


# CREATING AN ENSEMBLE

Putting on a play is a team effort, and everyone on the team has a job to do. Even outstanding actors who really shine onstage and might be described as the stars of the show wouldn't shine so brightly without the hard work and support of everyone else involved in the production. The entire cast of the play *God of Carnage* received Tony nominations for lead actor/actress. Since there were only four actors in the play, nominating all four was an exceptional turn of events in modern theater. (The play is about two couples whose sons have gotten into a playground scuffle. The parents meet in order to figure out how to deal with the boys. Their attempt to have a polite, civilized discussion eventually breaks down as the more aggressive sides of their personalities begin to emerge.) After the cast was nominated, Jeff Daniels, one of the actors, said, "When it comes to success in acting, people often think of the sole actor, the 'I'm ready for my close-up' sense of me, me, me," he said. "But in our play and others this season, the interdependence of the actors is key."

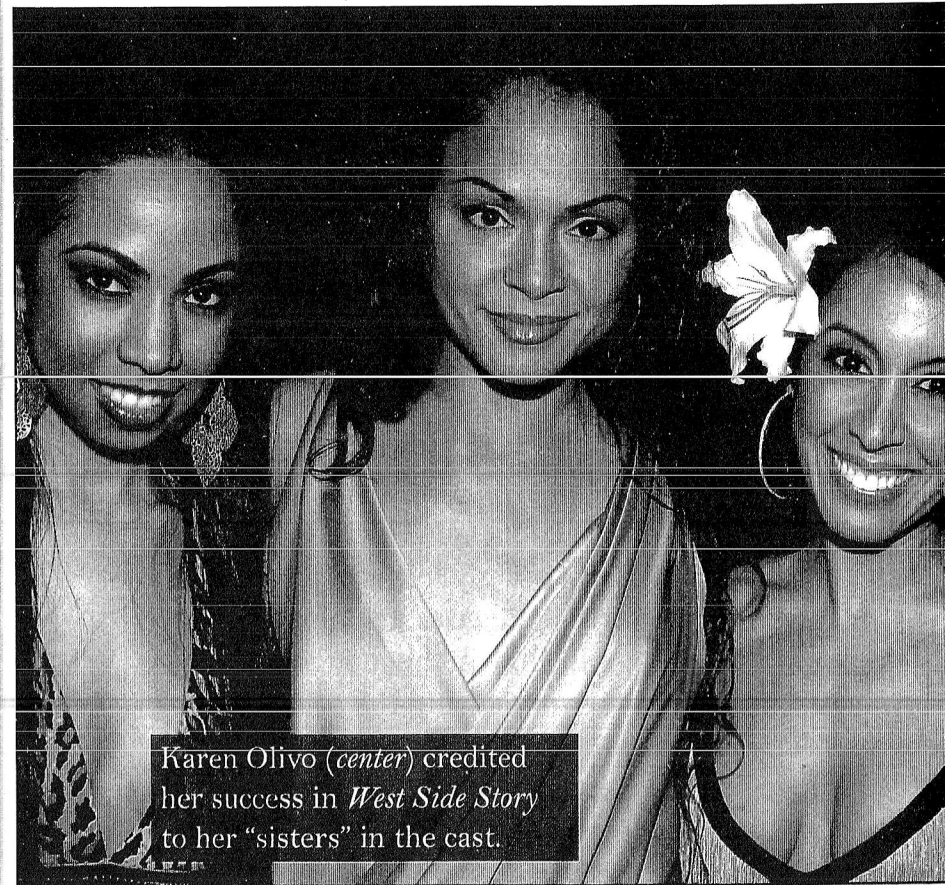


Elton John (in sunglasses)  
created the music for *Billy  
Elliot the Musical*.

The play *Billy Elliot the Musical* tells the story of a boy in a mining town in the North of England. The play is based on the movie *Billy Elliot*, which came out in 2000. In both cases, Billy discovers his talent for dancing and aspires to learn ballet, something his father, a coal miner, can't accept. In the Broadway production, three young actors took turns playing the part of Billy Elliot. Instead of becoming rivals, the boys became close friends who attributed their success to the support they gave each other. After all three were jointly awarded a best actor prize, Kiril Kulish, one of the winners, said, "Playing Billy would be impossible for me if there weren't the other Billys."

His fellow actor Trent Kowalik agreed: "We don't actually see each other that much now, because we have different performances. But we learned from each other's strengths in rehearsals. And it's really good to get and give moral support to each other." Giving and receiving moral support is an important part of teamwork, without which the challenging work of putting on a play would have less chance of succeeding.

In another musical—*West Side Story*—two rival teenage gangs, the Sharks and the Jets, compete for dominance in New York City. The members of the Jets, led by Tony, are all white; the Sharks, led by Bernardo, are Puerto Rican. Karen Olivo, the actress who played Anita, Bernardo's sister, in a 2009 Broadway production, credited the success of her performance with the support she received from the other girls in the gang. "They're like my little sisters," she said. "Several of them haven't done a whole lot of shows before. They sometimes ask me,



Karen Olivo (center) credited her success in *West Side Story* to her "sisters" in the cast.

'How do we fill out this form?' or 'What do we do here?'"

Sometimes directors will go to great lengths to get the kind of rapport they're looking for among their actors. For example, Richard Linklater, writer-director of the 2016 movie *Everybody Wants Some!!*, wanted his actors to experience a close, brotherly feeling toward each other. In the movie, they play college baseball teammates who get together during the weekend before the new semester begins. To achieve the feeling he was going after, he "required

the actors to live together for two and a half weeks before rehearsals started. They established relationships while staying in a cabin on his Texas ranch, which carried over to present-day."

Sharing a Texas ranch wasn't the only requirement the actors had to meet before filming began; they also had to play baseball, like a real team, during the actual rehearsal period.

Directors and drama teachers can employ a range of games and exercises to help build teamwork and foster a collaborative spirit among the students and/or actors. Lorraine Thompson is an actress and the head of the Drama Department at Athens Academy in Georgia. She believes strongly in getting her acting students to work together as a team. And her efforts are paying off. One of the judges who evaluated her students' work during the performances of one-act plays made the following comment after the competition: "I want to start by saying that I have never seen such amazing **ensemble** work! I was watching so much more than a play about a town. I was watching a [real] town. Well done!"

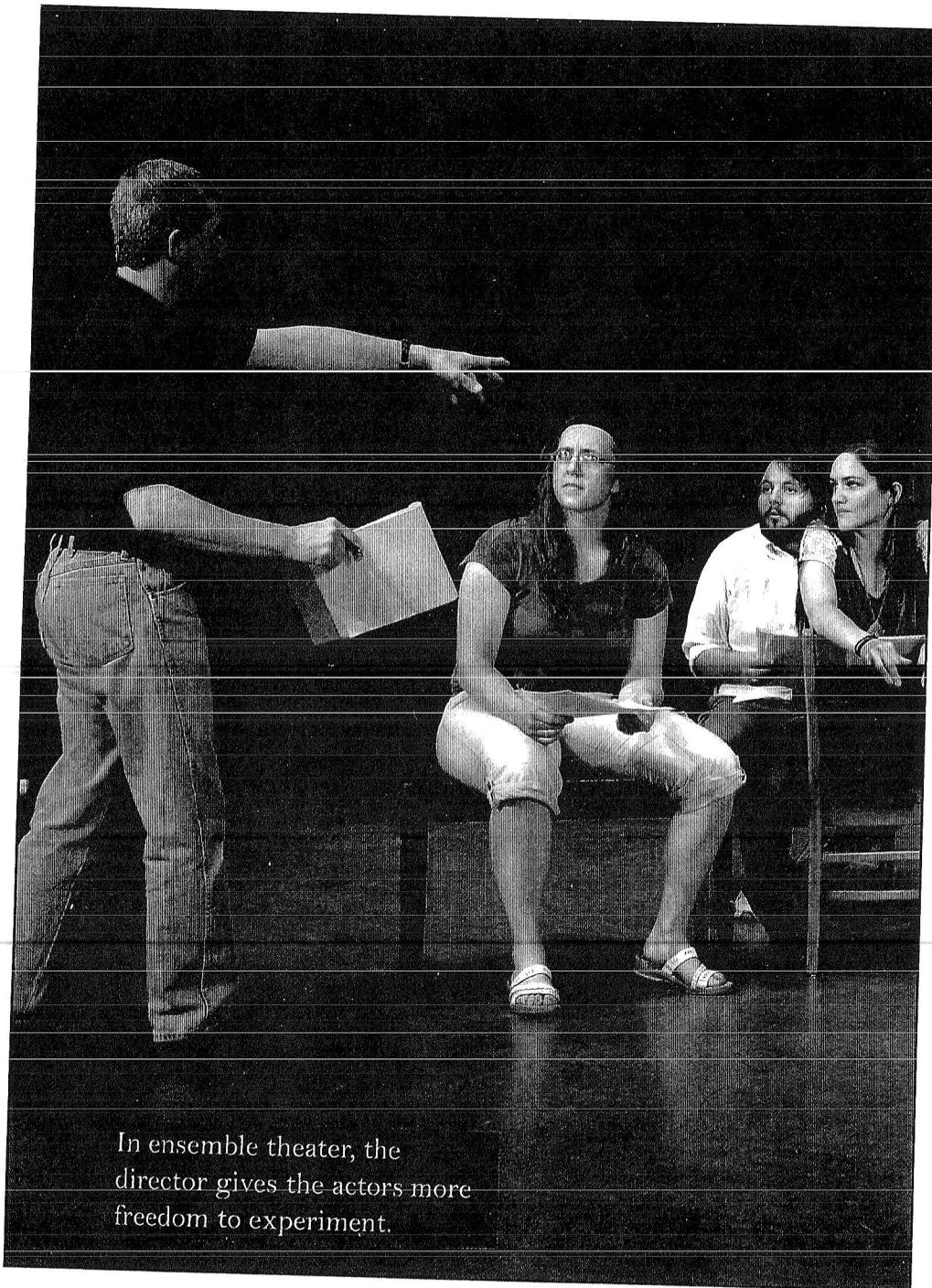
Thompson's students were thrilled. "High fives and hugs rippled throughout the room. As far as they were concerned, they had already received the highest praise they could. They had reached their goal of [creating an] ensemble."

In theater, an ensemble is not the same as a cast of players. In an ensemble, the actors are still part of a team striving toward the same goal, but they are also working more closely with the director to generate ideas for staging, character development,

and the overall shape of the play. Moreover, in an ensemble, there is no star. Every performer, whatever their role happens to be, is expected to work at their highest level. Sanford Robbins, head of the University of Delaware's theater department, compares ensemble work to sports: "It's rare that an all-star team is as good as a really good regular team, even though you may pick the best players. In ensemble acting, there's a cohesion and harmony in the way the roles are played ... and the sum is more powerful than the parts."

Creating an ensemble is not easy. It takes teamwork, commitment to the process, and discipline. It's one thing to tell actors "There are no small parts, only small players," or "You're all equal parts of one whole." But to make this a reality, cast members must be willing to work together and encourage each other to do their best. Otherwise, there's a risk that conflict, frustration, and tension may result, and these things can slow down the work and compromise the quality of the production. Putting a show together can be an immensely rewarding experience for everyone involved. It can also be stressful, especially if cast members don't get along or if their personal schedules conflict with the production schedule. Maybe some of the actors in a student production, for example, have competing demands on their time and have to miss rehearsals. Technical problems can also cause stress and strain and consequently gnaw away at the spirit of teamwork. Suppose the set designers are working behind schedule; opening night is coming, and the





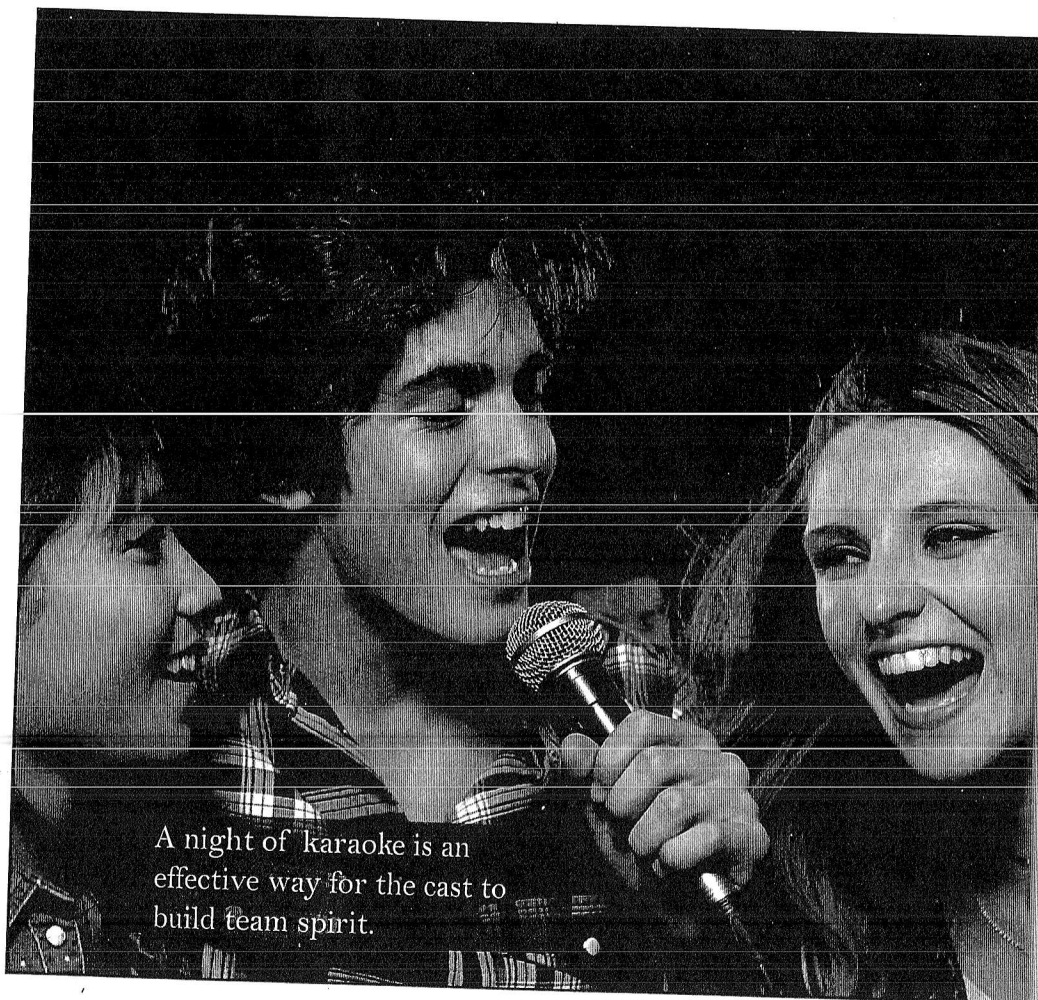
In ensemble theater, the director gives the actors more freedom to experiment.

main set pieces are still under construction. The actors need to rehearse with a completed set. The director is frustrated because only part of the set is available, and those frustrations affect the actors, who start griping about one thing or another.

Another example of a stressful situation that can impact teamwork is the presence of one or more **prima donnas** in the cast. These are actors who view themselves as indispensable and believe their talent is far superior to anyone else's. For them, the play is mainly a vehicle to showcase their star power to an adoring audience. Such individuals may find it difficult to work as part of a team and to share the spotlight with their fellow actors.

Of course, in any theatrical production, actors are not only working with other actors; they are also interacting with members of the technical crew, the director, the stage manager(s), and whoever is in charge of publicity. All of these relationships require a willingness to treat others with respect and to see them as partners in the creation of a theatrical experience. In some respects, a successful play is like a smoothly running machine in which all the parts are meshing with each other without undue friction. The players make up one of the parts. They can't do their job without the support they receive from the people responsible for sound and lighting, set design, and costumes and makeup.

At various points in the rehearsal process, actors will need to meet with the costumer to have measurements taken for whatever outfits they will be wearing in the play. The person in charge of sound



A night of karaoke is an effective way for the cast to build team spirit.

will need to adjust sound levels for actors wearing microphones. In plays with specific sound effects, the actors will need to anticipate sound cues and adjust the timing of their lines accordingly. If the script calls for a train whistle at a particular moment in the play, actors onstage may need to pause briefly so the sound of the whistle is audible and not muffled by the dialogue.

Some productions use highly complex lighting cues (and sound cues too!) that are programmed in a computer. Even with less complex lighting directions, actors will need to know where the light is coming from onstage and where they need to be in order to be properly illuminated. For example, a production of William Shakespeare's romantic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* may require Juliet to appear in a soft blue light during a **soliloquy**. The actress playing Juliet had better know where she's supposed to stand when the blue accent light appears. If she doesn't, then the audience may hear her words but have a hard time seeing her.

## Team-Building Activities for Actors

Ideally, team building is about creating a community of individuals, each of whom feels empowered to work at his or her highest level. In the process of becoming a community, cast members will learn to support their fellow performers, improve their ability to communicate effectively, become better listeners, and express empathy when appropriate. Here are some ways of building a community.

### 1. Character Background

Each actor completes a worksheet that provides details about the character he or she is playing. The worksheet could include such elements as name, age, daily routine, relationships with other characters, and major goal(s). During the rehearsal

period, actors can share the information on their worksheets; this way, the entire cast has a clearer picture of each other's characters.

## **2. Getting to Know You (sort of like "speed dating")**

Actors form two groups of equal size—A and B. Each group sits in a line directly opposite the other group. Each pair of opposing actors has one minute to share something about the characters they're playing.

When time is called, group B moves down one place. The person at the end of the group B line moves to the beginning of the line and introduces himself or herself to the person at the start of group A. The sharing continues until all actors in both groups have had a chance to introduce their character.

## **3. All Hands on Deck!**

In this team-building activity, the entire cast works together to complete a project or participate in an activity, preferably one connected with some aspect of the play. Suppose a group of middle school students is putting on a play about Victor Frankenstein, the obsessed scientist who dreams of creating life and succeeds in creating a monster. To build team spirit, the director might provide a collection of found objects and let the actors work together to assemble the objects into a large, puppet-like character or creature that suggests Frankenstein's monster.

*Emma!*, a musical comedy by Eric Price, concerns a matchmaking high school senior (Emma) who hopes to find a boyfriend for her shy sophomore friend, Harriet. The play features a selection of tunes from 1960s girl groups and contemporary solo performers like Katy Perry and Avril Lavigne. For a group project, cast members could take part in an informal "sing-a-long" of popular tunes.

For the production of *Quilters*, a musical about a mother and six other women (called her daughters) living during the pioneer era of American history, the director gave the actors pieces of fabric from the costumes they would wear in the show. They sewed the pieces together to make a quilt, which was put on sale in the theater lobby. At the end of the run, the cast presented the quilt to the director in recognition of all she had given to them.