

# GETTING ON: A BACKSTAGE TOUR



AN OPEN SOURCE WORKSHOP TEMPLATE

by Lois Weaver, Helen Paris and Leslie Hill

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	INTRODUCTION
4	DAY ONE
5	BODY HOO-HAH
6	FANTASY CHARACTERS
7	BACKSTAGE TOUR
8	IMPULSE WRITING
9	STAGE WHISPERS
10	CALL AND RESPONSE
11	ONSTAGE OFFSTAGE
12	PERFORMANCES
14	DAY TWO
15	IMPULSE WRITING
16	MY OWN BACKSTAGE
	+ FINDING THE THRESHOLD
17	THE STAGE OF LIFE
	+ PERFORMANCE
	+ FEEDBACK



# INTRODUCTION

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‘Age fright’ is a feeling of anxiety that most of us experience from time to time as we enter different phases of our lives and readjust notions of our own identities. It can happen at any point in a lifetime, including puberty, leaving home, ‘midlife crisis’ or retirement. Age fright can be compared to the experiences of a performer’s stage fright - the sudden fear that we won’t be able to go on. This workshop uses metaphors of the theatre with its ‘backstage’ and ‘on stage’ aspects to explore confronting fears and performing our selves to the world.

Getting On: A Backstage Tour was developed as a collaboration between Lois Weaver, Leslie Hill and Helen Paris. Lois Weaver is an artist and Professor of Contemporary Performance at Queen Mary University of London. Lois has created performances for over 30 years, and some of her academic and artistic work looks at the development of her own performance methodology. This project furthers her work on ‘age fright’ as a means of using theatrical contexts and language to encourage conversations on the subjects of age and fear. Leslie Hill and Helen Paris are artists and Associate Professors of Performance Making at Stanford University whose work interrogates contemporary culture and politics. This work furthers their interest in sharing personal journeys alongside public research and enquiry. Together Weaver, Hill and Paris conducted a series of two-day creative workshops with groups in London, San Francisco and Palo Alto to create a series of exercises that generate personal yet creative responses to subjects such as fear, aging and identity.

The workshop template below gives detailed descriptions of the exercises undertaken, plus observations and notes from the artists that might be of interest to facilitators working with groups dealing with similar issues. It was conceived as a two-day workshop but the exercises could be rearranged and developed for different time frames. Getting On was initially developed for elderly groups, but can also be used and adapted with a wide range of participants.

# DAY ONE

**Thresholds and Beginnings:** We suggest that the workshop begins with an introduction and general discussion to introduce the facilitator(s) of the workshop and its primary objectives. This threshold conversation should also introduce the notion of starting a new project, entering a new room, doing something you've never done before and allowing for the possibility that doing new things can make people feel uncomfortable. Introduce the idea that it's okay to feel uncertain yet do things anyway. The exercises are designed to get people to think and act impulsively, to dispel the notion that there is a right or wrong way of doing things and to encourage them surprise themselves and each other. The first couple of exercises address fears that people might have about not being performers by confirming that we all we need to start making a performance is to move and make sounds.

**Shake out:** This is a physical warm-up that gets everyone to shake up a little bit, and get solid on their feet. Everyone stands in a circle (make chairs an option if someone has a mobility issue or needs to rest).

**Shake your hands and make a sound. Shake your shoulders gently make a sound. Shake your hips. Find your weight on both feet and bounce a little bit up and down.**

Look for ways to make some shared humor from any awkwardness created by references to various body parts - either from sexual associations or differences in abilities. Try to create a sense that we are all in this together. End with some centering instructions such as:

**Inhale and exhale. Inhale and sigh. Inhale and groan. Inhale and giggle.**

## BODY HOO-HAH



The exercise is basically 'follow the leader'. Go around the circle and each person makes a sound and a movement. As each person makes a movement the whole group repeats it back to them, call and response. Encourage people not to think too much or preempt what movement they might make, and let them know it can be the simplest or the most ridiculous sound and movement. Go three times round the circle so that everyone has a chance to lead three times. This helps people become familiar with the structure and lets them try different movements and sounds each time.

After the third time ask, **Can you remember what you just did?**

People sometimes panic. So reassure them that it doesn't really matter if they remember or not. Say: **I'm going to let you rehearse that (or make it up again if you can't remember) by counting to three – one, two, three...**

Everybody does this together maybe a few times. Tell them to try and remember it so that we can use it later. Then go round again and do another sound and movement, and again ask them to remember it by rehearsing on the count of three. Now everyone should have two sets of memorized sounds and movements. Remind them it doesn't have to be perfect and reassure them that even if their mind doesn't remember, their body will almost always remember what they just did.

Next, ask them to think of something they are afraid of. It's always good to give examples. For example, you might be afraid of death, or spiders. Go around and get everyone to say what it is they are afraid of. Now tell them we are going to make a little performance that has text. On the first set of sound and movement they have remembered, they say their name trying to keep true to the quality of the sound they made and keeping the movement. Encourage them to keep the integrity of the sound and the movement, and just let the name ride on top of that. Next, attach the fear to the second set of sound and movement that they made. So if the fear is of spiders, then get them to do the sound and the movement with the word 'spider' attached. Now everyone has a tiny performance:

'My name is \_\_\_\_\_(performing the sound and movement and saying the name) \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm afraid of \_\_\_\_\_(performing the sound and movement saying the word that describes their fear' \_\_\_\_\_).

# FANTASY CHARACTERS

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Explain that we are going to continue to work with the word they used to express their fear in the first exercise. Then ask: **What might be a characteristic or quality that you could use to confront that fear? Courage? Speed? Invisibility? Can you think of someone who exhibits that quality? Now thinking about that quality, think about who or what kind of person you've always wanted to be. It could be a real person, it could be a superhero, it could be an animal, a fantasy of who you think you'd like to be.**

Using these questions get them to build their own 'superhero'. Facilitators should carefully explain what the term really means, as in someone who has that special quality they have always wanted or admired that might enable them to confront the fear they spoke about in the first exercise. Get them to describe their special power by asking them: **What is this character's name? Do they remind you of someone you have come across, either in any of your readings, or in your life? What do they do for a living? Where do they live?**

Ask any question that would enable them to build a fantasy character based on their desire for a super power to confront fear. The facilitator(s) might want to think of their own fantasy persona as an example. Or you might ask participants to fill in the blanks of sentences such as these:

Being able to \_\_\_\_\_ would help me \_\_\_\_\_.  
I've always wanted to \_\_\_\_\_ or be a \_\_\_\_\_.

Go around the group and ask them to introduce the superhero and invite other members of the group to interview the superheroes as a way of fueling their imagination about these characters.

## BACKSTAGE TOUR

Talk about any of their experiences of the backstage of a theatre—either real or imaginary. Then invite the participants to walk around and explore this idea of a backstage in the space that they are in, which can be a real theater backstage, or a delineated section of the workshop space you are using. Give them some prompts to guide their explorations, such as: **What does this backstage look like? Is it a theater you've been to? Is this a real backstage that you've been to? If not, can you imagine what it is like? What are the scents? What does it sound like? What are the textures? What can you see? Is there any scenery back here? Is it modern or is it old? What artifacts are there? What costumes are there?**

Ask questions that stimulate the imaginative journey and give participants some time to literally move around the space.

Now encourage the participants to imagine that they are leading a Backstage Tour. There are two ways you might do this, depending on your group and the space you are working with:

- Allow each person to take the stage one at a time and give the tour; or
- Invite the whole group on stage to physically take each tour so everyone stays on their feet and follows the tour.

Some people might like having the stage all to themselves. On the other hand, it can be more active and engaging to have the whole group on stage participating.

# IMPULSE WRITING

Pass out paper and pens, or if the budget allows, give each participant their own notebook. Tell them that they will be doing 5-10 minutes of spontaneous or impulsive writing. Assure them that this is not an essay or exam but simply a chance to let the mind connect with the pen and paper. Ask the group to feel like they are writing with their body, to work with stream-of-consciousness, to let the pen lead them and just keep writing whether it makes sense or not. You will give them two prompts to start them off.

**First Prompt: ‘Standing backstage, about to go on, I ...’** Ask them to continue the sentence and keep writing. Take a moment to hear the writing – ask each participant to read some or all of what they have written. Ask them if the writing reminded them of a story they could tell or a particular circumstance they could describe in a bit more detail.

**Second Prompt: ‘When I get there, I will...’** This is the moment for them to consider what it is to embody the fantasy character they created earlier. Invite them to think about what their superhero/fantasy character might do if they were to arrive on stage. Suggest that they imagine a fantasy performance for the character based on something they’ve always wanted to do. Then just write whatever comes into their mind for 5 minutes. Again, take a few minutes to hear the writing. Then ask them to underline a line from the second piece of writing - perhaps it is the juiciest, the line that surprises them the most. Advise them to find something short, something they can remember.

**NOTE:** Facilitators might want to take down a few notes on the information that has been read aloud. It might help you to remember things that you can use later to help them creatively – interesting details, textures, images, etc.

## STAGE WHISPERS

Divide into small groups and get them to work with each other on their writing from the First Prompt: **Standing backstage, about to go on, I ...** Ask them to use that writing -- or a story that the writing reminded them of -- to develop their backstage performance. Once they each have a few seconds of material, have them go and find a place ‘backstage’ where they might deliver that performance. Then ask them to do their performance one at a time from that place. This ‘offstage’ performance is heard, but not necessarily seen. You can demarcate the offstage space with a curtain, or may be have them face upstage – but the key thing is that these little performances/stories are only heard. (Depending on what space you are in, you might have them work with a microphone so that they can whisper and still be heard by the group.) These are the stories of what they are thinking about when they are backstage, so there is freedom in being ‘invisible’ and backstage.

## CALL AND RESPONSE

This exercise is another variation on follow-the-leader, where one of the participants is going to take the line they have underlined from the Second Prompt: ‘**When I get there I will \_\_\_\_\_** (jump with joy), and make it shorter and more active. For instance, ‘I’m going to jump with joy’. Get all the other participants to gather in a group like a Greek Chorus. They are going to follow across the room in support of the soloist. So the soloist says his/her line, ‘I’m going to jump with joy’, and moves across the stage with a sound and a movement, and stops; and then the whole group comes behind him or her, with the same impulse and the same line. The soloist moves across the room with several impulses, several different ways of saying the same line, and the group follows the impulses.

**NOTE:** This exercise encourages them to experiment with saying the line in lots of different ways and to play with the idea of how to put that line inside their body and occupy the stage. The call and response format tends to embolden both soloist and chorus and gets everyone moving around the stage in a fairly unselfconscious and playful way.



## DOING IT IN CHARACTER

The next step is to add costumes! Bring in a dressing-up box. It should contain both costumes and props of different textures and fabrics including diverse cultural and gender possibilities with a few mad and spectacular character items thrown in - something for everyone and enough for all.

Ask them to use the box to ‘dress up’ or chose an object that would help them to convey a characteristic of their fantasy character. Now get each one of them to repeat one or two of their Call and Response impulses, but this time as their fantasy characters. Encourage valor and flamboyance associated with their super powers.

# ONSTAGE OFFSTAGE

Ask them to go ‘backstage’ to the spot where they performed their Stage Whispers. Then indicate the threshold between off-stage and onstage. If you are in a theatre you might actually have a curtain. Explain that each of them will, one at a time, make an entrance as their fantasy character by crossing over that threshold. Encourage them to think:

How will I make my entrance?  
What am I going to do as I step on stage as the fantasy character?  
How might I build on the onstage performance based on that one line used during their Call and Response exercise?  
How can I find a way to end the performance with a strong final line or image?

Once they have all come through the curtain, and the stage is full of fantasy characters, encourage them to think about what they’ve always wanted to do either on or off stage.

Do they want to sing a song, give a speech or fly an airplane?  
How might they do that on stage as their fantasy character?  
How might they build a short performance based on that fantasy?

Ask them all at once -- on then count of 1..2..3 -- to rehearse that fantasy, or at least say it out loud.

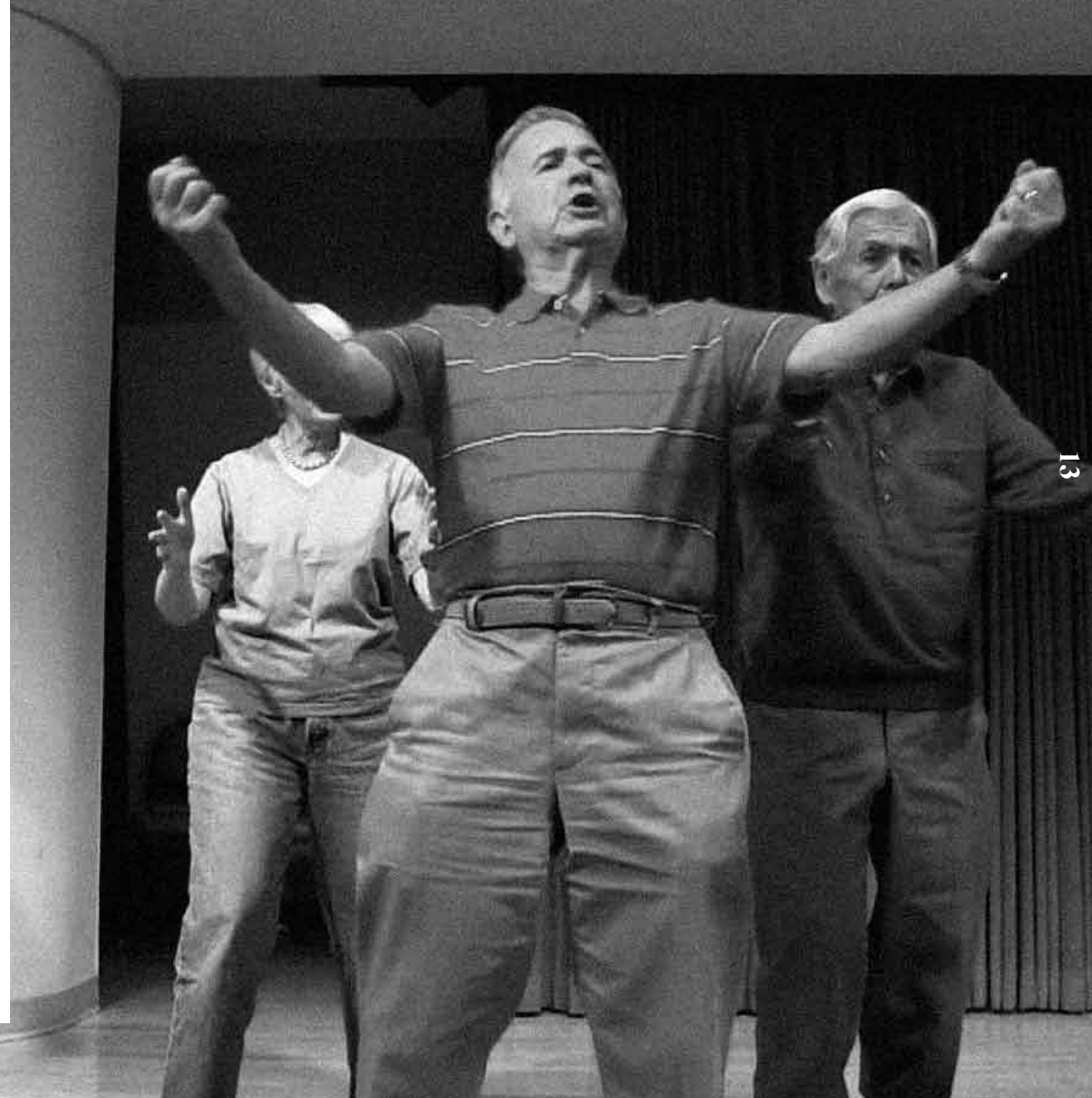
## PERFORMANCES



Now it is time to see each performance. Set everyone up in an audience configuration. One by one, ask each participant to go back stage and to perform their backstage moment or story as themselves and then make their entrance across the threshold and perform their fantasy character by simply saying a line or doing an element of their fantasy performance. After you see all the performances from the group, give them a moment to think about the relationship between the experiences backstage and onstage, and initiate a short discussion about that. Then ask them to think about their onstage performance, and how they might want to improve it.

Could they add music? More costumes? More color or props? Write something extra? Invite them to bring anything into the next session that they might need to develop these performances further.

**NOTE:** Giving them 'homework' to think about how they might enhance their onstage performance will give them some time to reflect on what they have done, and also gives them an incentive to come back; and for some people who feel a little immobilized in the moment, it allows them another opportunity to reflect, to be able to rethink, rewrite, re-edit and reshape what they had done. So even a small amount of homework feels like positive encouragement for these workshops.





# DAY TWO

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**Talking to Yourself in Public:** Everyone sits in a circle and when the facilitator raises one hand, everyone starts talking at the same time. People can talk about whatever comes to mind; but also invite them to talk about what happened in the previous workshop and/or, what they might have thought about in between. When everyone is talking you might hear some people and not others over the sound of your own voice. The rule is that everyone stops when the facilitator puts their hand down. Do this several times in order to warm them up and to get a sense of group sound and participation.

**NOTE:** This allows participants to remember in a way that is playful, but not judged. There is also a sense of timing, when everyone starts and everyone stops. This is a gentle way of starting and remembering. It is in keeping with the previous workshop's focus on association and impulse, without censoring or worrying what's right and what's wrong. Next, invite people to say some of the things about the exercise, or comment on what they thought about the performance workshop last time, or what they thought about in the mean time.

**Body Hoo Hah: (See Day One)** This is the same 'follow the leader' format to get them moving unself-consciously and to get the impulses flowing. Again it is repeated three times around the circle. After the third time, they are asked if they can remember the impulse they just did. Now do a fourth round and ask them to remember that one. Now everyone has two sets of memorized sounds and movements. Rehearsing it all together on the count of three is a good way to get them to remember and perform.

Now ask them to think about something they hope for and go around the circle and ask each one to say aloud their hope. Like on Day One, you are going to make a short performance from these impulses and this hope. Attaching their name to the first impulse and their hope to the second impulse, they will make the following performance:

'My name is \_\_\_\_\_ (performing the sound and movement and saying the name) \_\_\_\_\_ and I hope that \_\_\_\_\_ (performing the sound and movement saying the word that describes their fear' \_\_\_\_\_).

## IMPULSE WRITING

*Again, this is the same set up as on Day One. This time you will follow on from the previous exercise by using the line from their performance prompt:*

**Prompt: I hope that...**

Again, the invitation is to write spontaneously and not censor themselves. They don't have to write full sentences – it might work as a list. For instance, I hope that tomorrow will come; I hope that we don't go to war; I hope that my clothes will fit in a couple months. Encourage them to include examples of the grand as well as the mundane hopes. Keep them going for 3 to 5 minutes.

Hear some or all of the writing from each participant. Out of that conversation, ask them three questions:

**Where is that place where you feel hopeful? Where are you before you move out into the world? What is your personal backstage? What are those backstage areas where you're standing in hope, wondering what it is going to be like on the other side?**

## MY OWN BACKSTAGE

The next exercise is to get everyone to think about the 'backstage' in their own lives.

**Is it their bathroom mirror? Their car? Their morning coffee? The door to the community room?**

Have them walk around in the same space that you used for their backstage explorations on Day One. Ask them to imagine their personal backstage, screened against the architecture of their imagined theatre backstage from the first session. There is no wrong way to do it – they can take up as little space or as much space as they want to, mapping their imaginings and memories onto the real available space. Allow them the time to domesticate this personal space, encouraging them to be as detailed as possible about the colors, the smells, the sounds and the shape of the room. Then ask them, one at a time, to take the group on a tour of this personal backstage. As with the first backstage tour, you can

- Allow each person to take stage one at a time and give the tour; or
- Invite the whole group on stage to physically take each tour so everyone stays on their feet and follows the tour.

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## FINDING THE THRESHOLD

Ask them to think about that exact moment when they cross from their own personal backstage into the world – whether they're stepping out to the street, or getting out of bed – and get them to walk around and find a space that for them feels like the threshold between their own backstage and the real world. Once everyone has found a space, then all together make sound and a movement that expresses that personal threshold. Have them repeat the sound and movement and hold it in that position. Now have everyone relax and, one at a time, repeat the sound and movement while saying this line from the earlier exercise:

**When I get there, I will \_\_\_\_\_**

Encourage them to fill in the blanks with some of their hopes or with some ideas about their fantasy performances.

## THIS STAGE OF LIFE

Pair them up and invite them to discuss with their partners how they might make a short performance that consists of their own backstage story, the moment when they are about to step across the threshold into their life and into an onstage performance of their version of their fantasy performance in their fantasy character. You may pair them up depending on the knowledge you may have about what they have shared till now. You might thematically group people, or you may want to group them in terms of whether they know each other. Encourage them at that point to use the fantasy character at any point if that helps them to perform. Get them to work in groups to help each other create an off-stage performance, which gets them over their threshold into their onstage fantasy.

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## PERFORMANCE

Set up the space for the performance --perhaps even more formally than on Day One -- to give the feeling of a special occasion. You might also want to video tape the performances if the participants give their permission (but if so, be aware that they may want to be able to see playback or have a copy). Give them time to prepare, create a running order and perhaps ask one of them to be the MC. An MC is not necessary but adds to the fun. Invite them one at a time to present their prepared performance. Move swiftly between them so that there is less chance of conversation that might verge on critique.

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## FEEDBACK

At the end, gather everyone in a circle and have a general conversation about the whole experience of both workshops. Try to steer conversations away from what was good or bad about the performance and toward how the experience made them think about issues of fear and aging.

Dear workshop leaders,

You may come prepared for a day based on these templates, but it may not work out this way. There might be many unforeseen circumstances in terms of space, time or attendance. If you have experience working with community groups, you'll already know that a facilitator has to go with those uncertain elements with as much grace as possible. Make accommodation for people who might want to join in later, without having attended the first workshop, or even for those who were around the first day but did not make preparations for the second session. Also, you may want to adjust the amount of time you spend on the concept of 'age fright' in relation to stage fright, as there may be some resistance, especially if you are working with elders. Some people justifiably feel that elders are stereotyped and do not want to work directly with the subject of aging. Focusing on the idea of backstage is enough to allow all the exercises to be successful if people seem wary when discussions of age come up. Trust that giving people the opportunity to perform identities they wouldn't necessarily otherwise embody has its own benefits, and one need not employ the metaphor of stage-fright as age-fright. Believe in the creative authenticity of each of these exercises. Being creative together is enough.

Best,  
Lois, Helen and Leslie



PHOTO: HUGO GLENDINNING



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