

# PERFORMANCE ESSENTIALS: HOW TO MAKE A GOOD SHOW

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From the beginning, this project was imagined as a way to make the voices of farmers come alive and by doing this to stimulate discussion about the economic and ecological sustainability issues contemporary agriculture faces. Everything that is said in this piece has been expressed by someone interviewed by Cynthia Vagnetti. The choral segments are direct quotes. The dialogues and monologues are extensions of experiences, ideas, and concerns presented to this project from many different representatives of the agricultural community.

The piece was always imagined as performed with scripts in hand. The performers would be members of the audience community. Sometimes the performers would be their own audience.

This script relies on the authenticity of the speakers. To the audience they would be known persons, voicing concerns of actual people.

In that sense it is not a conventional play, where the actor hides behind the character and pretends to be someone else. Here the person speaking lends some credibility to the language because of who they are in their own community. At the same time he or she is taking on the persona of another person.

## PREPARING FOR THE PERFORMANCE

Very often people doing this performance will have the script only a short time before the actual presentation. It will be good if they have time to read the whole thing. It is more likely that they will take time to read their own parts. In any case they should:

- Highlight or underline their lines.
- Pay close attention to their cues—the lines that immediately precede theirs.
- Mark the pages where they come in some way—paper clips are helpful.

## WORKING WITH PARTNERS

Except for the two monologues (the new ag worker and the person with the egg co-op) everyone works with others, either in pairs or in choral groups.

The key for everyone is to *listen actively*. In the choral sections, each speaker is contributing a different angle on a topic. It is critical to listen to each speaker, look at them, respond to them, so that when you speak you are contributing to the larger conversation of that topic.

In the dialogues each speaker plays off the other. Listen to what is said. Realize what your character must be thinking before you speak. What you say comes out of that thinking and feeling.

## REHEARSAL

Get with your partner. The Choral Group should gather all together and work through the choral sections one by one. The pairs should get off by themselves and sit where they can look at one another while they go through their scenes. Go through them, out loud, beginning to end.

## GUS & BERTIE

Central to these two women is the fact that they have known each other for their whole lives. Their talk is full of shortcuts. They are way past making each other mad—or at least they can speak about things directly, and move on to the next topic without a lot of formality. Each has a sense of humor. Bertie's dilemma about the farm is a question that keeps the piece going. What will she do? The question allows us to explore a lot of issues. It doesn't give so many answers as it raises questions.

## THE YOUNG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Here we get to meet a kid, a young man, who was raised on a big commercial farm and a girl who has idealistic notions about having a natural/organic farm . . . but mainly you have a little love story as he tries to impress her.

Their dialogue raises some more questions about modern farming . . . and gives conventional farming a face. Their interest in each other drives the two scenes.

### **THE KIDS**

They are driven by a competitive instinct that supercedes everything else. Their dialogue raises more issues of sustainable farming. The fun in them is letting the competitiveness gradually turn into a friendship. They both like being smart.

### **THE CHORAL VOICES**

Each voice has several speeches. Some of them come from the same original speaker. Other times they are roughly connected by a point of view.

It is among the voices that we hear from African American, Native American, and Hispanic American farmers. If the presenters have no representatives of these groups, these voice should simply be read by whoever is available, speaking honestly and directly, without any attempt to have an accent.

If there is a smaller or larger number of choral speakers than suggested by the script, the organizers should feel free to divide the voices differently.

Choral readers should ask themselves: What am I reacting to? What thoughts are going through my head? Who am I trying to convince? Why am I saying this now?

Many of the choral statements are musings—inner thoughts. Some are spoken out of frustration. Some feel

they are simply stating the obvious. Think about each speech and each line within a speech, and figure what state of mind is behind it. Then adopt that state of mind.

Be ready to step right up when it is your turn to speak. Keep the flow going.

If the choral group is seated during other scenes, those speaking a particular section can rise and remain standing after they have spoken, and then all sit down together. They can stand one at a time, or stand around a mike together. The key factor is to minimize the time between speakers and to eliminate waiting for people to be seated when they are done or lots of shuffling around to get together to start. The choral sections are created as a sort of dialogue among voices. There should be an energy of statement and response—sometimes in agreement, sometimes giving a different aspect to something, sometimes challenging. Whatever it is, the feeling of response should be there.

### **MONOLOGUES**

The New Ag Worker and the Egg Co-op Farmer have longer stories to tell.

The New Ag Worker is obviously very nervous about a meeting he/she has to run. The fear is only partly real and the character has a sense of humor about it. The character is trying to talk himself into handling the moment—and in the process raises a number of questions about modern farming. This character usually gets laughs—and members of the cast can laugh too as they listen.

The egg co-op story is a big success story for modern alternative farmers. It is certainly told with a smile and a

sense of disbelief that it could have turned out so well. It also speaks of many issues of scale and sustainability.

In rehearsal the two monologue givers might read their monologues to each other as a way of trying them out.

Before the performance, everyone should rehearse everything out loud with their various partners. This is essential to get the bugs out. It is not enough to have read it silently to oneself. It is very different to speak it out loud with someone listening.

These can be done simultaneously—the choral group working, the pairs working, the monologues working—but everyone must speak anything out loud that he or she is going to speak in performance.

### **A SONG AS AN ENDING**

If you use the song at the ending remember to rehearse the smooth starting of the song, and rehearse the song. Stand and bow at the end of the song. Follow the lead person off-stage. If you do not use the song, simply close with the final Choral piece. When it is finished, everyone stand, and on the cue of the leader, take a bow. The audience will know this is the cue that it is over, and will applaud.

### **A SMALL-GROUP EXPERIENCE**

In a small-group experience, performers and audience are the same group. If your performance is very small scale—that is, if the group who is reading is its own audience, you can still note the suggestions above. You will want your group as an audience to follow the

action, to hear what is said, to be engaged, to care about the speakers and not get distracted by turning pages. But, skip the full rehearsal step. You can warm everyone up by doing a simultaneous reading of everyone's first speech. But it will be counter productive to rehearse everything, because for a small self-contained group, part of the fun will be the discovery of what the piece is. It will be fun to find out what is happening to your character as you read the piece. The discussion that follows will be informed by your experience both as audience and as performers. The mistakes or missteps

you make along the way will just add to the mix.

**REMEMBER: THIS IS THEATRE**

That means its essential nature is an interaction between audience and performer. Whatever happens is part of the show. It can't be erased. Enjoy it!

**FINALLY**

Find a way to give credit to the creators and disseminators of the piece.

Many people have contributed to the existence of this script. Include their names in a program, or read them out in your introduction. From the collection of the original interviews, to the editor and creator of the dialogues, to the many people who tested or tried out the script, to the management of the printing and production of the actual scripts, dozens of people have been involved. It is important that the audience know that such projects require a lot of people and resources—even when the medium appears to be clean and simple.