

# TROUPE



**By Jason Cox**

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**Players:** *Troupe* can accommodate as few as 3 players and as many as 8, but the ideal number is 5 (including the facilitator).

**Time:** 2 hours

**Props:** The game requires some sort of device for timing. If possible, play in a space that has lights and furniture you can manipulate. Ideally a selection of masks, puppets, or dolls would also be available, but these are optional.

### **Introduction:**

Good afternoon boys and girls, and welcome to the humble company of *Little D's Travelling Storytime, Inc!* In this game, players take on the roles of performers in a children's theatre group at the end of the season. The game's story primarily evolves in two arenas: firstly within performances for the benefit of an imagined audience, where in theory the "real" personalities and relationships of the characters are subsumed by the roles they play; secondly in the "real" world, in which the characters encounter the frustrations of touring and of seeing other people non-stop for an extended period. *Troupe* begins with the characters heading out to their final two shows of the season, and ends during their return trip.

### **Backstory:**

*Troupe* is based on the author's memories from his time as a touring puppeteer in 1999-2002. The archetypes are each drawn from the repertoire of shows his troupe performed, the roles from their responsibilities at the shows, and the events from things that really occurred over the course of his time in the troupe..

## **Character Creation: (15 minutes)**

- **Management:** One player takes the role of Management, and assumes several responsibilities:
  - Firstly, Management facilitates play by taking the lead in understanding the rules and orchestrating character creation with the other players. If there is any uncertainty about how play should proceed, it is up to Management to resolve it.
  - Management is also a character who is back at the Troupe’s “home base”, and generally exists “off-screen. Management answers the phones, handles whatever problems can be resolved from a distance, and signs the checks... unless a client fails to pay, in which case things may be pretty lean for a while.
  - Management is responsible for beginning and ending of the prologue and each act, which they do by clapping and applauding the other players. This is generally a matter of keeping time so that play stays within the allotted time, but Management can also extend or shorten a scene if it seems to fit the dramatic needs of the game.
  - The flow of time within a scene is also subject to manipulation by Management, and they may have the troupe replay an act or a portion of an act. This should only be done to serve dramatic play, and not as an exercise of control. It is also important that the elements of the act determined by the troupe remain in place, which in general means that Management shouldn’t fast forward to a new scene or rewind to a point before the established background.
  - If other non-player roles are necessary, Management can assume those roles. If the game is in a public area and passers-by consent, management may also

conscript them to into additional roles. Examples of these might be the manager of a theatre, a waiter in a restaurant, the cop who pulled the Troupe over for having a busted headlight, etc. These roles should always be created in reaction to a situation the Troupe itself has devised.

- **The Troupe:** Every other player is a member of the performing troupe, and has an archetype, an attribute, and a role to define. There are nametags included with this document that include a space to record these choices. There are also some questions that will need to be answered about their relationship with the troupe.
  - **Archetypes:** Each player will select one of these archetypes: Queen, Dreamer, Wolf, Mouse, Knight, Gnome, Buffalo. The names of the archetypes serve as the names of the troupe members, and describe their “real” personality, though the terms may also apply to the roles they take on before an audience. The archetypes are chosen in the order presented, so someone must volunteer to be Queen before someone else can be Dreamer. Also, as an effect of this a game with two players and Management will only have Queen and Dreamer in the troupe. Technically Management is also a character, just one whom is generally absent from play.
  - **Roles:** Each player except for management will choose a role that describes the troupe member’s responsibilities during a show, as well as their function in this game. These roles are: Lighting, Sets, Props, and Costumes. The last person to pick their archetype will be the first person to choose a role, and so on in reverse order back to the Queen. Each role must have at least one member assigned to it before any role is allowed to have two. If there are fewer than four players, then

some will assume additional roles. At the beginning of each act, on or off stage, these roles answer specific questions.

- **Lighting:** A player in the lighting role will determine what happened right before an act begins.
  - **Sets:** The Sets role decides where exactly the action will be taking place in this act.
  - **Costumes:** During a performance, the Costumes role decides what role each troupe member will be playing. When the characters are “off-stage”, the Costumes player determines the emotional state of the characters at the beginning of the act.
  - **Props:** Props creates a point of conflict for the characters, determining the current situation and setting in motion the actions that are follow.
- **Context:** Each member of the troupe has been with *Little D’s Travelling Storytime, Inc!* for at least the length of this season, and they know each other reasonably well. The questions below are meant to clarify their relationship with the company, which in turn may affect their relationships with other characters. The questions are intentionally broad and subject to interpretation, but some sub-questions have been included to suggest possible directions they might be taken.
- **How long have you been performing?** This could mean as a general description of how much of a character’s life has been spent on stage, but could also relate specifically to their time with *Little D’s Travelling Storytime, Inc!*

- **Why are you here?** Performing does not pay well, has few benefits, and involves a lot of stressful situations, so why does your character do it? What particular skills does the character bring to the Troupe? Are there relationships that drew them there in the first place?
  - **Where do you see your future?** Are you devoted to helping the company succeed? Was it a stepping stone to something bigger? Are you going back to school to finish your degree?
  - **What kinds of subject matter will the performances include?** Are we doing drug addiction awareness or fairy tales? This last question should be considered as a group, and might take slightly longer to answer.
- **Traits:** Each player picks one trait of the three listed beside their archetype on the list below to focus their character on. Players then begin a story about a time this season when that trait came into play, but partway through stops and asks one of the other players to finish the story in a way that portrays the trait as an asset. They then repeat the process with a different player, but this time the trait is described as creating complications instead. For example, Queen says, “I recall being very direct with Summer Camp’s director about nailing down a booking, since he was waffling about what their facilities were, but it didn’t work out very well, did it Wolf?” Wolf responds, “No. The guy said they had a PA system, but it was totally busted and our soundtrack didn’t work, and, since we didn’t bring any musical instruments, we all sang a capella and it was awful.” After either story a short exchange might follow to further develop the relationship between the characters.

- **Queen-** ambitious, direct, regal
- **Dreamer-** creative, eccentric, curious
- **Wolf-** passionate, competitive, magnetic
- **Mouse-** quiet, thoughtful, pacifist
- **Knight-** loyal, honor-bound, impetuous
- **Gnome-** old, sneaky, cautious
- **Buffalo-** strong, imposing, reactive

- **Setting the stage**

- Play consists of a prologue and 4 acts, two of which happen “on stage” and two of which happen off. Each act begins with the roles “setting the scene” by selecting, in the order listed below, what the exact situation characters will be playing. If two players share a role, then they should collaboratively decide on this choice. The process of setting the stage should be completed in under five minutes, after which Management indicates that action begins by applauding. Once time has elapsed Management applauds again to let the players know the act is over.
- **1st- Lighting:** Lighting characters determine the time for the act. This could be the hour, season, or an event that is occurring during the act. In terms of play, this means that Lighting also determines what has just happened right before an act begins. If the group has the ability to control the lighting, Lighting players should adjust it to match their chosen time as closely as possible.
- **2nd- Sets:** Players in the Sets role determine the place in which the act will take place. When “on stage” this can be more or less anywhere, but “off stage” it is

confined to more realistic locales. This location will be most effective if it is in some way connected with the time as determined by Lighting. For example, if a vehicle has just been in an accident then the side of the road, a garage, or a hospital might all provide great opportunities for play. If the environment you are playing in has easily movable elements, like pillows or chairs, players in the Sets role should alter them to match the location they describe for other players.

- **3rd- Costumes:** When characters are “on stage”, players in the Costumes role assign them characters to enact that are consistent with the time and place determined by Lights and Sets. If the group has access to puppets, masks, or dolls, they may also pass those out at this time to appropriate character. When characters are “off stage”, players in the Costumes role selects an emotional state for each player to begin the act in. Since the number of players is variable, these emotions may be repeated as often as necessary and arranged in any order. For example, three players could be “Tired” one “Smitten” and the last one “Pumped” or alternately they could all share the “Smitten” state, which could create an even more complex scene.
- **4th- Props:** In *Troupe* the players in the Props role gets to present a conflict for the characters, one which integrates the choices from the other three roles. “On stage” this encompasses the overarching action, such as an entry into Wonderland or rescuing captives from Captain Hook. “Off stage” this refers to events which complicate the lives of the troupe, such as Queen arranging gigs that involve long stretches of driving because he is frustrated that nobody else helps with the bookings. Where Sets has described what happened “before” Props defines what



is happening “now”, though a player in this role should be careful to suggest conflicts rather than directing actions.

- Here is an example of how the stage might be set drawn from Act 1, which thematically focuses on new beginnings:
  - Lighting- “As the curtain raises, it is a fresh spring morning just after a light rain. It has been a hard winter, and the the darkest day of that winter was the passing of the beloved Queen.”
  - Sets- “A sleepy town on the outskirts of the kingdom wakes to the sound of laughter and merriment in the streets. They bustle with activity even though the sun has barely risen.”
  - Costumes- (Indicating players with each selection) “Twin girls dance in circles around their father, the apple seller, and their mother, who is secretly of royal blood.”
  - Props- “Today the kingdom is celebrating news from an Oracle that a new Queen will be found within a fortnight. Her reign is foretold to bring great prosperity to the land, though she will not live to see it.”

- **Scene Structure** (70 minutes)

- Below are rough descriptions of the theme and events surrounding each act, as well as some suggestions that players in each role may choose from to set the stage. Players are encouraged to use their own ideas or to tailor the examples provided, but in doing so they ought to keep the theme of each act in mind.

- **Prologue- Hitting the road** (10 minutes)
  - In the prologue the troupe has just left the studio to drive for two days to get to their last two shows for the season. It is early morning, and Queen is driving. Use this as a time to get to know the characters and how they interact with each other.
- **Act 1- On Stage** (20 minutes)
  - In Act 1 the Troupe is doing its second to last performance, with Management sitting in as the audience. The act is thematically linked to the idea of beginnings and innocence.
  - **Lighting-** Dawn. Spring after a long winter. A holiday after a grim time.
  - **Sets-** In a quiet village. In a large house. In a deep, dark forest.
  - **Costumes-** Children and playmates. Talking animals. Fairies of every description.
  - **Props-** A festive public event. An exploration of a new realm. A visitation by someone or something not seen in living memory.
- **Act 2- Off Stage** (20 minutes)
  - Act 2 occurs between the two performances, but can be at any point in that time span, such as immediately after the performance in Act 1 or just before the performance in Act 2. Thematically Act 2 is about a gathering tension and diminishing control.
  - **Lighting-** Late Afternoon, having finally finished driving. Smack in the middle of rush hour. Mealtime, just after the food has been ordered.

- **Sets-** Backstage after the end of the show in Act 1. In a hotel with the TV on. At a fast food diner.
  - **Costumes-** Pumped and excited. Exhausted or bored. Utterly smitten.
  - **Props-** Running out of money for gas or food. Mechanical trouble. Bad reviews or other professional challenges.
- **Act 3- On Stage** (20 minutes)
    - Act 3 occurs at least a day later than Act 1, and in a different venue (though it may be close by). It is the very last show of the season, and thematically represents a point of uncertainty and disequilibrium.
    - **Lighting-** Twilight, right as the street lights come on. The Witching Hour. Just after the music stops.
    - **Sets-** In a foreboding castle. Deep underground, with only the light of a torch. In a large, empty area, surrounded by the sound of wind.
    - **Costumes-** Spirits re-enacting their death. Warriors on the eve of battle. Musicians, performing before a mighty and temperamental king.
    - **Props-** An uncertain rescue. A confrontation of personal flaws. An escape from a doomed world.
  - **Act 4- Off Stage** (20 minutes)
    - Act 4 may occur at any point after the show in Act 3, but before the official end of the summer. It is possible that some, or all, of the troupe members will not be coming back next year. Act 4 represents endings, good and bad, but also the possibility of new beginnings.

- **Lighting-** Midnight on New Year’s Eve. Just before everyone goes to sleep. Right after all the bars have closed.
  - **Sets-** In the van for the last time this season. In a movie theatre, during the end credits. Back in the studio and putting away the materials until next season.
  - **Costumes-** Abandoned and lonely. Optimistic for the future. Nostalgic about an event from this past season.
  - **Props-** A death in a troupe member’s family. The end of a relationship. Medical trouble.
- **Debrief** (15 minutes)
    - The debrief is a chance to validate experiences, make meaning of the game, and discuss areas that may be troubling emotionally. It can be hard to anticipate how exactly to do that, but the “outsider” perspective Management occupies in *Troupe* should give that player the chance to pay attention to verbal and physical cues to facilitate that discourse in a way that can be difficult for players. In order to begin the process, consider having every player (including Management) take a minute or two to write down immediate thoughts at the end of the play, without saying anything to anyone. Whether they will share what they write or not is up to them, but it gives a starting point for discussion. Then use some of the sample questions below to guide the direction of the conversation. Don’t worry if it veers off track, that just means play was meaningful in a different manner than was anticipated! Also, feel free to go out socially after the end of the game and continue talking.

- **Suggested Discussion Questions:**
  - When did you feel supported by another player or character?
  - What is something you will be glad to leave in the game?
  - How did the game connect to your own experiences?
  - Which act felt the most meaningful to you, and why?

<p>Name/Archetype:</p> <h1>Queen</h1> <p><b>Role (Circle One):</b> Lighting, Sets, Costumes, Props</p> <p><b>Trait (Circle one):</b> Ambitious, Direct, Regal</p>	<p>Name/Archetype:</p> <h1>Dreamer</h1> <p><b>Role (Circle One):</b> Lighting, Sets, Costumes, Props</p> <p><b>Trait (Circle one):</b> Creative, Eccentric, Curious</p>
<p>Name/Archetype:</p> <h1>Wolf</h1> <p><b>Role (Circle One):</b> Lighting, Sets, Costumes, Props</p> <p><b>Trait (Circle one):</b> Passionate, Competitive, Magnetic</p>	<p>Name/Archetype:</p> <h1>Mouse</h1> <p><b>Role (Circle One):</b> Lighting, Sets, Costumes, Props</p> <p><b>Trait (Circle one):</b> Quiet, Thoughtful, Pacifist</p>
<p>Name/Archetype:</p> <h1>Knight</h1> <p><b>Role (Circle One):</b> Lighting, Sets, Costumes, Props</p> <p><b>Trait (Circle one):</b> Loyal, Honor-bound, Impetuous</p>	<p>Name/Archetype:</p> <h1>Gnome</h1> <p><b>Role (Circle One):</b> Lighting, Sets, Costumes, Props</p> <p><b>Trait (Circle one):</b> Old, Sneaky, Cautious</p>
<p>Name/Archetype:</p> <h1>Buffalo</h1> <p><b>Role (Circle One):</b> Lighting, Sets, Costumes, Props</p> <p><b>Trait (Circle one):</b> Strong, Imposing, Reactive</p>	<p>Name/Archetype:</p> <h1>Management</h1>