



AATE + Westtown School

Theater Anywhere: A Cookbook of Activities

Alex Ates interviewing Lisa D'Amour + Katie Pearl

Friday, August 7, 2020, 9:30a Eastern.

>> Alex Ates: Hi, everyone! My name is Alex Ates from Westtown, and today I'm speaking with Katie Pearl and Lisa D'Amour. Thank you both so much for being here—it's really an honor. And I'm so excited to hear about your recipe!

>> Lisa D'Amour: Great! We're excited to share it with you. So, when PearlDamour devises a show—PearlDamour is our theater company—we often rely as much on objects, space, and sound as we do on characters and the words to get a story or a story-moment across. We're interested in how content can happen just from layering a range of elements together.

>> Katie Pearl: Right! And so, part of our process is setting up situations where we can surprise ourselves. So, this recipe that we're going to do for you, and give you today, is designed to help students learn how to incorporate the elements of surprise into their own making. It's a great tool! So, we'll be devising a 30 to 60-second scene, or performance moment, that can be activated on Zoom and that is called "The Underdog Hero."

>> Lisa: So, the first step can take about five minutes. Having too many options can bog you down, so we want them to take five minutes to gather and identify just really the first three everyday handheld objects that you have around your room. They can be any objects. Like, I could decide I was really interested in this chicken broth, or, maybe this pencil sharpener.

>> Katie: Here's a sticky note pad.

>> Lisa: And if you'll notice some of these have a little bit of a possibility of transforming. They don't have to, but it can be fun if

they can transform like a lipstick. So, once you choose those objects make sure that one of the objects is the same among the students. So, everyone could have a pair of scissors or everyone can have a key. The teacher or the class can decide what that is. You will also want a specific light source you can turn on and off like an overhead light or pulling a window shade open or shut, or clicking a lamp. And then one micro-stage that you choose.

>> Katie: And I have an example (cross-talk). So, for example, I might choose this pillow as my micro-stage. And the students will just organize their screen so they can work on the micro-stage, and everybody can see and they can see themselves as they work.

>> Lisa: And you can work behind it or even to the side of it—whatever feels comfortable to you.

>> Katie: Great, okay, so once everybody's gathered their ingredients: objects, light, little micro-stage, it's time to explore and discover the qualities of each of these objects. So, this is also going to take about five minutes to explore, because there are five things we're exploring: three objects, a light, and a stage. And then, five minutes to share back. So, what I suggest is that you have the students choose one of their objects, you time it for 60 seconds, keep yourself, your volume up but your students on mute, so that everybody can go crazy but they can still hear you. So, when I say go, as the teacher, "go," your job is to explore the object. So, what does it sound like? What does it move like? What does it feel like? How can it transform? And as they are exploring in all the different ways that they can imagine, you're side-coaching, that's why your volume stays up, so you're encouraging them to go farther—"Pick up your next object, what sound can it make? How does gravity interact with it? How does it feel on your body? What's the texture?" When you get your stage, what are the edges of it? What's the topography? How can things move on it? So, you're just encouraging a wild moment of exploration. You're thoroughly excavating each of these objects.

>> Alex: Oh that's cool.

>> Katie: And then after everybody's explored the objects, just have your students share back one thing they discovered that they really, that surprised or delighted them. So if I were the student, I might say, "Oh, I loved how I could take a piece a paper off and crinkle it up and then drop it through the screen and it disappears."

>> Lisa: And what's great about that, Katie, is the crinkly sound of that post-it was awesome. And I could tell that from my side, but not from yours, so there might be a way for students to share back things that the creator hasn't even realized themselves.

>> Katie: Oh, that's great! That's great. Good collaboration!

>> Lisa: Are we ready for the next step?

>> Alex: Let's do it.

>> Lisa: Okay, the next step is devising which can take about five minutes as well. It's time to make, to create, this 30-second wordless moment. And the theme or the title of this moment is: "The Underdog Hero Meets Their Match and Grows Huge." So your scene must take advantage of the qualities of the micro-site and incorporate the following things: the object that everyone has in common is the protagonist, that is the underdog hero. Use at least two objects. The underdog hero plus your other two objects; A change in lighting; A change in scale from small to big or big to small; One shift in proximity to the computer camera, really close or really, really, really far; A moment of music or sound, this can come from the objects or it can be some layered sound that you play on your computer or phone; and then, one physical transformation of one of the objects, like when Katie was playing with the post-it note or when I was playing with the lip-stick. So those are the ingredients that you try to give the students to accomplish in this short scene.

>> Katie: And then, after five minutes—we don't want to think too much—we want to work with super fast brains, let the objects and the site really talk to each other and talk with us—then we share back. So this will take as long as the number of students that you're working with. But take turns sharing. Notice how the bones of the story, the bones of the exercise are the same, each piece is going to change according to the ingredients they use and how they're layered together. So, you might want to talk as a group about how tone, or mood, or character, is impacted by the qualities of the objects chosen to tell the stories.

>> Alex: Oh wow. That's great. I love how kinesthetic this is.

>> Katie: Yeah.

>> Alex: I'm wondering are there variations that people can apply, considering that there are so many different levers of this, like, are there ways to change it up a little?

>> Lisa: Oh sure! Yeah. One thing, you know, the ingredients that we give as the instructions for the scene, there are a lot of them because we don't want people to think too much. We want people to—I mean—we don't mean don't be creative, but we want people to make quick decisions. However, if you as a teacher, want to swap out an ingredient with another one, you should feel free to do that. Whatever's going to work for your class.

Another thing you could try is after making the individual pieces, you could put three to four students together to create longer Underdog Hero journeys. You could have the Underdog Hero travel from one Zoom screen to the next, meaning the new scissors or the new post-it note takes over, and they can overcome their match again, and again, and again. And the students should collaborate and adjust, so their sequences have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

>> Katie: Another modification is that you can add some random text—so this is another kind of accident. So, have your students open up a book or a play that's in their vicinity at random, and maybe have them send a line of text to somebody else in the class in a private chat or something so it stays kind of secret, and then re-present the scene and, this time, each student has to add that line of text in. Who says it? What character? How do they say it? When will it happen in the scene? And you can really enjoy the serendipity of the random combinations of the text in action.

>> Lisa: And then another idea would be to create a heightened moment, well this is a heightened moment for your Underdog Hero, so you could—if you want to try to explore some writing of dialogue, you could create five or six lines of dialogue between the Underdog Hero and one of the objects—it could be as simple as about breakfast food or current events. It could be a lover's quarrel. But you can try speaking the dialogue with different dynamics or different moments in the scene, without even changing the original action. So, you can explore what adds tension, what could create some humor, all sorts of things, just by adding dialogue that you write.

>> Alex: Oh that's great! Katie Pearl, Lisa D'Amour, thank you so much for this epic recipe. I wish you both well in these times and thanks again for joining us.

>> Katie: Thanks for having us. It was fun.

>> Lisa: Yes, great to be here. Thank you.