

AFTER-PLAY FORUM FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Designed and written by Laurie Brooks

Much of the success of the after-play forum is dependent on the facilitator's energy and attitude. The facilitator can be any age or gender or one of the actors can fill that role in the forum. For example, in the premiere production of *The Wrestling Season* the Referee was a natural choice to facilitate the forum.

The facilitator's role includes the following key ingredients:

**To welcome the audience into the Forum.*

The facilitator has been termed the "velvet fist." Using few words, the facilitator establishes benevolent leadership, explaining each step with simple, clear directions. The facilitator never asks the audience's permission by saying, "Okay?" at the end of sentences. Clarity of purpose and firm leadership will establish the audience's comfort level and encourage their participation. Through a warm but firm attitude, the facilitator makes a human connection with the audience, welcoming them into the experience.

**To set the tone for a space where opinions can be exchanged without fear of judgment or giving a "wrong" answer.*

The facilitator explains that the forum is a space where we can agree to disagree, that many disparate opinions will be offered; all will be given equal validity. The facilitator accepts each audience response with neutral comments, such as "thank you," never using status to skew the nature of a free exchange of ideas by offering his or her own opinion. If an audience member offers a problematic response that demonstrates blatant prejudice or name-calling, the facilitator need only ask, "Does everyone agree with that?" then step back and allow the audience to respond. It is never the task of the Facilitator to teach or correct. Because the dialogue is focused on the audience, the facilitator's job is to assist and promote their safe participation.

**To keep the dialogue clear and moving forward.*

In the Exploration phase of the forum, the facilitator encourages speakers to stand and face the audience, repeating each comment or paraphrasing the general idea. This repetition is necessary to define and clarify, but often it is merely to help the audience hear a soft-spoken or hesitant offering. It may be necessary to condense a long-winded participant, by politely interrupting and consolidating the response.

"I'm going to have to interrupt you. I think I'm hearing you say... is that right?"

In the same manner, the facilitator may be called upon to encourage a struggling audience member to think through an idea by saying, "I think I understand. Are you trying to say...?" Often this encouragement can jump-start the participant to finish a comment. For this part of the forum, the facilitator's biggest challenge is to listen carefully.

**To encourage further discussion.*

Now that the audience has both offered their own opinions and listened to others' points of view, the facilitator creates a sense of closure. Facilitators are silent during this portion of the forum, allowing the audience to negotiate the experience. "If you have something to say," The facilitator charges the audience. "Stand and take your turn. If you or more of you stand at the same time, then you will have the opportunity to negotiate with body language who goes first." The facilitator need only step in if an audience member decides to make a speech. Experience has proved that audiences are amazingly respectful and generous during this phase of the forum if the facilitator gives concise directions and trusts their ability to take turns. When responses have begun to diminish, the facilitator ends the forum, thanking the audience for their participation and encouraging them to continue the dialogue.