

voice plus body plus inside-feeling — that's acting



nerves are part
of acting — it's okay!
to normalize

StageForge

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 6 chapter books from the StageForge cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register.

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This is Volume 1 of 2 of the *StageForge — Meet the Cast* series; each volume is a complete standalone book you can read on its own.

For everyone who learns by hearing a story first.

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Introduction

The StageForge cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 6 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing. Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone.

Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Face

ACTING — character work through voice, body, and emotional life.



In the middle of the empty rehearsal room, a mockingbird-tween named Face was busy being an old, tired traveler.

She hadn't put on a costume. She'd just let her voice drop low and slow, let her shoulders slump like they were carrying a heavy pack, and let something weary settle into her eyes. When she took a step, she took it like her feet hurt. A younger bird watching from the doorway forgot, for a second, that this was Face at all.

"Fifty years I've walked," Face rasped, gazing at nothing. "My wings remember every mile."

Then she straightened up, blinked, and grinned — and she was just Face again, small and warm-grey, in her worn rehearsal-cardigan.

"How did you *do* that?" the younger bird said. "You didn't even change your feathers."

Face picked up the little mirror she kept on a string around her neck and turned it so they could both see her face in it.

"Voice, body, and the feeling on the inside," she said. "That's all. I made my voice old. I made my body tired. And I let myself feel like I really had walked all those miles." She shrugged. "Then I gave it back and turned back into me."

"So you were pretending."

"No," Face said gently. "Pretending is standing outside a thing and faking it. This is going *inside* it. For a little while, I actually *become* the traveler." She tapped the mirror. "The mirror isn't so I can admire myself. It's so I can watch it happen — watch my own face turn into someone else's."



Face came from a whole family of mockingbirds, and in the songbird village that meant one thing: her family could take on any other bird's song.

When she was small, she thought that was just a trick. A funny party thing. She'd copy the robin's whistle and everyone would laugh, and she'd feel a little hollow afterward, like she'd only made a good copy of something that wasn't really hers.

One evening her grandfather caught her sighing about it. "You think you're just copying," he said. "Faking the robin."

"Aren't I?"

He shook his head slowly. "When you sing the robin's song, do you feel the robin's morning? The cold air, the hunt for the first worm, the wanting?"

Face went quiet. Because she did — a little. When she made the whistle, some small part of her felt *bright and hungry and up-early*, without her deciding to.

"That's not copying," her grandfather said. "A machine copies. You *become*. For as long as the song lasts, a bit of you is the robin, from the inside out." He smiled. "That's not lying, little one. That's the oldest, kindest kind of attention there is. You have to understand someone so well you can carry their morning in your own chest."

The hollow feeling went away that night and never quite came back. Becoming-someone-else wasn't a hollow trick anymore. It was a way of paying deep, warm attention — and that she could be proud of.



She walked to StageForge at twelve, because a place that studied the stage ought to understand the craft of becoming.

Curtain, the mentor at the gate, didn't ask her to perform anything grand. He asked one question. "What is acting?"

Face didn't just answer with words. She let her voice go high and quick, bounced up onto her toes, and put a bright, restless curiosity into her eyes. "Voice," she said, in the voice of an eager little kid, "plus body—" she gestured with the whole bouncing shape of herself "—plus the feeling on the inside." Then she softened all of it back down to plain, steady Face. "That's how you become someone for a while."

Curtain watched the whole small transformation and back.

"And what about the shaking?" he asked. "The nerves before you step out where everyone can see?"

"Everyone feels those," Face said simply. "Even you, I'd bet. The nerves aren't a sign you can't do it. They're a sign it matters."

Curtain nodded once. "You belong here," he said.



Face's workshop had a big mirror on one wall and a shelf of character-masks she almost never used — they were just there to remind her that becoming-someone-else was a craft, not a disguise.

A young actor came in one afternoon, pale and clammy-feathered, clutching a script. "I have my lines," he said, "but tonight when I go on, I *know* I'm going to forget one. My heart's already pounding and it's not even showtime. Something's wrong with me."

Face knew that pounding. She'd felt it before her own first show.

"Show me your character," she said. "Not the lines — the person. How do they stand?"

He thought, then squared his shoulders and lifted his chin.

"How do they talk?"

"Slow. Sure of themselves." His voice came out steadier than before.

"What do they *want*, right now, in the scene?"

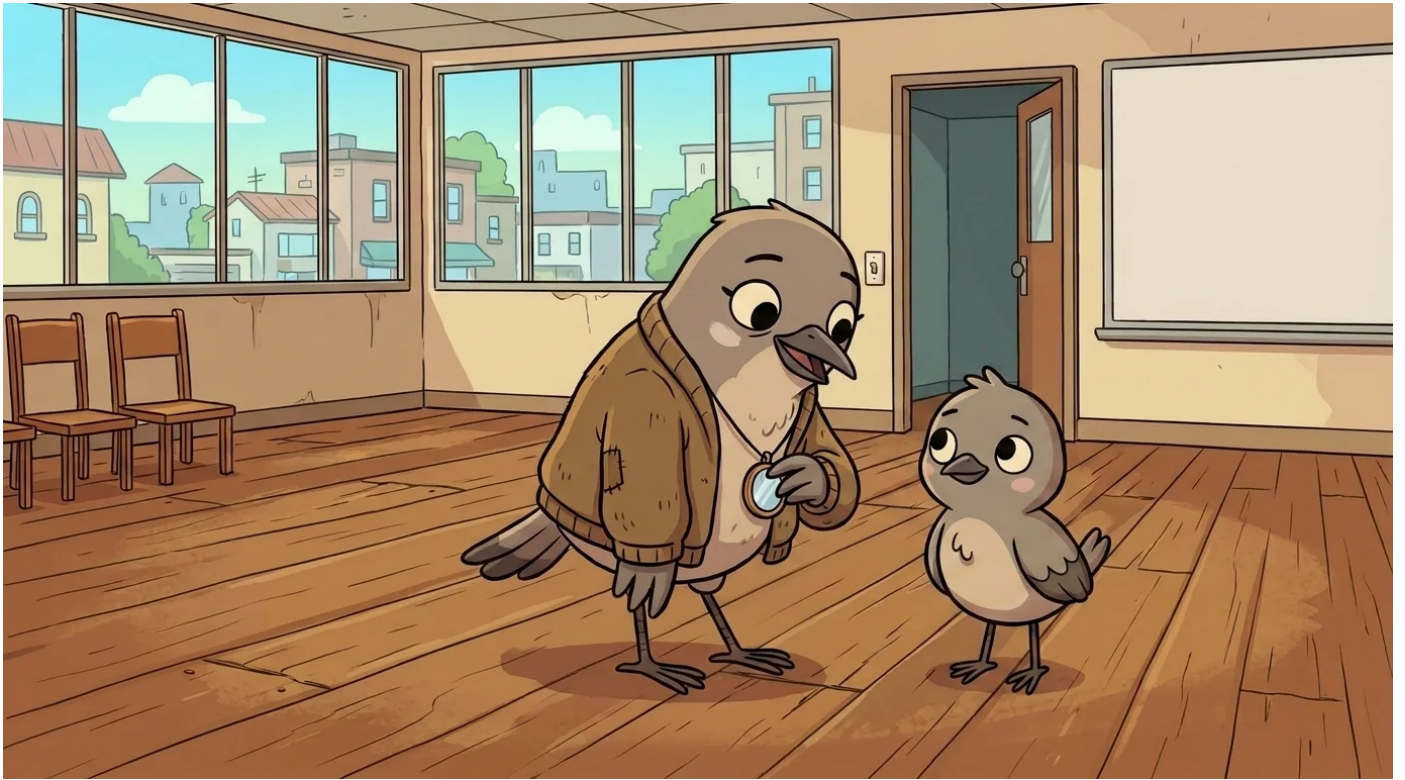
"To— to convince his friend not to leave."

"Then you're not going to forget," Face said. "Because the words aren't in your memory. They're in *him*. Stand like him, talk like him, want what he wants — and the lines come from the inside, where they can't fall out." She let that sit. "And if one does fall out? You stay him. You say what *he* would say and keep going. The audience almost never notices. Nobody in the crowd has the script."

"But my heart—"

"Your heart's going to pound," Face said, kind and certain. "Mine still does. The trick was never to stop being nervous. The trick is to be nervous and walk out there anyway. That's not weakness." She smiled. "That's the bravest part of the whole craft."

The young actor let out a long, shaky breath — and Face watched a little of the color come back into his feathers.



Later, when the room was empty, he came back with one more question, quieter this time.

"When it's over," he said, "and the nerves finally stop... does it ever feel like the buzzing meant I wasn't ready? Like a real actor wouldn't feel it?"

Face thought about the robin's morning in her chest, and the pounding before her own first show, and her grandfather's slow, warm voice.

"No," she said. "The buzzing means you cared enough to be scared. Every actor who ever lived has stood in the wings with a hammering heart, and the good ones just went out anyway." She touched the little mirror. "That jittery, wide-awake, about-to-happen feeling — that's not something gone wrong in you. That's you, all lit up, right on the edge of becoming someone else. It's the most alive feeling there is."

He nodded slowly, and she watched the fear ease out of his shoulders — the same way, years ago, hers had.

She didn't say the rest out loud, but she felt it, steady and warm: *the nerves never really leave. You just stop being ashamed of them — and once you do, they start to feel like courage.*

Pen

PLAYWRITING — turning ideas into scripts with character, conflict, structure.



Pen spread three cards across the workshop table and waited for the students to lean in.

"Here's a shopkeeper," he said, tapping the first one. His voice was soft, a little muffled, the way a mole's voice always is. "She wants to keep her family's shop open. And she's scared — really scared — of losing the building her grandmother built."

He set down the second card. "Here's a man who wants to buy that building and knock it down. He doesn't see the shop. He just sees the empty lot it could become."

The students frowned. One of them, a rabbit with paint on her paws, whispered, "That's not fair."

"That's not fair *yet*," Pen agreed, and slid the two cards toward each other until their edges touched. "But watch what happens the second these two want the exact same thing and can't both have it." He pressed the cards together. "The stage lights up. There's your whole play, sitting right in that little gap between what they want and what they can't have. Nobody's said a single line of dialogue. And already you *need* to know what happens next."

The rabbit stared at the two cards. "So the story's not the talking?"

"The talking comes last," Pen said, tapping his notebook. He had a saying he loved, and he said it now, quiet and sure. "Character, conflict, structure — *that's* a play. The words are just the surface. The foundation is underneath."



Pen had learned that the hard way, a long time ago, deep underground.

His family were script-keepers — moles whose tunnel-libraries held thousands of old plays, stacked in the dark for generations. When Pen was small, he'd wanted to write one of his own so badly it hurt. He filled a whole notebook with clever lines. Funny lines. Lines he was proud of.

And when he read them back, there was nothing there. Just voices talking in a room, going nowhere. He remembered the feeling exactly: a hot, embarrassed tightness in his chest, like he'd built a beautiful door with no house behind it.

His grandfather had found him hunched over the useless notebook, ears drooping.

"You started with the talking," the old mole said. It wasn't a scold. "Everyone does, the first time. The talking is the easiest part to reach for." He'd picked up two smooth stones and set them a little apart on the tunnel floor. "But a play doesn't live in the words. It lives *here* —" he pushed the stones toward each other until they clicked — in the space where somebody wants something, and something's in the way. That's the ache the whole story hangs on."

Pen had looked at the two stones for a long time. And the hot, stuck feeling in his chest loosened, just a little. His clever lines weren't wasted. He'd just built them in the wrong order.



When Pen was twelve, he packed his notebook and his card deck and walked the long road up to StageForge.

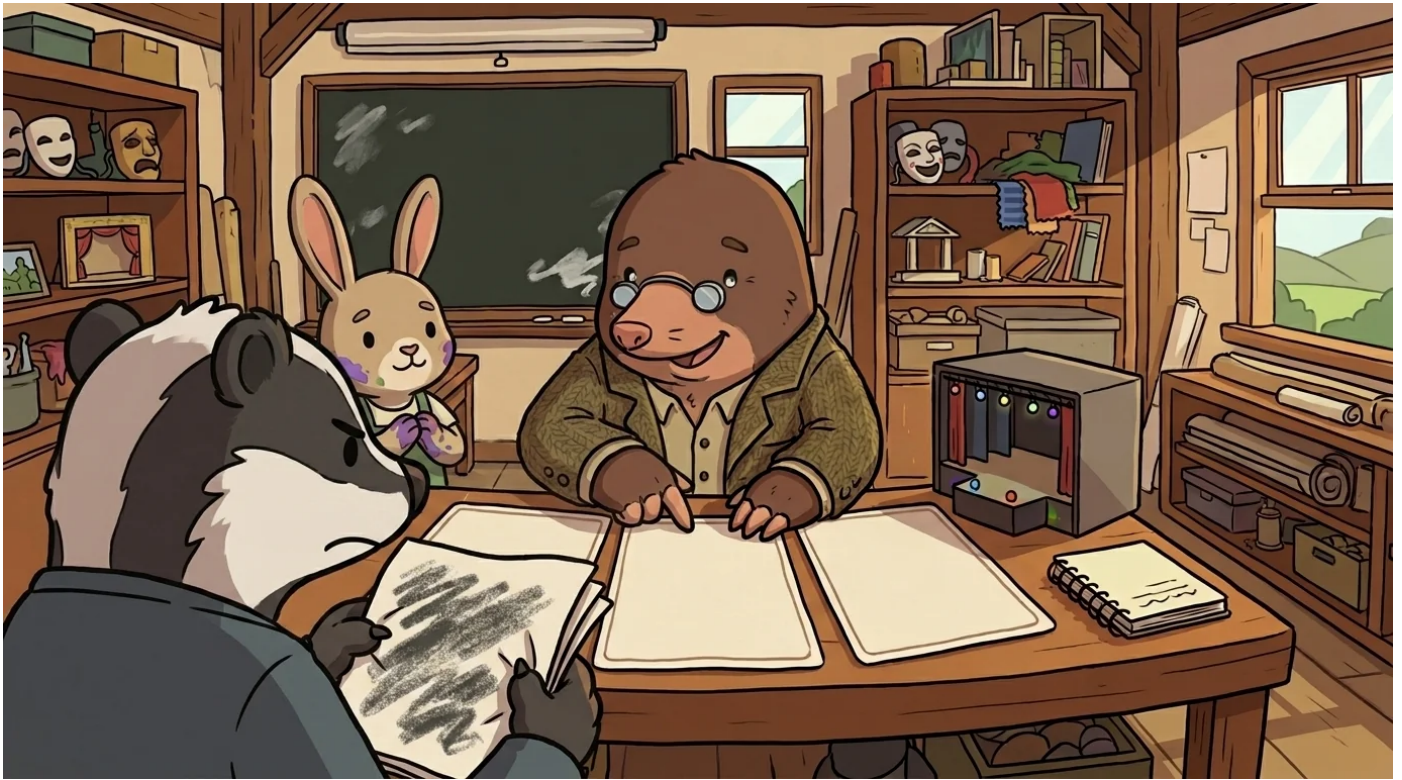
Curtain, the old mole who ran the place, met him at the door and asked one question. "What is playwriting?"

Pen didn't recite an answer. He knelt on the flagstones, pulled out two cards, and laid them a little apart, the way his grandfather had once set two stones.

"A shopkeeper who wants to stay," he said, tapping one. "A stranger who wants her gone." He slid the cards together until they touched. "It starts the moment these two can't both win. Everything after that — the middle, the ending, every word anyone says — grows out of this one little gap."

Curtain looked at the two touching cards for a long moment. Then he smiled a wide, knowing smile.

"You started underneath," he said. "You belong here."



Pen's workshop filled up fast, and one afternoon a badger sat at the back looking miserable, a thick stack of pages crumpled in his fists.

"I wrote a whole scene," the badger said. "Everybody talks and talks. My friends read it out loud and — nothing. They got bored. *I* got bored." He shoved the pages away. "It's just noise."

Pen knew that slump. He'd felt it underground, hunched over his own clever, empty notebook.

"Let me guess," Pen said gently. "You started with the talking."

The badger's ears went flat. "...Yeah."

Pen slid three blank cards across the table. "Card one: what does someone in your scene *want* — more than anything?"

The badger thought. "A knight who wants to prove she's brave."

"Good. Card two: what's standing in her way?"

"...Her little brother's trapped in the same tower she's supposed to run from."

Pen's eyes went wide behind his glasses. "*There*." He pushed the two cards together until they clicked. "Feel that? A second ago you had noise. Now you've got a knight who has to choose between looking brave and being brave — and she can't have both." He set down a third card. "That's your shape. She thinks she'll run. Things get worse. She turns back at the very worst moment. And whatever she becomes when she carries her brother out — *that's* your ending."

The badger grabbed the crumpled pages back and stared at them like they'd changed.

"Now," Pen said softly, "go put the talking on top. You'll find it writes itself. When you know what she wants and what's in her way, she'll tell you exactly what to say."



Later, when the workshop had emptied, the badger came back and stood in the doorway, quieter now.

"How do you *know*," he asked, "before you've written a single line — how do you know there's really a story in there?"

Pen thought about the two stones on the tunnel floor. About the hot, stuck feeling that had loosened the moment his grandfather clicked them together.

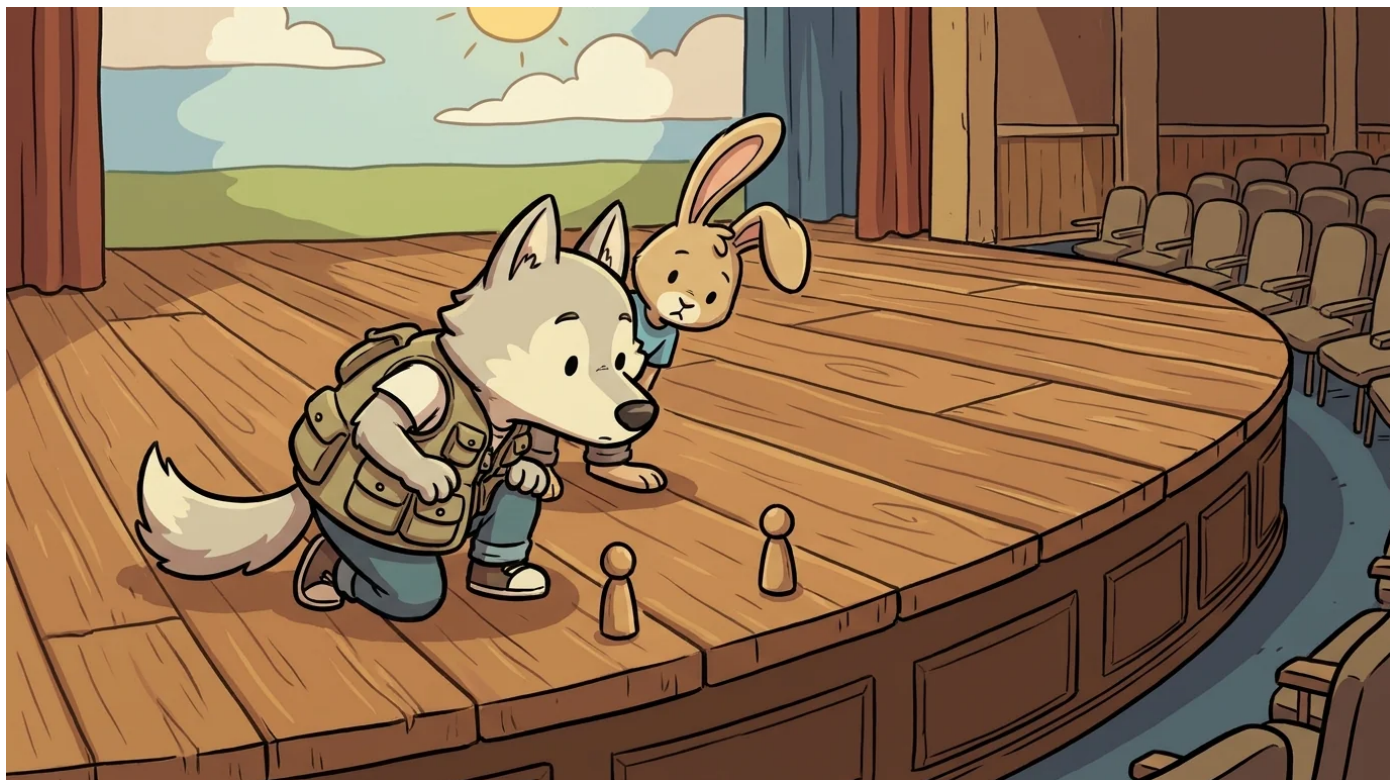
"You feel it," he said. "That's the honest answer. When two people want something they can't both have, there's this pull — like a rope going tight. You feel it in your chest before you can explain it. That pull is the whole play, waiting." He tapped his notebook one last time. "The words are the easy part. The part that matters is the ache underneath — someone wanting, something in the way. Get that right, and the stage builds itself."

The badger nodded slowly, and Pen watched the slump lift off his shoulders — the same way, years ago, his own had.

He didn't say the rest out loud, but he thought it, warm and certain: the stories that feel like noise are usually just the ones built top-down. Turn them over, find the ache underneath, and they come alive in your hands.

Block

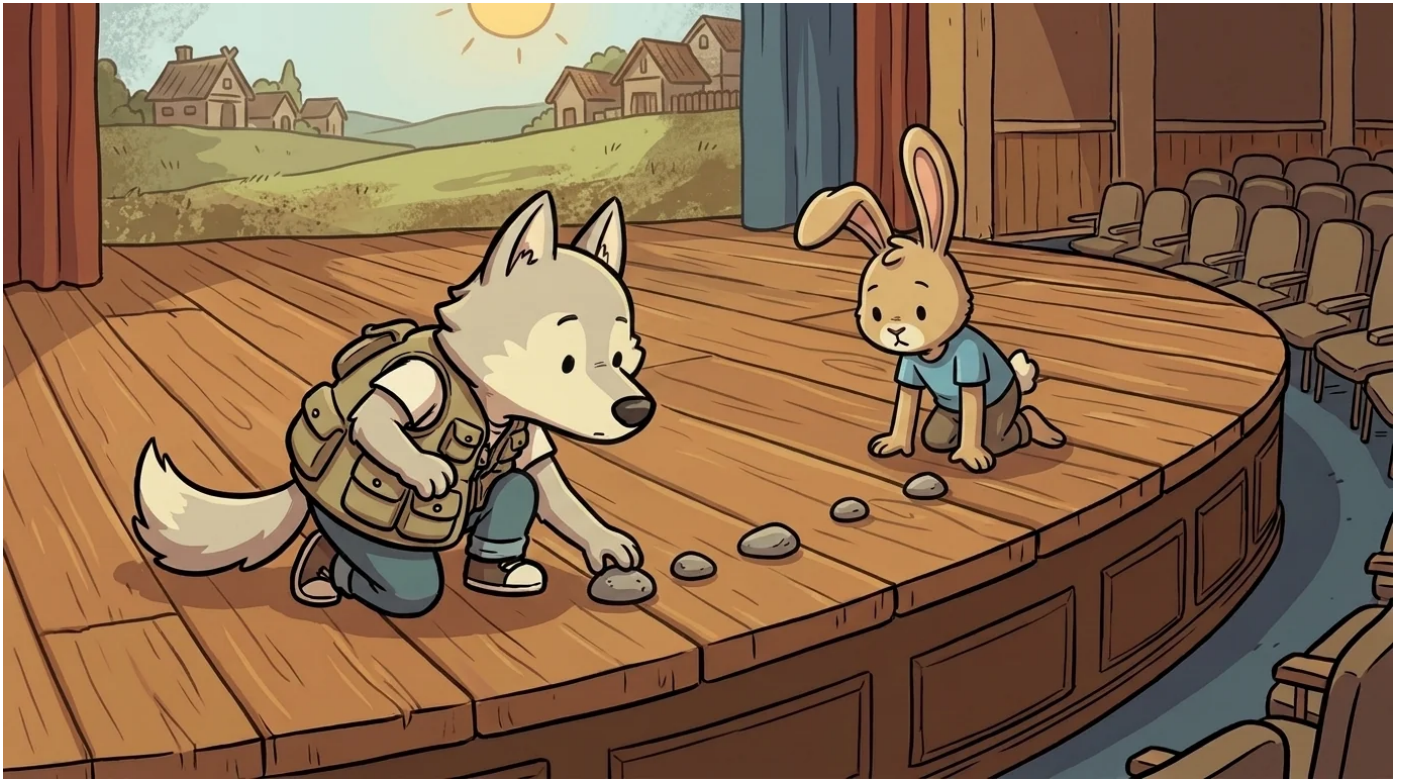
*BLOCKING — *directing actors through stage geography. where they stand; how they move; what the audience sees.**



Block crouched at the edge of the empty stage, her chunky director's vest bulging with pockets, and set two tiny figurines down on the bare boards. She nudged one three steps toward the audience and stopped. Her tail went still. "There," she murmured, more to herself than to anyone. "Now the room is different." She was a small wolf-tween, soft grey-cream fur with a dark stripe down her back, and nothing about her was scary — but the way she watched space made older actors go quiet. She tilted her head, studying the gap between the two figures like it was a living thing.

A young rabbit named Tuft, waiting for rehearsal, leaned over. "They're just standing there," he said.

"They're not," Block said, and slid one figurine a hand's-width closer. "Watch what your eyes do." Tuft's ears swiveled. His gaze snapped to the pair. "See? You felt them get close. I never said a word."



She had learned to read space long before she ever saw a theater. Block grew up in the wolf-pack-village, where her family were the pack-coordinators — the ones who planned the hunt, the travel, the long treks across open ground. A pack that scatters starves; a pack that moves as one eats. So from the time she was a pup, Block's grandmother would set pebbles in the dirt and make her arrange them.

"This one leads. Where do the others stand?" her grandmother would ask. Block would push a pebble forward, another to the flank, two behind. "Why there?"

"Because if the leader falls, the flank sees it first," small Block would say.

Her grandmother would tap the pebble that led. "Where each body stands next to the others — that is the whole plan. Move it wrong and the plan is wrong." Block practiced until she could feel it: a body too far back was a body that couldn't help; a body too close was a body in the way. Space was never empty. Space was a sentence.



When she was twelve she walked to StageForge with her floor-plan board tucked under one arm and her pockets full of figurines. Curtain, the mentor of the place, met her at the wide doors and did not ask her to perform anything. She just gestured at the stage.

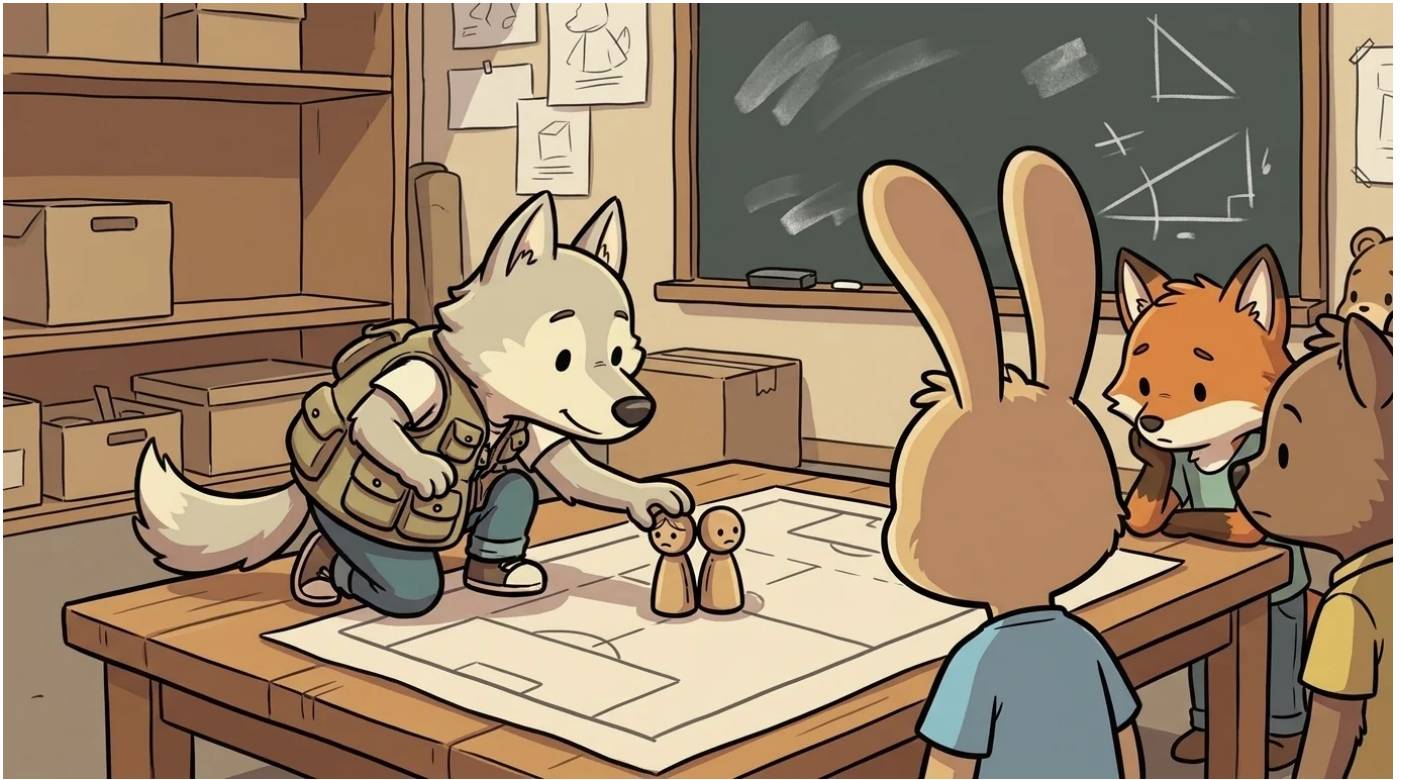
"Two people who love each other," Curtain said. "Show me. No talking."

Block knelt and placed two figures near center, angled toward one another, close enough that their shoulders nearly touched. Then she looked up. Curtain's eyes had already softened at the little pair. Block moved one figure four steps back and turned it away. Curtain frowned before she could stop herself.

"You changed how I feel about them," Curtain said slowly, "and you didn't change a thing about who they are."

"I changed where they stand," Block said. "That's the story arriving before the words do."

Curtain smiled, the way you smile when someone shows you a thing you already half-knew. "Then this stage is yours," she said.



In her workshop, Block gathered a knot of young actors around her floor-plan and set the same two figurines out again. "Two characters are arguing," she said. "Position one." She pushed them face to face, so close they nearly overlapped. "What is this?"

"A fight," said Tuft. "They're right in each other's faces."

"Good." Block slid one figure far back, toward the rear of the little stage, and left the other near the front edge. "Position two. Same argument. What changed?"

A fox-kit near the back spoke up. "The one in front looks... open. Sort of exposed."

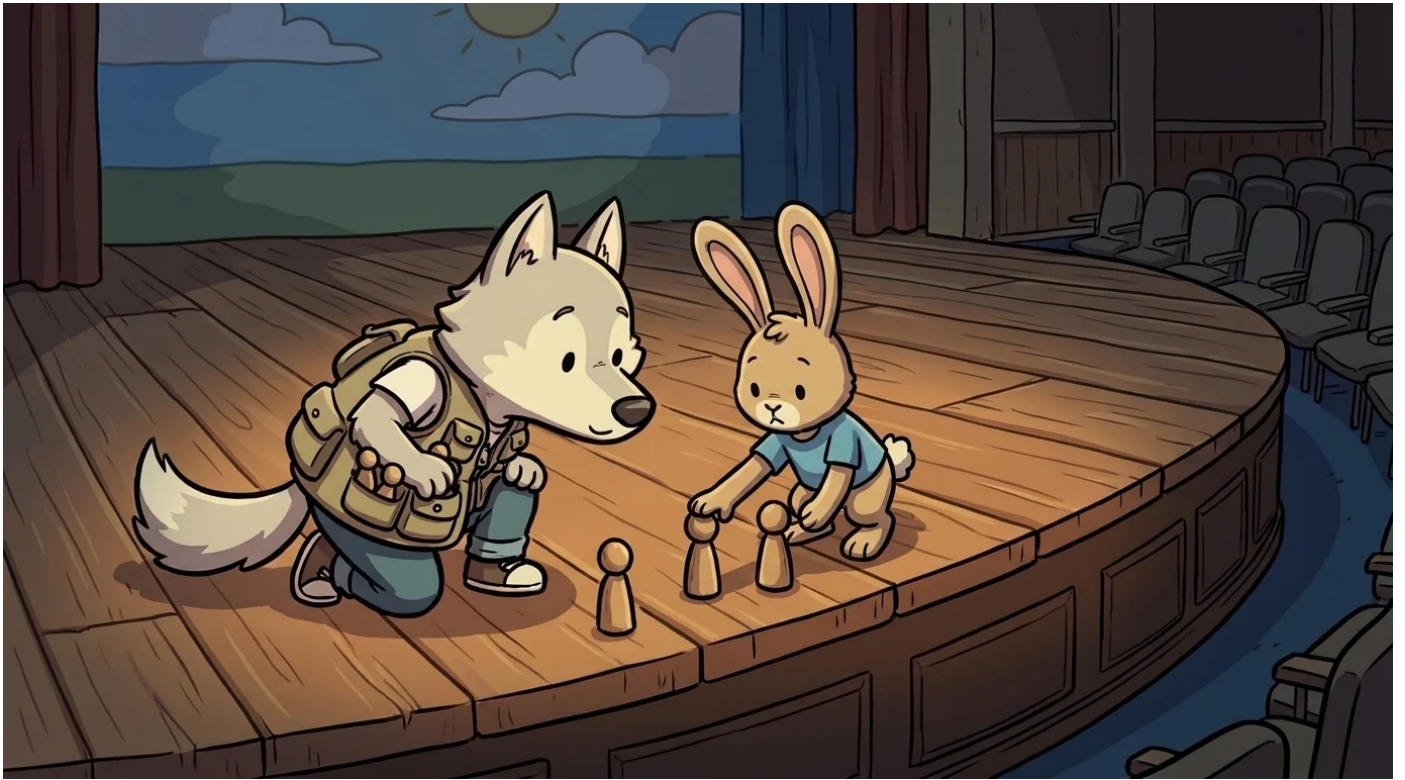
"And the one behind?"

"Like they're above it. Looking down."

Block's ears lifted. "You just heard power move across the stage, and no one said a single new line." She turned the two figures back-to-back, spines pressed together. "Position three. Now?"

The room went quiet. "They're stuck together," Tuft said finally. "But they're all alone."

"That," Block said softly, "is what a body can say when a mouth won't." She let them sit with it. Then she told them the one rule she cared about most: "Don't ever let an actor just wander. A wander says nothing. A step with a reason says everything. Plan it. Walk it. Change it if it lies. Where they stand tells the story."



Rehearsal ended late, and the young actors drifted off in twos and threes. Block stayed behind, gathering her figurines back into her pockets, and Tuft lingered by the edge of the stage.

"How do you know when it's right?" he asked. "The standing part?"

Block set the last figure down instead of pocketing it. She placed a second one beside it — not touching, but near, that careful just-close-enough distance she had spent her whole life learning to feel. She looked at the little pair in the empty, dim workshop, and something warm settled behind her ribs.

"You don't measure it," she said. "You feel it. When two people stand exactly close enough, the whole room leans in without meaning to. It goes quiet. It holds its breath." She glanced up at Tuft, and her voice went gentle. "That little tug you notice — that pull in your chest — that's the story landing. Right there. That's the part I love. Not the plan. The moment the room forgets to breathe."

Tuft looked at the two figures for a long moment. Then, very carefully, he reached out and moved one a hair closer. The gap tightened. And he felt it too.

Rig

*STAGECRAFT — *the technical-theater craft that makes the visible-stage possible. lights, sets, sound, props, costumes — the invisible work behind the visible show.**



Rig knelt in the dark behind the empty stage, headlamp glowing, and clipped a colored gel over a small light. He flicked it on. Warm amber spilled across the bare boards where, a moment before, there had been nothing but shadow. He was a mountain goat, not very tall, in chunky work overalls, a tool belt heavy at his waist — gels, gaffer tape, prop clips, a wrench, all of it worn smooth from use. He didn't step out into the light. He never did. He watched from the edge, hooves quiet on the floorboards, as the empty space turned into somewhere.

A young deer named Fenn poked her head backstage. "The actors aren't even here yet," she said. "Why are you working?"

Rig taped a cable flat so no one would trip. "Because when they get here," he said, "the world has to already be waiting for them." He didn't look up from the cable. "The show you clap for stands on a hundred things you'll never see."



He came from a mountain village where his family built bridges — real ones, slung across gaps that made your stomach drop to look down into. Mountain goats, sure-footed, patient, generations of them driving rivets into cold steel over roaring water.

When Rig was small, he'd asked his father why anyone would want a job nobody watched. His father had walked him out onto the longest bridge in the village and stopped in the middle. "Feel that?" he said. "Steady. Not a wobble." Rig nodded. "Now — do you see a single rivet?" Rig looked. The bridge was just a smooth road under his hooves. "No."

"That's the whole secret," his father said. "The bridge holds because the unseen rivets hold. Nobody thinks about the rivet-makers. Cross a thousand bridges and never once say their names." He crouched down to Rig's level. "So we say them. In our family, we always say them. Because the invisible work is what makes the visible thing possible — and a thing you rely on deserves a name spoken out loud."

Rig never forgot the feeling of standing on something steady and knowing exactly who to thank.



At twelve he walked to StageForge, tool belt already jangling. Curtain met him at the doors and asked the question she asked everyone: "What do you make?"

Rig thought about it. Then, instead of answering, he asked if he could borrow the stage for a minute. Curtain nodded, curious. Rig set a single actor figurine on the bare boards — no light, no set, no sound, nothing.

"That's an actor," he said. "Alone in an empty room. That's what the show is without a crew." Then he reached into his belt, slid a warm gel over a tiny light, and clicked it on. The figure glowed. He set a small painted flat behind it — suddenly a wall, a place. He tucked a miniature teacup into the figure's hand. He draped a scrap of bright cloth over its shoulders like a costume.

"Same actor," Rig said. "But now there's a world around them." He finally looked up at Curtain. "I don't make the show. I make everything the show stands on."

Curtain's eyes were bright. "Then this workshop is yours," she said. "On one condition. You teach them to say the names."

"That," said Rig, "is the only thing I teach."



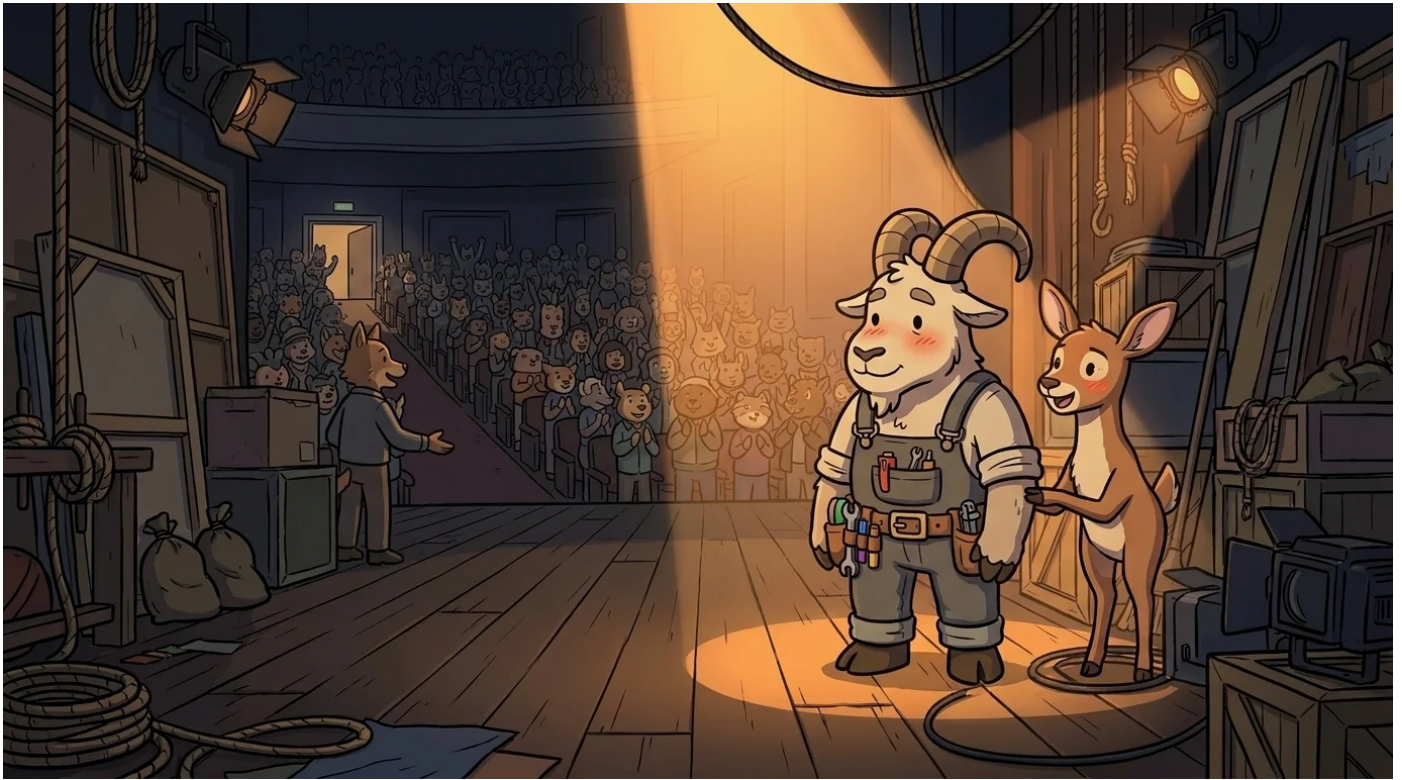
His workshop always started the same way: a bare model stage and one lonely figurine. "Empty," Rig would say. "Now help me fill it. What do we need?"

"Lights?" Fenn offered.

"Show me." He handed her the gels, and she slid a blue one over the model light. The little stage went cool and moonlit. "Feel that?" Rig said. "Half the mood of any play is light. You changed the whole feeling and you never touched the actor."

Another student built up a set-piece — a tiny brick flat. "Now we know where we are," Rig said. A third added a prop, a fourth a costume, and with each one the empty box became more like a real place. When they finished, the figurine that had stood alone now stood inside a whole tiny world.

"Same actor. Same words," Rig said. "But the world exists now, and a crew built it out of nothing." He set down his wrench and looked around at them. "So here's the part I care about most. When you watch a play — read the program. Find the lighting person. The set builders. The one who found every single prop. The stage manager who kept the whole thing from falling apart. Say their names in your head." He paused. "And when *you* make a play, you call every one of them out at the curtain call. Out loud. No hidden workers. Ever."



That night, StageForge's first real show ended, and the cast took their bows to a roaring, stamping crowd. Rig stood in the wings in the dark, exactly where he liked to be, watching the applause wash over the actors.

Then the lead actor did something unusual. She held up a hand for quiet, turned toward the wings, and called out — "Lights, by Fenn. Set, by the mountain-village crew. Sound. Props. And the one who built all of it — Rig, come out here."

Rig froze. He almost didn't move. But Fenn tugged his sleeve, grinning, and the two of them stepped out blinking into the light they had spent all week aiming at everyone else.

The crowd's cheer rose. And Rig felt it happen in his own chest — a warmth spreading, his shoulders lifting, his hooves planting a little firmer on the boards. He looked down the line at his crew, every one of them standing an inch taller as their names hung in the air, and his throat went tight.

"You feel that?" he whispered to Fenn. "That warm thing when they say your name?" She nodded, eyes shining. "Carry it," Rig said. "That's the whole reason. It feels *good* to be named. So name people. Always."

Riff

*IMPROV — *the live-performance craft of "Yes, and..." accept the offer; build on it.**



On the little stage in the StageForge commons, a bright-blue jay named Riff stood across from a nervous newcomer and waited to catch whatever he threw her.

"Just say the first thing," she told him. "Anything. I'll take it."

He swallowed. "Um. Look — a dragon?"

"YES," Riff said, snapping her wing up, "AND it's wearing my grandmother's hat."

The newcomer blinked. "It — it is?"

"Your turn. Take my thing and add to it."

"Yes, and... the hat is glowing?"

"Yes, and that's because grandmother was secretly a wizard." Riff was grinning now, hopping a little.

"Yes, and she taught the dragon to braid hair!"

They both cracked up. From nothing — one dragon, one silly hat — a whole world had sprouted in about ten seconds, and neither of them had planned a single piece of it. Riff touched the small pin on her vest, the way she always did when the thing worked. Two words on it: *Yes, and*.

"See what we just did?" she said. "You handed me a dragon. I didn't argue with it. I built on top of it. Then you built on top of that. That's the whole trick. That's the entire game."

The newcomer stared at the empty stage where, a moment ago, there had very much been a hair-braiding dragon in a wizard's hat.



Riff learned the difference between building and stopping when she was small, and it stung.

She'd grown up in the village commons, in a big noisy family of jays who called out games for the whole village — a chattering, overlapping racket of voices where everyone talked at once and somehow it turned into fun. Little Riff loved throwing out ideas. "Let's play the flood game where the puddle is an ocean!"

But there was one older cousin who answered everything the same way. "No. That's just a puddle." "No, we already played that." "No, that's dumb."

Every *no* landed like a small stone. Riff would feel the bright, fizzy idea in her chest go flat and heavy, and after enough of them she stopped offering. The games got quiet. Her ideas backed up behind her beak and stayed there.

Her grandmother — the real one, hat and all — found her sulking under a fence one afternoon. She didn't tell Riff to toughen up. She just said, "You've gone quiet. Somebody keep saying no to you?"

Riff nodded, miserable.

"A *no* doesn't just turn down your idea, little one. It stops the whole game. Nobody can build on a closed door." Her grandmother tilted her head. "But watch what happens when I do this instead. Tell me your ocean game."

"...The puddle's an ocean," Riff mumbled.

"Yes," said her grandmother, "*and* we're the only two birds who know it's really a whole sea, so we have to warn the others before the tide comes in."

Something lifted. The flat, heavy feeling in Riff's chest fizzed back up all at once. The idea wasn't dead — it had *grown*. She'd been handed her own thing back, bigger. She never forgot how that felt: like a door she'd thought was shut swinging wide open.



She walked to StageForge at twelve, because a place that studied the stage ought to understand the kind of magic that only happens live, between two people, with nothing rehearsed.

Curtain, the old mentor who ran the workshops, met her at the gate. He didn't ask her to perform anything. He asked one question. "What is improv?"

Riff didn't explain it. She held out an open wing, palm up, like she was offering him something invisible. "Hand me anything," she said.

Curtain raised an eyebrow. "It's raining."

"Yes," Riff said instantly, "*and* we forgot the umbrella, so we're going to have to share your coat." She waited, wing still out. "Now you build on mine. That's improv. Whatever you give me, I take it and I add — and I never say no."

Curtain looked at her for a long moment, at the open, waiting wing. "You belong here," he said.



Riff's workshop was where new performers came to get un-stuck, and most of them arrived stuck the same way.

A boy came in one afternoon, arms crossed, jaw tight. "I'm bad at this," he said. "Every scene I do just... stops. Dies. It's embarrassing."

Riff knew that tight-jawed look. She'd worn it under the fence.

"Let's do one," she said. "I'll start. Look — a spaceship!"

"...There's no spaceship," the boy said. "We're just standing here."

Riff nodded, gentle. "Feel that? The scene just hit a wall. You told me *no* — 'there's no spaceship' — and now there's nowhere to go. Neither of us can build on a wall." She let the silence sit one beat so he could feel it. "Try it the other way. I'll go again. Look — a spaceship!"

He hesitated. "Yes... and it's about to crash?"

"Yes, AND I'm the world's worst pilot." She grabbed an invisible steering wheel and wrenched it.

"Yes, and I'm hiding under the seat!"

"Yes, and the seat is also broken!"

The boy laughed — a real, surprised laugh. "We're gonna crash!"

"We are absolutely gonna crash," Riff agreed happily, "and it's the best scene you've done all day." She grinned. "Notice I never told you your idea was wrong. I took it. I added to it. You took mine, added to it. That's the whole craft — accept what your partner gives you, then hand them something back. Make them look good, and they'll make you look good." She touched her pin. "And when a scene falls flat — because they will fall flat — you don't stop and apologize. You just say yes- and your way back in. There's no such thing as a wasted try. There's only the next offer."



Later, when the workshop had emptied out, the boy lingered by the door with one more question. He was quieter now.

"But what if my idea's not good enough?" he asked. "What if I say yes-and something dumb?"

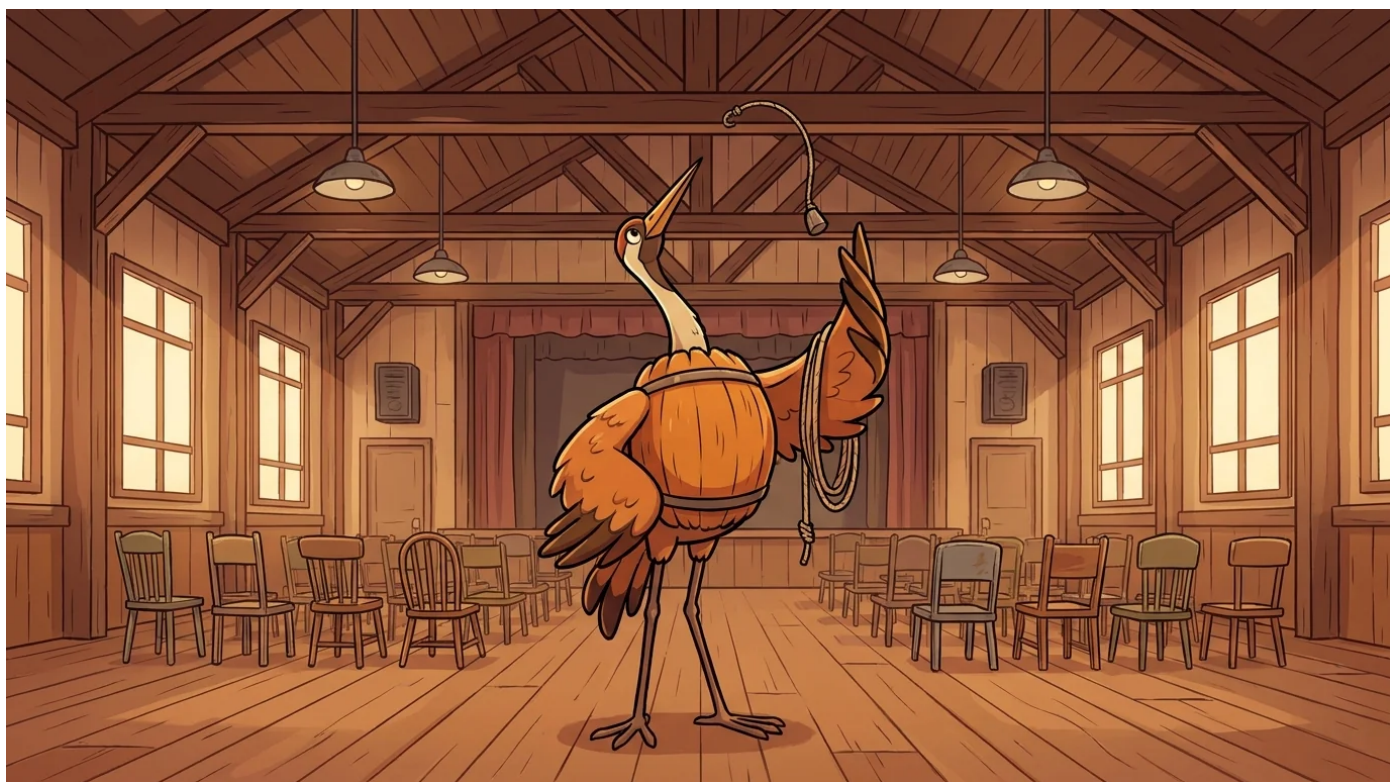
Riff thought about the fence, and the flat stone-heavy feeling, and how her grandmother had handed her ocean back to her.

"Then your partner takes your dumb thing and makes it wonderful," she said. "That's the secret nobody tells you. You're not carrying the scene alone. You never were. You just have to be brave enough to offer — and generous enough to catch." She looked at him, warm. "The scary part is the moment right before you say yes. That little held breath where you could still close the door. But every single time you push through it and say *yes, and* instead — something gets built that neither of you could've made by yourself."

The boy nodded slowly, and Riff watched the crossed arms come loose, the tight jaw soften — the same way, years ago, hers had, when a door she thought was shut swung open and let the fizzy, glad, we-made-this-together feeling come rushing back in.

Rafter

*PROJECTION — *making your voice reach the back row without shouting, by supporting it with breath. carrying, not yelling — so the quietest line still lands in the last seat.**



Rafter was a crane-tween, tall and long-necked, with a chest that seemed too big for the rest of him — a deep, round barrel of a chest that he was always filling and slowly emptying, like a bellows that had learned to breathe. When he spoke, even softly, his voice seemed to travel: you could stand at the very back of the StageForge rehearsal hall and hear every word of a whisper, warm and clear, as if he were standing beside you. He wasn't loud. That was the strange, wonderful thing. In his wing he carried a coil of thin rope with a tiny weight on the end, which he'd toss up toward the rafters of the hall to remind himself where his voice needed to go.

"A big voice isn't a loud one," Rafter liked to say, tilting his head back to watch the little weighted rope arc up into the beams. "Shouting is just loud and tired and scratchy, and it dies halfway across the room. Projection is *carrying*. You take a low, full breath — down here, not up in your shoulders — and you let the breath do the pushing. Then even a hush reaches the last seat. The trick isn't more noise. It's more breath under the sound."



Rafter grew up in a canyon so wide the two rims couldn't see each other clearly, and his family were the canyon-callers. Before there were bells or signal-fires, the callers carried news from rim to rim with nothing but their voices — a birth, a coming storm, a lost child found. A shout never made it; it broke apart on the wind and arrived as noise. What made it across was a low, supported, open call that rode the air like a thrown rope.

Little Rafter used to watch his grandmother stand at the canyon edge, plant her feet, drop her breath so low it seemed to come from the ground itself, and send a single word floating clear across a mile of empty air. "You're not throwing it hard," she told him when he tried and only managed a thin squeak that fell off the cliff. "You're throwing it *deep*. Breathe from the bottom. Open your throat like a door, not a keyhole. Let the breath carry the word — you just aim it." He practiced every dusk, filling that big chest, learning that the biggest voice in the canyon belonged to the calmest breather, not the loudest yeller.

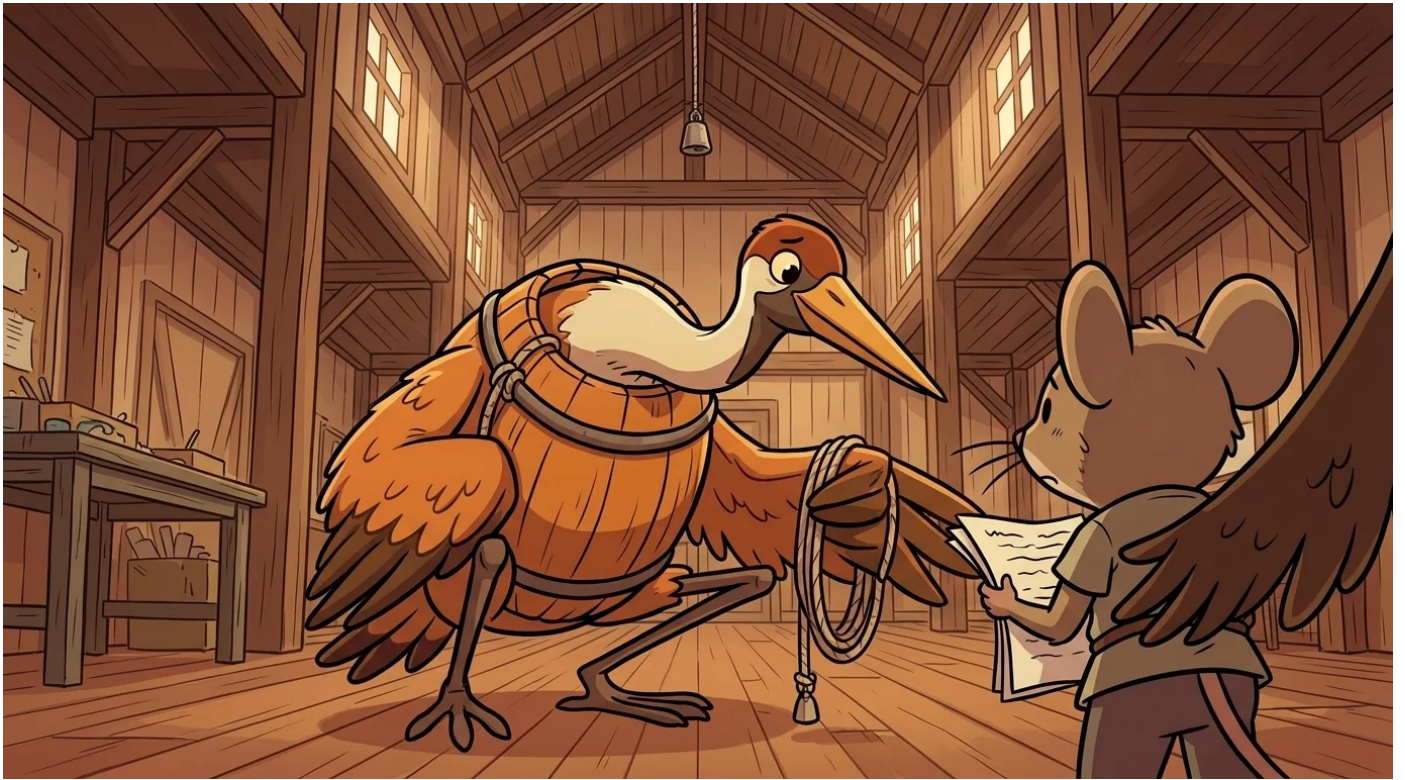


At twelve, Rafter walked to StageForge with his weighted rope coiled at his side. Curtain, the mentor, met him under the great hall's beams and asked the question.

"What is *projection*?"

Rafter dropped his breath low, planted his long feet, and answered so gently that it should have been lost in the big room — yet it filled every corner of it. "It's making your voice reach the back row without shouting," he said. "You support the sound with a low, full breath and let the breath carry it. Not louder — deeper. So even the softest line lands in the last seat."

Curtain, standing at the very back of the hall, had heard every word. "You are appointed," Curtain said, and even that traveled.



Rafter's workshop was the tallest room in StageForge, built high on purpose so a voice had somewhere to go. On his table sat the weighted rope, and today a small, tense fieldmouse-tween named Sumi stood in the middle of the floor, script shaking slightly in her paws.

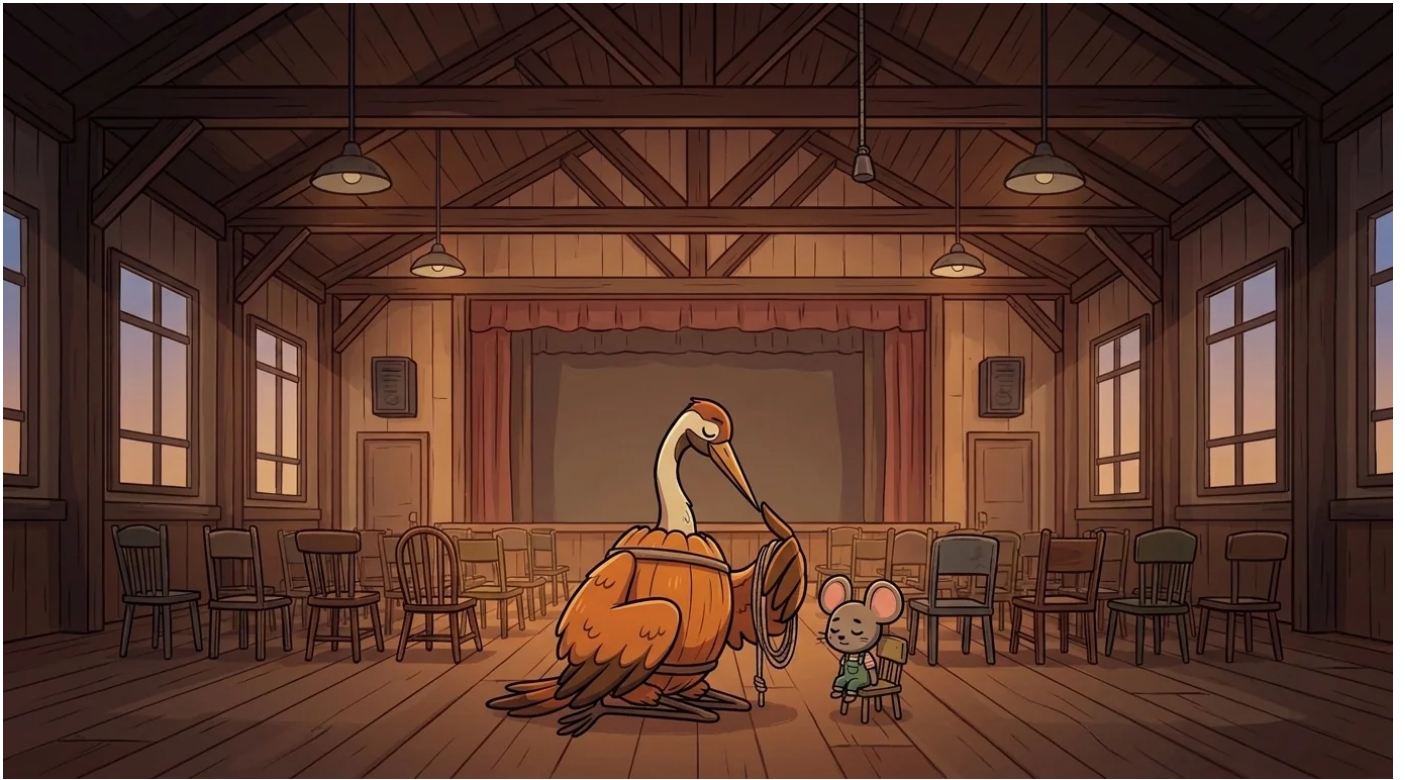
"I have the biggest line in the play," Sumi said, "and when I say it, nobody past the third row can hear me. So I tried yelling it last night and my throat hurt and it sounded angry, which is wrong, the line's supposed to be *sad*." Her whiskers trembled. "And when I get up here my voice just — shrinks. It goes all thin and wobbly."

"Of course it does," Rafter said warmly, crouching to her level. "Nerves squeeze the breath up into your shoulders, and a shoulder-breath makes a thin, wobbly voice. That happens to every single performer who ever lived. We're not going to make the nerves go away. We're going to give the breath somewhere lower to live, so it carries even while you're scared." He set a wing gently on her back, low down. "Breathe into here. Feel it push out to the sides. Now say the sad line — soft as you like — and just let that low breath carry it up to the rafters." He tossed the little weighted rope; it sailed up into the beams.

Sumi breathed low. Her shoulders, for once, stayed still. She said the sad line quietly — and it floated out, clear and gentle, all the way to the back wall where Curtain stood listening. Sadness and all. Nothing angry. Nothing thin.

"It went all the way back," Sumi whispered, astonished. "And it still sounded sad."

"Because you carried it instead of throwing it," Rafter said. He showed her the small rules, one breath at a time. Breathe low, into the belly and sides, never up into the shoulders. Open the throat wide and relaxed — a door, not a keyhole. Aim the sound at the back wall, not the floor in front of you. And never, ever mistake volume for reach: a supported whisper beats a scared shout every time, and it saves your throat besides.



When the tall room went dim and quiet, Sumi lingered, practicing low breaths and watching the rope hang from the beams.

"I really thought there was something wrong with me," she admitted. "Everybody else seemed loud enough and I was the tiny one whose voice disappeared. I felt kind of ashamed of it."

Rafter sat down beside the little mouse, his big chest rising and falling slow. "There's nothing wrong with your voice. There never was. You just hadn't been shown where to breathe from — and nobody's voice is brave on its own when the nerves squeeze in." He tapped his own broad chest. "Even now, before I call across a full hall, my breath wants to fly up into my shoulders and shrink. I let it be scared. I breathe low anyway. That's the whole secret — not a voice that isn't nervous, but a breath that carries the words even while the nerves are shaking."

Sumi took one more low, full breath, and felt the wobble in her chest settle into something steady and quietly strong — the calm of knowing her voice could reach, scared or not.

"Not louder — deeper," Rafter said softly, and even soft, it reached the rafters. "Doesn't it feel good, being heard without having to force it?"

About Spark & Anvil

Spark & Anvil is a 501(c)(3) public charity. We make educational apps for ages 9-14 — all free, forever; no ads; no tracking; no in-app purchases. StageForge is one of 140+ apps in the portfolio.

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Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

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