

LESSON 4

Stage Terminology

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Identify the different parts of the performance space.
- ◆ Identify the proscenium stage acting areas.
- ◆ Follow basic stage directions using the acting areas.

Warm Up



Stage Terms Relay. As directed by your teacher, match your assigned theatre term with the corresponding part of the proscenium stage or performance space.

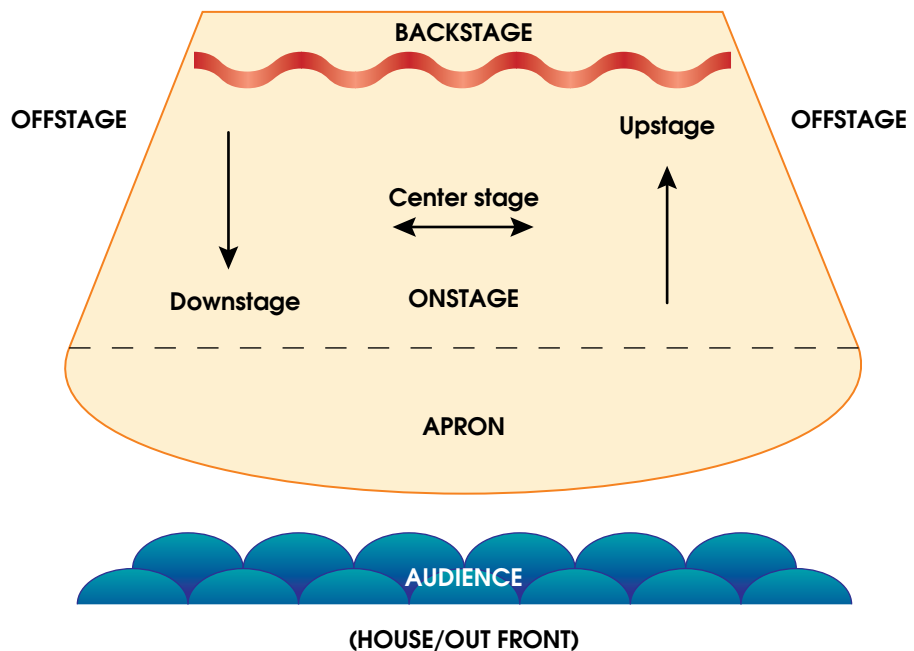
As you take your place onstage, you will discover that the theatre has a language all its own. This language has evolved over many years, reflecting the techniques commonly practiced by actors and directors. Knowledge of this basic theatre language is as important to the actor as knowledge of the alphabet is to the child learning to read. Once you have learned to use this language, you will be able to effectively communicate onstage with your director and the other actors.

The Performance Space

First, you need to become acquainted with the parts of the performance space. As you study the new terms, be sure to look at the diagrams that have all the parts labeled (see Figure 9–6). Anything within the stage setting and visible to the audience is considered *onstage*. Anything beyond the stage setting and not visible to the audience is considered *offstage*.

Figure 9–6

The Basic Parts of the Stage.



house

the section of the theatre where the audience sits; also called “out front.”

acting areas

nine to fifteen divisions of the stage floor, used by directors when moving actors or placing furniture or scenery.

blocking

planning and working out the movements and stage grouping for a play.

The area of the performance space where the audience sits is often called *out front*, or the **house**. The areas behind the stage and not seen by the audience are usually called *backstage*. In your school, backstage could be just a small area behind the back curtain, or it could be large enough to include storage rooms, rehearsal rooms, and dressing rooms.

Stage Positions

Directors use a set of standard terms to guide the actors on the stage. On the proscenium stage, the directions *downstage* and *upstage* date back to the days when stages were built with the rear of the stage slanting upward away from the audience. Downstage (D) was the area closest to the audience, and upstage (U) was away from the audience. Although all stage floors no longer slant, the names for these areas have remained. Other directions, such as *stage right* (R), *center stage* (C), and *stage left* (L), are always given as if the actor were standing on the stage, facing the audience. When you are onstage, stage right and stage left will always be *your* right and left as you face the audience.

Acting Areas

The proscenium stage floor is divided into imaginary blocks called **acting areas**, in which the director can move people or place furniture and scenery. Small proscenium stages are usually divided into nine acting areas (see Figure 9–7) and large stages (see Figure 9–8) into fifteen. Planning the movement for the play is **blocking** the play.

Figure 9–7

Proscenium Stage with Nine Acting Areas.

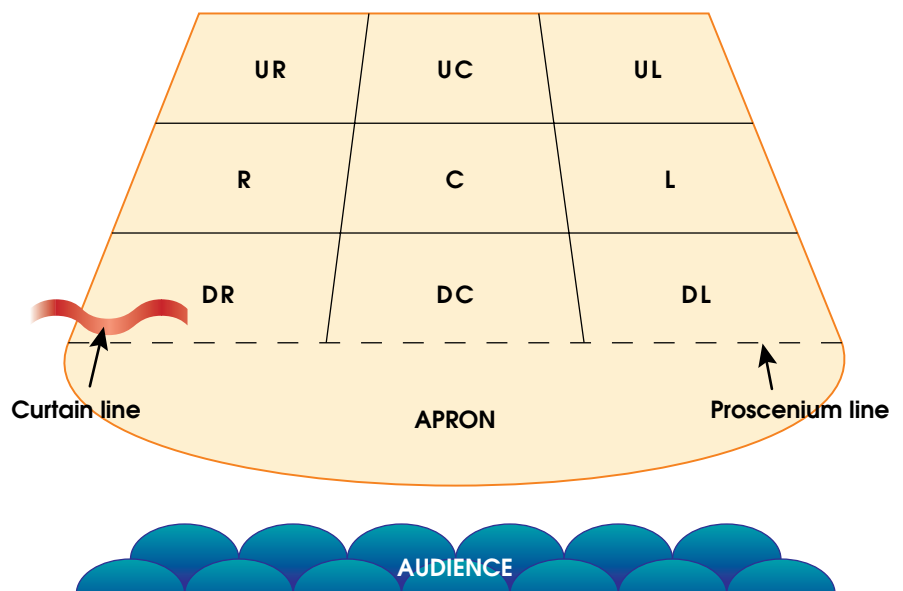
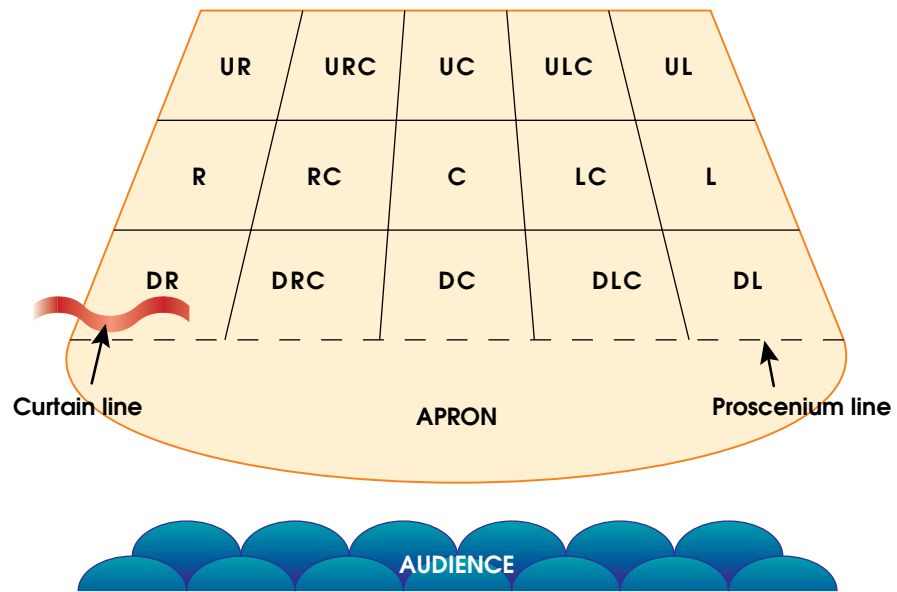


Figure 9-8

Proscenium Stage with Fifteen Acting Areas.



Dividing the stage helps the director to block the play and provides a guide, or road map, for the actors and technicians.

In arena theatre, because the audience is seated on all sides, the terms *upstage* and *downstage* cannot be used. Instead, the arena stage is usually viewed as either a map (north, south, east, west) or a clock (see Figure 9-9). During a performance, some actors will naturally have their backs to the audience, while others will be facing the audience. The director's challenge is to position the actors so that they can be seen by the greatest number of viewers.

The thrust stage can be thought of as a combination of a proscenium stage and an arena stage. The upper part of the stage, away from the audience, is usually treated like a proscenium stage. The part of the stage closest to the audience is treated like an arena stage.

Because of the vast differences in flexible staging, no one set of practices exists. Directions in flexible staging would depend on the shapes of the acting areas and audience areas. Directors often use a combination of techniques from both proscenium staging and arena staging.

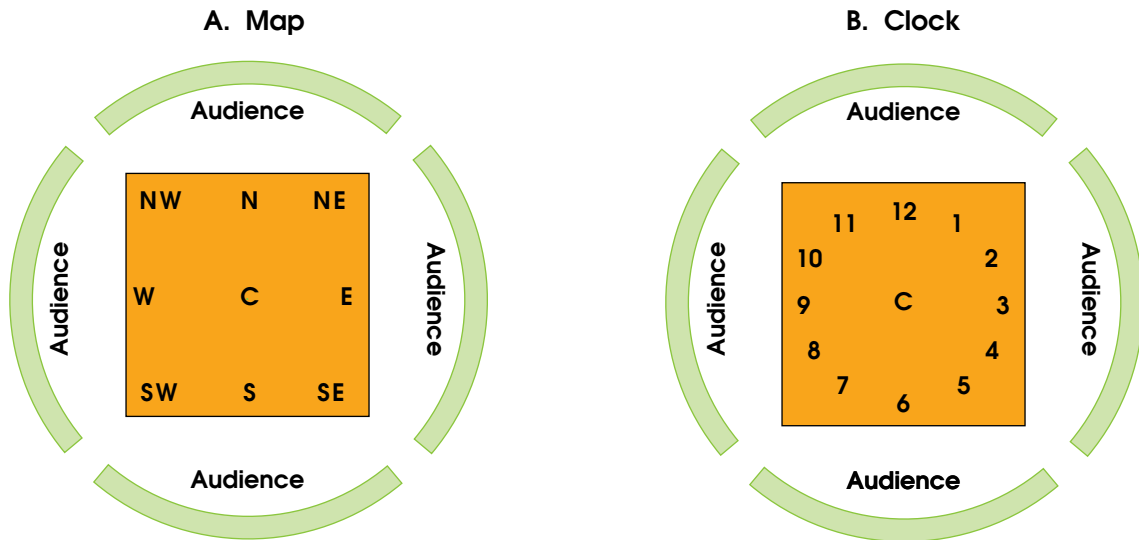
ACTION

1. Labeling a Proscenium Stage. Do the following activities to make sure you know the areas of a proscenium stage.

- Draw an outline of the proscenium stage. Label these areas: on-stage; offstage L and R; wings; backstage; proscenium line; proscenium arch; apron; house.
- Draw an outline of the proscenium stage. Label nine acting areas: DR, DC, DL, R, C, L, UR, UC, UL.

Figure 9–9

Dividing the Arena Stage.



2. **Arena Floor Plans.** Draw two floor plans illustrating how movement might be directed on an arena stage.



Acting Technique

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Understand and use basic body positions.
- ◆ Use basic stage movement and composition to create meaning.



Play the game Stage Terms. One member of the class is selected as the stage manager. The stage manager calls out a letter of the alphabet. The first acting company to call out a theatre word beginning with that letter wins a point for his or her acting company. Defining the word doubles the point value.

Every day we receive over 90 percent of our communication without the use of words, through nonverbal messages—facial expressions, gestures, or body language. In a play, much of the meaning comes nonverbally—from the way the actors relate onstage to the audience and to each other, as well as from basic stage movement and composition. It is important to understand the acting techniques involved in such communication.

Body Positions

The actor's position onstage in relation to the audience can be described by five different angles, called **body positions** (see Figure 9–10 on page 160). Each position makes a different emotional contact

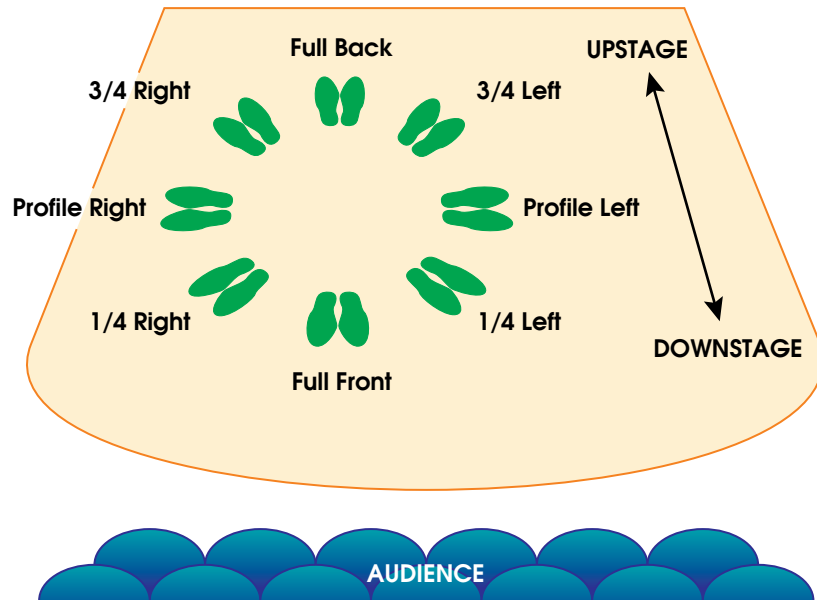
Figure 9–10

Actors' Basic Body Positions in Relation to the Audience.



The technique of acting can never be properly understood without practicing it.

Michael Chekhov



with the audience. On the proscenium stage, *full front position* means directly facing the audience. *One-quarter position* ($\frac{1}{4}$ right or $\frac{1}{4}$ left) means turning slightly, about 45 degrees, away from the audience. *Profile position* ($\frac{1}{2}$ right or $\frac{1}{2}$ left) means turning to face the side of the stage, 90 degrees away from the audience. *Three-quarter position* ($\frac{3}{4}$ right or $\frac{3}{4}$ left) means turning about 135 degrees away from the audience. *Full back position* means turning completely away from the audience and facing the rear of the stage.

In order to be seen by everyone in the audience, the actor is often given special instructions. To *open* or *open up*, means to position or turn the body more toward the audience. When an actor is told to *turn in*, turning should be toward the center of the stage. The direction *turn out* means to turn more to the side of the stage.

Other directions frequently given to actors relate to the actor's position in relation to other actors onstage. To give the audience a better view of the body and face, actors *cheat out* during conversations, turning more toward the audience than they would in normal conversation. This is called cheating because the audience isn't aware of the action. Frequently, actors are told to *share*. This means that they are to assume positions of equal strength by opening up to the audience equally, thus sharing the scene equally. If an actor is told to *give* or *give stage*, then that actor moves to a different part of the stage to allow another actor more emphasis or attention. The actor receiving more emphasis *takes* the scene. (See Figure 9–11.)

Movement and Composition

Movement is an exciting part of the actor's role onstage. Actors enter, exit, cross, sit, and rise based on motivation. Motivation is the

Figure 9-11

Ways for Two Actors to Share a Scene.

A. Four *shared* positions for two actors



B. Three *give and take* positions for two actors



“Acting isn't really a creative profession. It's an interpretive one.”

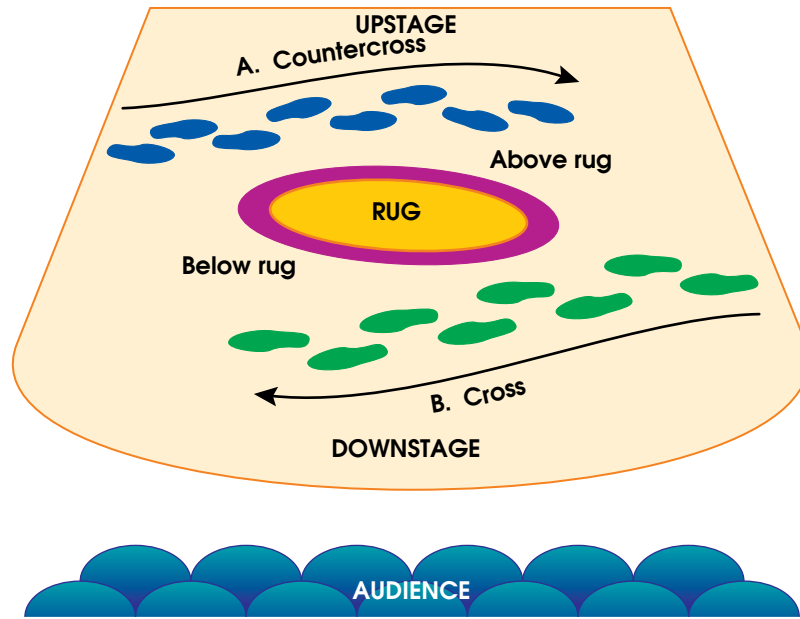
Paul Newman

purpose for or reason behind the move. When a character moves across the stage, it could be to answer the phone, open a door, or write a letter—but the move must have a reason and serve a purpose. Directors plan stage movements to emphasize the meaning in the playwright's work. All stage movement is planned and rehearsed, giving the director the opportunity to guide the actors. Actors will find many helpful suggestions in the “Guide for Basic Stage Movement and Business” featured in this chapter (see page 162).

As you know, planning the movement for a scene or play is called blocking. Some directors invite improvisational movement during rehearsals, thus working out the blocking with the actors. All entrances,

Figure 9-12

Cross and Countercross.



stage picture

an appealing and meaningful arrangement of performers on the stage; the picture that the audience sees onstage.

level

the actual head height of the actor as determined by his or her body position (sitting, lying, standing, or elevated by an artificial means such as a step unit or platform). Meaning is created in stage pictures by placing actors at different levels.

exits, crosses, and stage groupings are planned. After blocking, the actors add the plans to their scripts in pencil, in case changes occur as rehearsals progress.

Moving from one point to another onstage is called a *cross*. Indicate a cross in your script with an X. You should begin crosses with your upstage foot, which helps keep your body open to the audience. To complete a cross, the director may ask an actor to cross above or below a piece of furniture or an actor. *Above* means upstage, or behind the object or person; *below* means downstage, or in front.

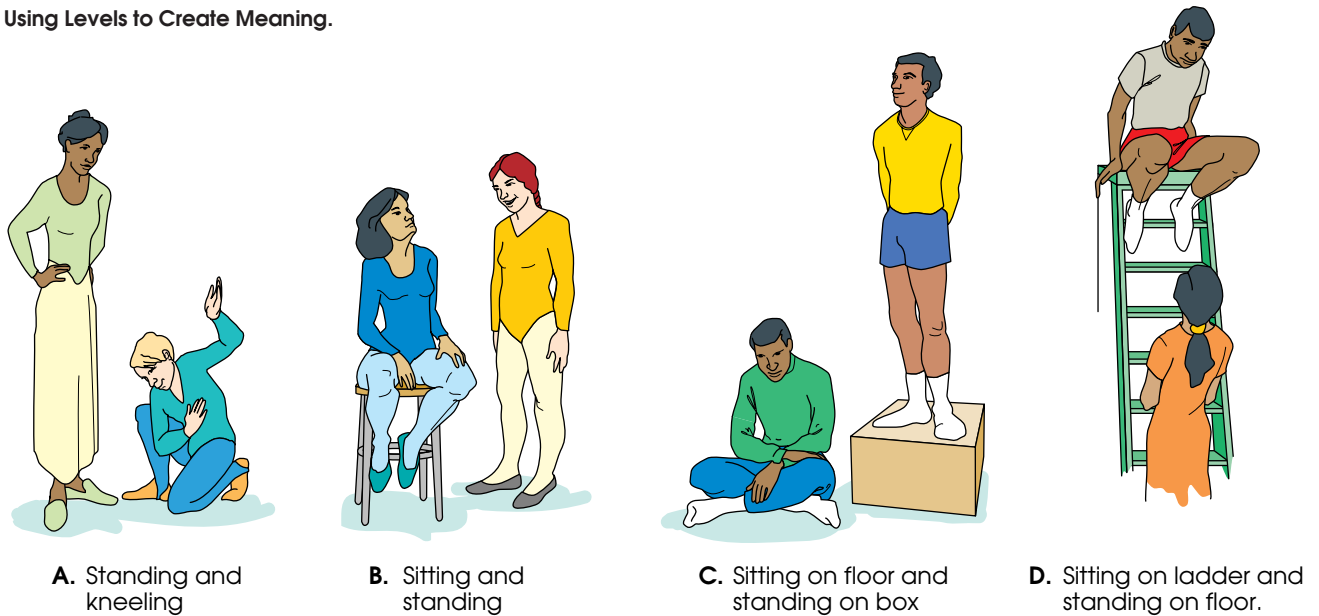
After one actor has moved, often another actor will need to move in the opposite direction, or *countercross* (see Figure 9-12). A countercross is sometimes needed so that the audience can see all the actors. A countercross might also be needed to call attention to a new focal point, or center of interest.

Inexperienced actors tend to line up onstage or clump together in a bunch. When this happens, the director may tell the actors to *dress stage*. This means that the actors need to look at the *composition*, the way they are grouped on the stage, and adjust their positions to balance or improve the stage picture. A **stage picture** is an appealing arrangement or grouping formed onstage by the performers. The director creates stage groupings to present a picture for the audience in much the same way that a photographer arranges people for a magazine layout.

Important considerations in planning a stage picture are levels and planes. The term **level** refers to an actor's actual head height. An actor is at his or her highest level when standing or when elevated in some way, as by a platform or set of steps. Different meanings can be created in the stage picture by placing characters at various levels to each other (see Figure 9-13).

Figure 9-13

Using Levels to Create Meaning.



planes

imaginary divisions giving depth to the proscenium stage. An actor moves through the stage planes as he or she moves downstage toward the audience or upstage away from the audience. Each imaginary plane is about 2 feet deep. An actor in plane 1 would seem more important to the audience than an actor in plane 6 (see Figure 9-14). When one actor causes another actor to turn his back to the audience, it is called *upstaging*. This can be avoided by actors playing in the same plane.

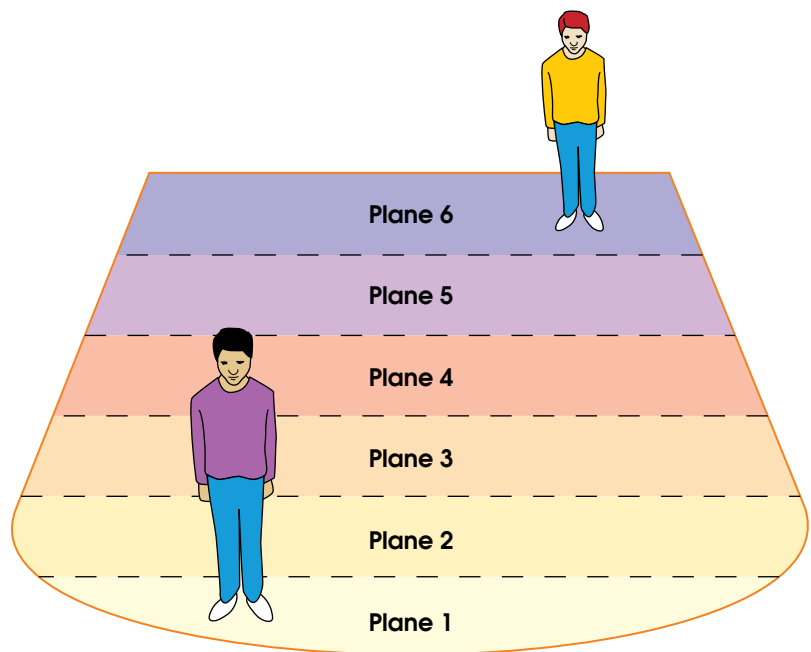
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Using their knowledge of body positions, levels, and planes, directors can create a composition, or stage picture, to establish the mood of a scene, help create emphasis, and show character relationships.

Figure 9-14

Imaginary Planes Showing Depth of Proscenium Stage.



ACTION



1. Creating an Acting Area. Working with your acting group, use masking tape to mark off nine or fifteen acting areas on the floor of your classroom.

- a. Make a set of stage directions, including entrances, exits, and crosses, using the areas on the floor (for example: Enter UR; X to DL; X UC; exit UL).
- b. Take turns instructing your group in stage direction and movement.
- c. Create a motivation for each set of movements you design. For example, motivation for the stage directions suggested in part (a) (Enter UR; X to DL; X UC; exit UL) could be: enter UR from the upstairs in response to phone ringing; X to DL to answer phone; X UC to sofa to pick up car keys; exit UL through kitchen door to get to car.
- d. Repeat the stage directions using the motivated movements.
- e. Discuss your observations.

2. Meaningful Stage Pictures. Work with a small group, using body positions, levels, and planes, to create a stage picture reflecting one of the following themes:

- | | | | |
|----------|---------|-------------|-------------|
| loss | triumph | separation | revenge |
| distrust | peace | celebration | hope |
| power | shame | grandeur | jealousy |
| grace | relief | gratitude | unhappiness |

3. Dramatize a Photograph. Using body positions, levels, and planes, bring to life a still photograph (use an art print or magazine photograph). Work with the same number of actors as people shown in the picture. Plan the movements that you imagine occurred prior to the “picture,” ending with the frozen image captured by the photographer.

Figure 9-15

Stage Picture.

