



Physical Theatre Exercises for the Drama Classroom

A collection of movement-based drama exercises designed to develop ensemble skills, physical awareness and non-verbal storytelling. Suitable for KS3, GCSE and A Level drama.

How to Use This Resource

These exercises can be used as warm-ups, devising tools, lesson starters or extended practical tasks. Most activities can be adapted easily for different ages and abilities.

Teaching focus:

- Ensemble and teamwork
- Movement and physical storytelling
- Confidence and inclusion
- Exploring character, emotion and ideas without text

Physical theatre exercises

Physical theatre exercises are one of the most effective ways to get drama students working creatively, collaboratively and confidently. By focusing on movement rather than dialogue, physical theatre activities help students explore character, relationships and ideas in a highly visual and inclusive way.

Whether you are teaching KS3 drama or developing GCSE and A Level devising work, physical theatre exercises offer practical, engaging approaches that suit a wide range of learners. They are particularly useful for ensemble building, abstract storytelling and encouraging students to move beyond naturalistic performance.

This guide brings together a selection of tried-and-tested physical theatre exercises commonly used in drama classrooms, along with a printable resource to support planning and delivery.

Why use physical theatre exercises?

Physical theatre exercises help students to:

- Develop ensemble skills and teamwork
- Communicate meaning without relying on speech
- Build confidence and physical awareness
- Explore character and emotion through movement
- Engage creatively with devising and scripted work

Because they rely less on text, these exercises are also highly inclusive and accessible for students with varying levels of confidence, literacy or language. They are particularly effective for supporting students with EAL (English as an Additional Language) to join in fully with drama activities.

Practical physical theatre exercises

Here are 12 physical theatre exercises you can use and adapt for your own classes. Remember to **sign up for our newsletter at the bottom of the page** to get future updates.

1. Round-By-Through

A core physical theatre exercise focusing on spatial awareness.

How it works:

Students move around an object, beside it, and then through it. The object may be a chair, table or another student. This works very well in groups of three or four, giving each student a turn in the centre. Encourage changes in pace, level and intention and add in emotions to differentiate the movements. Build up into a short sequence by joining five or six passes together. Work on adding eye contact between students or the avoidance of eye contact, to give a different feel.

Focus:

Precision, spatial awareness, purposeful movement.

2. Chair duets

A classic physical theatre exercise exploring relationship and status.

How it works:

Two students create a sequence using simple gestures and two chairs. Each student has a chair. Start by using simple arm movements to connect to a partner (e.g. one puts their arm around the other); the other one moves or shifts position. Build up a short sequence of 10-12 simple movements that can be repeated. No talking is allowed.

Once students are confident with small movements, encourage them to use leg movements, turn away from and towards each other. They can move the chairs as well and encourage them to do things in canon (one after the other) and unison (both at the same time) to develop the piece. Students may use music to help set the scene and explore ideas such as conflict, cooperation or power.

Focus:

Control, balance, non-verbal communication.

3. 10-second objects

A fast-paced ensemble exercise.

How it works:

With students working in small groups, call out an everyday object, such as a washing machine or playground slide. Students have 10 seconds to create the object physically before freezing. You can extend the time if needed.

You can extend this by moving on to scenes rather than objects (e.g. a beach scene, a scene at the opera or a busy market).

Focus:

Quick thinking, teamwork, clarity of physical storytelling.

4. Human machines

An excellent ensemble-building task.

How it works:

One student begins a repeated movement. Others join one by one, connecting their movements and adding optional sounds. The idea is to create a 'production line' effect using their bodies. Encourage movement and sound effects created by voice and/or physical movements such as stamping and tapping.

Focus:

Rhythm, layering, ensemble awareness.

5. Mirroring

A concentration and control exercise.

How it works:

Students work in pairs, copying each other's movements as accurately as possible. Progress from a clear leader and follower to shared leadership. Get other students to guess who is leading. This works best if the movements are slow and steady. Remind students that they are reflecting each other's movements, as if looking in a mirror.

Focus:

Precision, trust, physical listening.

6. Follow the leader (movement focus)

A physical awareness and focus exercise.

How it works:

One student leads slow, deliberate movements while the rest of the group copies exactly. Change the leaders regularly, moving the last leader to the back of the line to join in again. Encourage students to explore different ways of moving, different levels and ideas such as rotation, hopping and jumping. Also ask them to play with speed, doing some movements fast and others slowly. Sound can be added as well.

Focus:

Observation, discipline and ensemble cohesion.

7. Emotional statues

A simple way to explore emotion physically.

How it works:

Call out an emotion. Students create a full-body still image to express it. Discuss which physical choices make the emotion readable by the audience. You can make this into a game by giving 2 or 3 students the emotion and asking others in their group to guess what the emotion is. Try to use more complex emotions rather than just 'happy' and 'sad'.

Focus:

Emotional clarity, physical expression.

8. Physical storytelling (no words)

Encourages clear narrative through movement.

How it works:

Students retell a short story, myth or fairytale using only movement and gesture, with no spoken words. You can begin by asking them to recreate five or six freeze-frame images which tell the story. Once these have been established, you can bring them to life for 15 - 30 seconds each. An

extension of this is to get the students to think about how they will transition from one freeze frame to the next efficiently.

Focus:

Narrative structure, transitions, ensemble timing.

9. Levels and pace work

Explores how movement choices communicate meaning.

How it works:

Students move using high, medium and low levels, changing pace on command. You can do this as an abstract movement piece or add emotions or intentions to deepen the task. You can set rules, for example, one person must always be lying on the floor, one kneeling, one standing and one on a chair. Try to get them to work without talking to develop trust and group dynamics. Change the pace at which they move frequently.

Focus:

Dynamics, control, intention.

10. Group sculpting

A strong image-making exercise.

How it works:

One student sculpts others into a physical image without speaking. The sculptor then steps back to view and refine the overall picture. You can extend this by giving the sculptor a character (or letting them invent one of their own) to then explain their sculpture to an imaginary group of art critics. This can also be done in pairs.

Focus:

Composition, shape, visual clarity.

11. Slow motion sequences

Develops control and physical detail.

How it works:

Students perform a simple action or moment in extreme slow motion, focusing on control and precision. You can extend this by getting them to repeat the action, but this time going backwards, and at different speeds (half-speed, quarter-speed or even double-speed).

Focus:

Muscle control, awareness, detail.

12. Gesture amplification

Moves students away from naturalism.

How it works:

Students start with a small everyday gesture, such as a cough or a stumble or trip, and gradually exaggerate it, adding emotional intention until the movement is fully explored to its maximum. This works well in small groups where each student takes a turn at generating the action, with the following students each adding a level of exaggeration. The first student then moves to the end of the line, and the next student generates their own movement.

Focus:

Stylisation, expressive movement.

Teaching tip

Physical theatre works best when students understand there is no single correct answer. Encourage exploration, risk-taking and reflection rather than polished outcomes. Asking students to evaluate what communicates meaning most clearly helps develop analytical as well as practical skills.

Many of these exercises are strongly associated with the work of Frantic Assembly, whose education programme has had a significant influence on how physical theatre and ensemble work are taught in UK drama classrooms. Exercises such as Round-By-Through and Chair Duets are widely taught through their workshops and resources.

Want More Drama Resources?

Enjoying this freebie? Discover even more drama teaching resources, including GCSE set text overviews, revision materials, and lesson plans at Drama-Teachers.com.

Make sure you are subscribed to receive our newsletters.

