

## Playing Tag for Better Communication

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CENTERPORT

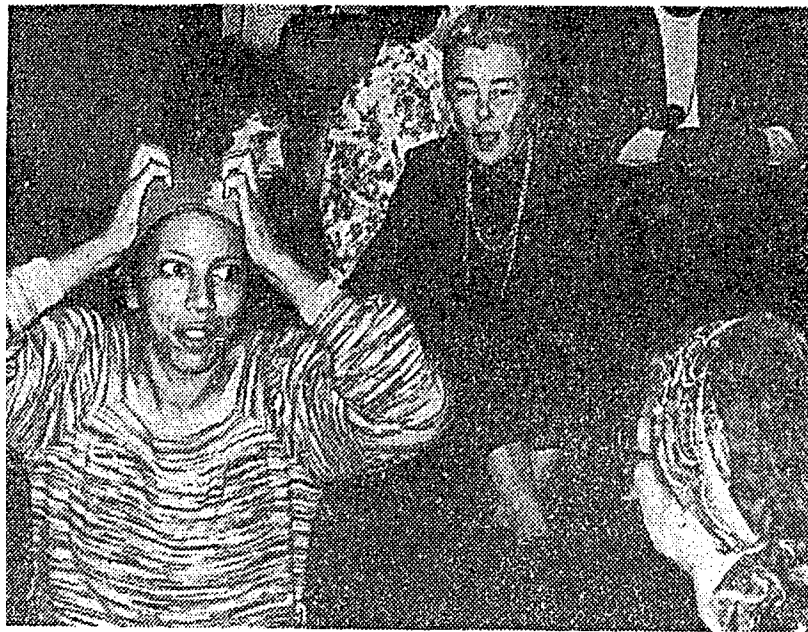
VINCENT CAMPISI believes that every good teacher is "a bit of a ham." So when the Performing Arts Foundation posted a theater-games workshop at its headquarters here recently, Mr. Campisi, a fifth-grade teacher from the Main School in West Babylon, showed up to sharpen his skills.

For six hours, he and 50 other teachers, therapists, graduate students and young actors from the Island and the metropolitan area—who had paid \$15 each to participate—played tag, pretended to "walk in space," grimaced and talked gibberish to each other and mirrored their partners' speech and expressions, all in the name of learning how to communicate more effectively.

Originally developed as an acting exercise, the theater-games technique has fanned out to classrooms, psychiatric hospitals, mental-health centers, prisons and other places where nonverbal as well as verbal communication is important.

"Theater games energize both the teacher and the students so that the classroom experience comes at a time when learning can take place at the highest level," said Stephen Book, the executive director of the Spolin Theater Games Center in Los Angeles. Under the aegis of Cemrel Inc., a national educational laboratory, he had stopped off in Centerport on a national tour to spread the word.

"The games break down barriers," he said. "Roles are changed, so that the teacher isn't just the authoritative figure, with the student feeding back information to please. The warmups or games set the juices flowing and, at the end, you can go right into what's being planned. Actual curricula can be



The New York Times/Penny Coleman

## Loosening up at the theater-games program at the Performing Arts Foundation in Centerport.

structured to the theater-games way."

To illustrate, Mr. Book invited his "students" to play tag, "shake it out without verbally communicating with anybody." Then, after a while, he asked them to imagine "a room full of air, feel the space around you, investigate it as some unknown substance."

The exercise, he told the romping adults (who didn't take long to become wrapped up in the limitless possibilities of their "space walk"), is "designed to get you out of your heads and into space with others."

"There's a tendency to think about the past and the future continuously, to be stuck there," he said later. "The tag and the space walk are right here

in the present tense. And it's fun to be in the now. Playing the game cuts through the garbage imposed by other people's frames of reference, other people's values and prejudices, and keeps us in the state of becoming."

Constantly emphasizing this "state of becoming," Mr. Book spent the afternoon showing the group how "communicating becomes an experience rather than a bouncing off of words."

For example, he said, by lining up, facing a partner, wordlessly changing their appearance, and then asking the partner to find the differences, the participants would enhance their ability to observe, learn how to improvise, and experience "the joy of discovery."

An extended session of talking in gibberish began hauntingly but concluded on a high, merry note of complete involvement. It showed, according to Mr. Book, that "the whole body creates energy which is then poured into communicating—it's the process of present-tense involvement between you and the students, creating energy in the classroom by getting everybody going, by giving a child a feeling of allowing him to be himself."

"Notice how they were all uncomfortable at the beginning," said Moses Goldberg, director of P.A.F.'s Art in Education program, which employs theater games in its creative classroom workshops. "It's difficult to expose yourself, even when you are doing it professionally. But by playing a game you begin to lose your self-consciousness and fears. Then, it's up to them to take the next step, to learn how to use these skills to communicate. Teachers are artists, too. Teaching, in fact, is the art of communicating and it's not just confined to words. It also involves one's perception of the universe."

Had the participants' perception been expanded? Miriam Tepfer, a therapist at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, thought so. "When you treat people with emotional problems you are always looking for ways of helping them free themselves, helping them function again," she said. "We use whatever works, and this could work."

Vincent Campisi had some reservations. He went expecting to pick up "some direct tools" he could use with his fifth-graders, but found that much of the proceedings were "too abstract for me and too abstract for my kids." He did learn a few new things, however, and "really didn't regret attending—every new experience has some value."