher is called to the stage so I jump up and assume the mantle, pick up one of the bamboo poles and begin a lecture on “portfolios” and “diversity.” One of the other players (my “student”) interrupts me: “You don’t know what you’re talking about, do you?” I have to admit, “I don’t.” This was a funny true moment that pushed us into a search for the “real” teacher.
- Do SOMETHING! As soon as you take an action, make a choice, something will happen. EXAMPLE: Roxanne picked up a sheet and began to carefully, mindfully fold it. Elinor matched her by folding another sheet. The action was riveting because both were so committed to being precise in doing their tasks.
- When in doubt, involve yourself in something physical; meaning will follow. It also buys you time to consider what to do next. EXAMPLE: Wash your hands in the bowl of water; fold a sheet, sweep the floor.
- When in doubt, begin a rhythm or a song.
- Ask for what you want from another player, loud enough so that your need is clear. EXAMPLE: One time Susan had a flash to play a carnie and asked the Wims for carnival sounds. EXAMPLE: to accompany my story about religious conversion, I asked the Wims to sing a liturgical song.
- Play each idea to its extreme; explore all possibilities; unpack the story.
- Cut when something needs to be cut, even if you have no idea what to do next.
- Individuals take responsibility to make sure all are included: an installation, a fact, a where, a sound piece, music, rhythm, mythical connection.
- In a scene, establish the who/where/why of the situation as quickly as possible.
- Don’t ask questions; supply information.
- Replay a scene by moving the story forward or backward in time.

- Often a scene appears with an ambiguous “where” and no real purpose. The way back into a real scene is to establish a clear where and why.
- Use repetition as a way to reinforce themes, to give the audience an experience of the echo of an image, musical phrase, or word, to help weave the piece together.
- From Dale: “Avoid standing outside the circle tossing things in without any actual commitment, though sound support from outside for something that is already cooking is often okay.”

STAY IN THE MOMENT

- If you are on stage, be aware of what is going on around you. Don’t get yourself in a position where you can’t see or hear the action. Keep in touch with each other either by eye contact or direct physical contact.
- Listen to each other; pay attention to each other; don’t be busy planning what you’re going to do next. Look at each other; allow things to happen in the moment.
- Ask yourself: what’s going on right now? This is a form of no denial: to always acknowledge and accept what’s going on in the moment.
- Be real in the moment; cop to what’s going on. If you’re lost, say so. If you’re confused, ask the audience what’s going on. Or, ask another player. Name it: say out loud what is going on; this can force you to stay in the moment and not only helps you to stay grounded in what is happening right then, it keeps you from planning your next move. It also adds to the ongoing intention of exposing the process.
- Stay connected to your own experience as a witness. Be affected by each other. If what’s happening on stage tickles your funny bone, laugh! If it moves you to tears, cry. Your own reaction is part of the experience. Being professional is the ability to bring together your own personal reaction and letting it add to what you contribute to the process instead of distracting you from contributing.
- Make connections with your fellow player and between what has occurred before on stage with what is happening now.
- Allow the audience in.
- Don’t desert people on stage (unless they don’t need you to be there).
- Let fellow players know if you’re being hurt or if you need help.

- Don't over-talk; allow silence to be a player.

TOOL KIT SHORTHAND

Before beginning to work, review what you have at your disposal to create an evening of Wims-style improvisational theater.

OBJECTIVE AIDS

- Lighting
- Objects
- Instruments
- The 4 elements
- Timer
- Blackboard
- Writing prompts

SOUND

- Rhythm instruments and body (clapping, stomping, etc.)
- Music (songs, melodies, word jazz, madrigal, choruses, solos)
- Call and response
- Silence

MOVEMENT (variables: speed, levels, staccato, angular, circular)

- Dance
- Freeze
- Sculpture
- Installation
- Contact improvisation
- The grid
- The clump

WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN

- Scenes
- Images
- Object as scene partner
- Storytelling

- Shared Narration
- Characters based on animals
- Characters based on inanimate objects
- Characters based on archetypes
- Characters based on myths
- List, diary entry, recipe, letter, obituary, a will, instruction manual, fact, current event, poem, dream, etc.

CONVENTIONS

- Check-ins
- Jams
- Transformations (physically, verbally, in a scene, of a character)
- Emblems and metaphors
- Patterns
- Haikus
- Machines
- Echoes (repetition of themes, characters, places, songs, etc.)
- Involving the audience
- Addressing the audience
- Working in solos, duos, trios, and as an ensemble

A FINAL WORD

The overriding objective is to have FUN together! When the players are truly playing and having fun in the process—even when the exploration is deep—the audience is having fun too.



The Wims — 1988

*(From left: Elinor Graham, Dale Eunson, Julie Payne,
Betty Thomas, Susan Krebs, Betty Macias, Stephanie Waxman)*