

WHAT-TO DO TO HOST A FRUITFUL WORK-IN-PROGRESS SHOWING

Summary: This WHAT-TO offers suggestions on how to avoid the pitfalls of people feeling awkward about doing or watching roughly sketched material and then giving or receiving feedback on it.

Disclaimer: The writers of this WHAT-TO recently spent time in residence at the University of Idaho working on a new physical comedy. Professor Matt Foss served as our ensemble's Outside Eye - we improvised and wrote and he responded to our work and offered ideas about both process and content based on induction rather than imposition. At the end of our residency, we invited Foss' students to come to a work-in-progress showing. This article sums up our efforts. Please see the article's end for thoughts on applying these tactics to an audience not composed of college theatre nerds (my people!) who know each other.

1. Play Pre-showing Music

A showing isn't an official show, but that doesn't mean you can't set the mood as people arrive.



Meet the eWikiWHAT-TO Contributors:

We are Matt Chapman, Sarah Petersiel and Josh Matthews - the Co-Artistic-Directors of [Under the Table](#) - an Oakland and Brooklyn-based ensemble making physical comedies. Our latest show is about a trio of trouble-prone thieves who've set their sights on a highly (over)valued painting.



This is us from another show.

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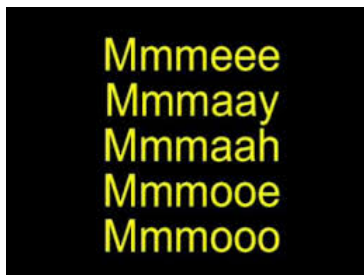
2. Play Warm-up Games

Thank people for turning up, make a few brief introductions, and then ask people to stand. From here, facilitate a few low-focus games to warm up the room and begin introducing aspects of your show.

Note: Make sure your audience knows in advance this'll be part of their evening. We told people to come dressed ready to move.

We played Chaos Tag and then facilitated an exercise where everybody pretended to be badasses moving in slow motion. Of note, the first of the five vignettes we later showed featured us pretending to be badasses moving in slow motion, thereby putting us in direct league with our audience.

*Chaos Tag is Tag where all players are It. At first if you get tagged you squat for ten seconds and then get back in the game. Later if you get tagged you perform a ten second death scene and then get back in the game. Here's [another description](#) of how to play.



3. Transition Back to Seats

Politely ask people to sit.

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4. Show the People What You've Made Using the Tools of Context, Questions and Titles

As was jump-started by the warm-up games, you can enlist the audience as collaborators by continuing to speak directly to them and arming them with the info needed to best watch and later respond to your work.

We had 5 short, disconnected vignettes to show our audience. We began each one by:

- Sharing any necessary info on given circumstances

Ex: In this pass, we are introduced to - or perhaps further get to know - our trio of trouble-prone art thieves.

- Posing 1-2 questions for the audiences to keep in mind while watching. We asked questions that would provide information about clarity as well as give us new ideas.

Ex: What relationship dynamics do you see at play/what relationship dynamics do you see the potential for us to draw out further? If this pass were to become a recurring bit, any ideas for fun permutations?

- Titling the piece and writing it on a title card and showing that to the audience

Ex: Here Comes Trouble...Slowly.



Note: We tried to strike a balance between giving our audience sufficient context while not over-explaining. We needed them to have a good grasp of the given circumstances and our intentions to be able to make sense of what they were seeing and envision its potential. At the same time, providing too much information would have stopped them from being able to answer our questions about whether our execution of certain aspects was clear.

5. Host a Jam Session

In the past, we have sometimes found post-showing feedback sessions to be stilted. If what you show is fragmented (eg, five disconnected vignettes), your audience may have trouble recalling what they saw. Also, they may feel forced to give compliments or say smart things. Here's what we did to make it feel more like we were all in the writer's room together:

- Used the title card to refer to which vignette we wanted people to focus on. (We went in order.)
- Asked them to close their eyes and visualize the vignette.
- Asked them to call out words or phrases that described the vignette - observations, not opinions.
- Restated the questions associated with that

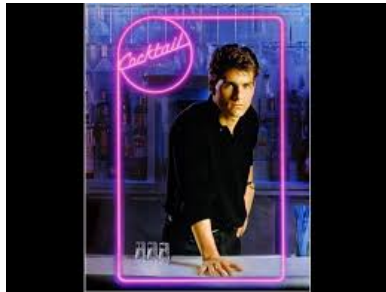
vignette we had inserted during our performance.

- Let the conversation fly! Since many of the questions were geared towards "What could be fun to add to this scene?", we fell easily into brainstorming as a group. And because our audience had eyes and brain fresher to the material than us, they gave us LOTS of great ideas. In short, we communed!



6. Say Thank You and Good Night!

We thanked everyone for coming, hung around to chat and answer questions and then headed to the bar.



Addendum: WHAT-TO maybe do if your audience is a group on less familiar terms with each other and the theatre:

1. Warm-ups: You could still facilitate some real theatre games - with advance warning, it'd give secular folk the option to try something new...or wait for another opportunity to support your work. Or, there are games that are even more low-focus

and physical than Chaos Tag and the movement exploration we did - like show-themed Whoosh. Writing and crafting activities could be another way in - eg, people could respond to show-related prompts on large post-its or make show-related costume pieces to wear while watching your roughly-sketched material.

2. Feedback: Chiming in to answer questions can be intimidating in front of a group of strangers. In which case you could use Turn and Talk - asking people to turn to 1-2 of their neighbors to talk about a question before returning to the whole group to share thoughts. Or, the performers could split the larger group into smaller groups and each facilitate a group and then report back with ideas.

Huge thanks to NET for providing us with the support to venture to Moscow, move our project forward, and make an Outside Eye match!