

SCENES FOR EXPLORATION—Creativity: Learning and Leading in a New Renaissance—Brent Cirves

Scene 1: from *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles. This is the famous confrontation scene between King Oedipus and the blind seer, Teiresias. A plague is troubling Thebes; an oracle has informed Oedipus that the killer of the previous king is still alive, and the gods are angry—this is the reason for the city’s misfortunes. Teiresias is summoned to help Oedipus solve the riddle of the old murder and thus save Thebes. *Oedipus Rex* was first performed in 429 BCE in Athens. Aristotle considered *Oedipus* to be the perfect example of tragedy.

Scene 2: from *Philoctetes* by Sophocles. Neoptolemos has come to a desert island where one Philoctetes has been abandoned by the Greeks due to a grievous snakebite in his foot and his incessant pain and moaning. Philoctetes has magical skills with bow and arrow, however, and General Odysseus has just learned that Philoctetes is needed to fulfill the fate of Troy’s downfall. Neoptolemos goes against his own personal ethics, tricking Philoctetes into giving him the bow and arrow. He thinks better about the deceit, however, returns the magical weapons, and tries to convince his old friend to come with him to Troy. *Philoctetes* was first performed in 409 BCE, in Athens, where it won first prize at the Dionysian Festival.

Scene 3: from *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare. This is a scene that has garnered criticism from scholars over the years. Critics agree that it seems just a bit underwritten, but this makes for an interesting challenge for the director and actors. Balthazar enters, performs the unlucky function of reporting Juliet’s “death” to Romeo, which Romeo accepts without question, and is immediately dispatched on another errand. Quick work! The director and actors must find powerful sub-textual action and emotion to make the scene work in these few lines. *Romeo and Juliet* was first performed at the Globe Theatre in London around 1595.

Scene 4: from *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. The famous Gravedigger scene needs little introduction. It is thick with meaning and irony: Hamlet has narrowly escaped death in England only to come face-to-face with the skull of his childhood friend, the court jester, Yorick. The morbid irony of the scene concerns the fact that Hamlet’s girlfriend, Ophelia, has just committed suicide and is about to be buried by the Gravedigger. The humor of the scene thus seems very much out of place. And yet it works, of course—or must be made to work by the director/actors. *Hamlet* was first performed at the Globe Theatre, probably in 1600.

Scene 5: from *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand. In this scene from *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the hero and his good friend Christian are in the besieged town of Arras. Roxane, beloved of both Cyrano and Christian, has just performed the miracle of traveling to Arras to be with her new husband, Christian. Of course Roxane doesn’t know that it was Cyrano who actually wooed and won her. Here Cyrano admits to the miracle of writing and somehow sending love letters to Roxane every day of the months-long siege. *Cyrano* was first performed in Paris at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin in 1897. After the opening night curtain fell, the audience applauded for over an hour.

Scene 6: from *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE* by Sinclair Lewis, adapted by Tony Taccone and Bennett S. Cohen. The unthinkable has happened in 1930s America: a demagogue who could not possibly win the presidency has just been elected. Contrary to promises of peace and prosperity, the new president gets busy setting up a police state. One of his detractors is a newspaper editor named Doremus Jessup. In this scene, Doremus’s good friend Buck informs him that it is time for the editor to make a hasty exit: to Canada. The novel upon which this play is based was published by Sinclair Lewis in 1935; the play adaptation was performed in 2016 at Berkley Repertory Theatre in Berkley, California to stunned silence and then rousing ovations.

Scene 1: from *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles. (At the palace. Teiresias enters.)

Beat 1

OEDIPUS: Teiresias, you're an intelligent man. Even if you are blind, you see what dangers threaten the state. With your gift for prophesy, tell me now: who killed Laius? We need to know.

TEIRESIAS: How terrible it is to be wise.

Beat 2

OEDIPUS: What did you say?

TEIRESIAS: Let me go home. You must bear your own burden with no help from me.

OEDIPUS: I would advise you, old man, not to turn your back on the State which raised you. If you know the truth—

TEIRESIAS: I know the truth, but I do not care to reveal it.

Beat 3

OEDIPUS: What did you say? You know but will not speak? Would you betray us and destroy the State? Do not turn away from me. Are you a traitor?

TEIRESIAS: Traitor?

OEDIPUS: If you were not blind, I'd say you killed the old king.

Beat 4

TEIRESIAS: So, you accuse me? Very well, I'll speak, for though I am blind I can still see the truth.... You are the murderer. You yourself. You are the godless defiler of our State.

OEDIPUS: How dare you say such a thing to me!

TEIRESIAS: You murdered Laius, noble king of Thebes, you killed him on the highway not knowing he was king. Think back, Oedipus. Remember the stranger? Soon you will learn more secrets, more shame—

OEDIPUS: There is no truth in what you speak. Your mind, your ears and eyes are blind.

TEIRESIAS: Soon all men will cast the very same insults on you.

Beat 5

OEDIPUS: Leave me, old man, I'm warning you. Leave me or I swear I'll do you harm.

TEIRESIAS: Swear, by your father's grave, your father whom you yourself killed. Swear by your mother's bed, your wife's, your children's, your brothers and sisters'—

OEDIPUS: I will not listen to this!

TEIRESIAS: The misery of your kingdom is on your hands alone, Oedipus. You are to blame, and you know it. Deep inside, you know....

Beat 6

Now I will go, and if you find that I have been in error, then take my life as you please.

Scene 2: from *Philoctetes* by Sophocles (On an island, before a desolate cave.)

Beat 1

NEOPTOLEMOS: So, Philoctetes, this is your chance. With your incredible skill at bow and arrow, imagine the glory of being the best of all the Greeks. Come with me, and you'll be in the hands of healers. Not only that but, by taking Troy, you'll be famous. Troy, the cause of all our pains.

PHILOCTETES: (Moaning in pain from a festering snakebite in his right foot) Aaaah! Miserable life! Why keep me above the ground? Miserable man! What should I do now? How should I act? How can I not listen to this man's words when he gives me what appears to be—aaah!—good advice. (After a moment more of howling.) Sail to Troy? With this lousy foot of mine? To those men I hate?

NEOPTOLEMOS: To those who'll save you from disease and stop the agony of your rotting foot, yes.

Beat 2

PHILOCTETES: Aren't you ashamed—of tempting the gods by saying such things, tempting fate?

NEOPTOLEMOS: Ashamed, of helping a friend?

PHILOCTETES: You're saying all this to help me, right? Not to help the cursed men of Atreus.

NEOPTOLEMOS: I am your friend. Yes, I'm saying it to help you.

PHILOCTETES: How can that be—if you're trying to hand me over to my enemies?

Beat 3

NEOPTOLEMOS: Friend, don't be so proud when you're in the grips of such pain—

PHILOCTETES: You'll ruin me with such talk! That much I've learned.

NEOPTOLEMOS: I'm not ruining anything. I don't think you understand—

PHILOCTETES: I understand that it was Odysseus who dumped me out here, with Agamemnon's blessing! Their names are poison, like the snake that bit me. No. I'll never go to Troy again. *Never!*

Beat 4

NEOPTOLEMOS: (After a moment.) So what should I do now? How should I act? If nothing I say can convince you.... All right, I'll leave and let you go on with your life. With no hope of being saved from this god-forsaken rock. I'm leaving now.

Beat 5

PHILOCTETES: Go! Let me suffer. Aaah! But deliver what you promised when you shook my hand before. Please, I'm begging you. I'm in such misery. Take me back to my country to die, back to Skyros. And stop reminding me of Troy!

NEOPTOLEMOS: I can't do it. No. I can't—

Beat 6

PHILOCTETES: Then you've betrayed me! (Shouting in pain and anger.) *You're no better than the rest of them!*

NEOPTOLEMOS: I brought you back your bow and arrows, didn't I?

PHILOCTETES: So I can clutch them to me and die here! Alone. Aaaah!

Beat 7

(They are at a painful impasse. / Then, enter the ghost of Hercules.)

Scene 3: from *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare (In a public place.)

Beat 1

ROMEO: If I may trust the flattering truth of sleep,
My dreams presage some joyful news at hand:
My bosom's lord sits lightly in his throne;
And all this day an unaccustom'd spirit
Lifts me above the ground with cheerful thoughts.
(Enter BALTHASAR, booted.)

Beat 2

News from Verona!—How now, Balthasar!
How doth my lady? Is my father well?
How fares my Juliet? that I ask again;
For nothing can be ill, if she be well.

Beat 3

BALTHASAR: Then she is well, and nothing can be ill:

Beat 4

Her body sleeps in Capel's monument,
And her immortal part with angels lives.
I saw her laid low in her kindred's vault,
And presently took post to tell it you:

Beat 5

O, pardon me for bringing these ill news,
Since you did leave it for my office, sir.

Beat 6

ROMEO: Is it even so? / Then I defy you, stars!

Beat 7

Thou know'st my lodging: get me ink and paper,
And hire post-horses; I will hence to-night.

BALTHASAR: I do beseech you, sir, have patience:
Your looks are pale and wild, and do import
Some misadventure.

ROMEO: Tush, thou art deceived:

Beat 8

Leave me, and do the thing I bid thee do.
Hast thou no letters to me from the friar?

BALTHASAR: No, my good lord.

ROMEO: No matter: get thee gone,
And hire those horses; I'll be with thee straight.

Beat 9

(Exit BALTHASAR.)
Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee to-night....

SCENE 4: FROM *HAMLET* (In a graveyard.)

Beat 1

HAMLET: Whose grave's this, sirrah?

GRAVEDIGGER: Mine, sir.

HAMLET: I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't.

Beat 2

GRAVEDIGGER: You lie out on't, sir, therefore 'tis not yours. For my part, I do not lie in't, yet it is mine.

HAMLET: Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say 'tis thine. 'Tis for the dead, not for the quick: therefore thou liest.

GRAVEDIGGER: 'Tis a quick lie, sir, 'twill away again from me to you.

Beat 3

HAMLET: What man dost thou dig it for?

GRAVEDIGGER: For no man, sir.

HAMLET: What woman then?

GRAVEDIGGER: For none neither.

HAMLET: Who is to be buried in't?

GRAVEDIGGER: One that was a woman, sir, but rest her soul, she's dead.

Beat 4

HAMLET: How absolute the knave is.... / How long hast thou been grave-maker?

GRAVEDIGGER: I came to't that day that our last King Hamlet o'ercame Fortinbras.

HAMLET: How long is that since?

GRAVEDIGGER: Cannot you tell that? Every fool can tell that. It was that very day, three and twenty year ago, that young Hamlet was born—he that is mad and sent into England.

Beat 5

HAMLET: Ay, marry. Why was he sent into England?

GRAVEDIGGER: Why, because 'a was mad. 'A shall recover his wits there, or if 'a do not, 'tis no great matter there.

HAMLET: Why?

Beat 6

GRAVEDIGGER: 'Twill not be seen in him there. There the men are as mad as he.... / Here's a skull now hath lien you i'th' earth twenty year.... This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester.

Beat 7

HAMLET: This...? Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him....

SCENE 5: FROM *CYRANO DE BERGERAC* by Edmond Rostand (Outside a ruined abbey.)

Beat 1

CHRISTIAN: What is it, Cyrano? Hurry, please.

CYRANO: If Roxane....

CHRISTIAN: Well?

CYRANO: If Roxane speaks about your letters ... do not make the mistake of showing....

Beat 2

CHRISTIAN: What letters—?

CYRANO: ... showing surprise.

CHRISTIAN: Why? (Impatient.) What letters? I don't understand you.

CYRANO: It's perfectly simple. I—had forgotten it until just now. You have....

CHRISTIAN: Speak quickly! Time is precious with Roxane here.

CYRANO: You've written oftener than you think.

Beat 3

CHRISTIAN: Oh, have I?

CYRANO: I took it upon myself to interpret you, and wrote sometimes ... without....

CHRISTIAN: Without my knowing? We've been blockaded here for months. We're surrounded and besieged, death all around us. How did you manage to send any letters at all?

CYRANO: Before daylight, I managed—

Beat 4

CHRISTIAN: By crossing through enemy lines! Perfectly simple. So, I wrote to her. How often? Twice? Three times?

CYRANO: Oftener.

CHRISTIAN: You'd better tell me, if I'm not to be surprised.

CYRANO: The fact is....

CHRISTIAN: Yes?

CYRANO: I've written to her ...

CHRISTIAN: Go on, Cyrano.

Beat 5

CYRANO: Every day since we've been here. / (Silence. Then they see Roxane crossing toward them.) Hush—not in front of her. (Cyrano exits into tent.)

SCENE 6: FROM *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE* by Sinclair Lewis, adapted by Tony Taccone and Bennett S. Cohen (In an editorial office, Vermont. Enter Buck, silently.)

Beat 1

DOREMUS: All right. What's so urgent that you couldn't talk about it on the phone?

Beat 2

BUCK: It's happening. They've arrested the editor of the Rutland *Herald*. About an hour ago.

DOREMUS: That's not possible. I would've heard.

BUCK: No publicity. I got it from a government worker I know. Have you seen the new "Order of Regulation"? "Any person who's accused of discrediting the State will be immediately interned pending investigation." Words to that effect. They're starting to lock up journalists.

Beat 3

DOREMUS: Well—I'm cooperating with them.

BUCK: So was the editor of the Rutland *Herald*.

DOREMUS: You're overreacting.

BUCK: I'm not. You have to get out.

Beat 4

DOREMUS: Get out—?

BUCK: Leave. Now.

DOREMUS: And go where?

BUCK: Canada. You'll have to go by car. Yesterday you could've flown, but they've stopped all flights—

DOREMUS: Since when?

Beat 5

BUCK: (Checks his watch. The worse news yet.) Since right about now. The *latest* Order of Regulation.

DOREMUS: This is insane. It can't happen here. This is the United States for God's—

Beat 6

BUCK: I have a friend with a Canadian license, Quebec plates—you know Jimmy Gibson. It's snowing too hard for them to care about anyone out on the road tonight. Good thing they haven't closed the borders yet.

DOREMUS: I need time to—I need 'til tomorrow. I have to go to the bank. I have some money in my account—

BUCK: Tomorrow's too late.

DOREMUS: But I'm not guilty of anything. Why would I run?

Beat 7

BUCK: To save your life. That's why.

INSTRUCTIONS for Quick Scene Work—10 Minutes

You have *only ten minutes* to put this scene on its feet. You may stay here in the classroom or find a quieter place in the halls if you wish, but please be back in ten minutes. Time is of the essence—and always in short supply in the theater. But that’s all right: creativity moves very quickly. Directors, please stay on top of the time, and take the lead on all of the following:

1. The director chooses which of his/her two volunteers will play which role.
2. Actors, read through the short scene on your feet. Feel free to move when the inclination strikes you. Directors should watch this instinctive movement carefully, taking note of what she/he liked.
3. Directors: praise anything you saw that you liked, the more the better. (No negative criticism, please.)
4. Still on your feet (stay out of those chairs, please, directors too!), discuss the scene for no more than three or four minutes. Directors, keep the time, and ask any of the following “beautiful questions” in any order—or if you have a better question, feel free; but make sure to engage your actors in a quick discussion of what is at stake in this scene, ethically and emotionally. Remember: actors love BIG IDEAS.
 - A. What is at stake in this scene? What is at stake emotionally? What is at stake physically/in terms of safety or security? What is at stake ethically? Are either of the characters falling short of the ideal, the ethical norm? How so?
 - B. Who are you (your character), exactly? Why are you doing in this scene?
 - C. What is the relationship between the two characters? Friends? Relatives? Enemies?
 - D. How do you feel, emotionally, about each other? Look for BIG EMOTIONS, the bigger the better.
 - E. What do you urgently need to achieve by the end of the scene?
 - F. What obstacles are standing in the way of your getting what you want?
 - G. What are the particulars: time of day, indoors or out, temperature, anyone listening in, etc.?
 - H. Actors, find a beat or a moment that reminds you of something you each have experienced in real life. You don’t have to tell the director about it if it’s too personal (the more personal the better), but take a few seconds, remember it in detail, visualize it, *feel* it. Think: how can you use this “original experience” (Stanislavski) in the scene?
5. Directors: What do you think is/should be the most intense moment, the climax of the scene? What ideas do you have to share with the actors in terms of what you’d like to see in the next run-through, especially ideas for strong physical actions? What did you see the first time around that you want to see again—and perhaps even more of? What is the quietest moment in the scene, a pause, a thin place, a gathering? Etc.
6. Run the scene again. Directors may interrupt this time, but only briefly and only to praise and/or ask for MORE of any underplayed moments/emotions.
7. Briefly discuss (one minute!) how the two run-throughs felt different. Praise what you liked—don’t worry about what you didn’t like. Actors, did you *feel* anything more the second time through? Were there any moments of what seemed like high creativity to you, powerful emotion, inspiration? How do you feel about these characters now? Any other observations? Directors?

TIME’S UP! What would you like to ask or share about this work with the big group (if there is time to do so)?

Production Photographs.

Scene 1. Teiresias and Oedipus (Pittsburg Public Theatre, 2006):



Scene 2. Neoptolemos and Philoctetes (Open Gate Theatre, Dublin, 2012):



Scene 3. Romeo and Balthazar (Cork Shakespeare Theatre, Cork, Ireland, 2016):



Scene 4. Hamlet, the Gravedigger, Yorick's skull (Quintessence Theatre, Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, 2016):



Scene 5. Cyrano and Christian (Old Globe Theatre, San Diego, California, 2009):



Scene 6. Doremus and Buck (Berkley Repertory Theatre, Berkley, California, 2016):

