

A Conversation Piece

For 10 people* engaged in conversation: the 1976 version.

by David Gunn

* Boise, Cariole, Errol, Hezekiah, Klaxton, Noots, Queenie, Taft, Wembley and Zugs.

Preparation

Furnish the performing area with the following:

- a fashionable couch
- a fashionable chair or two
- several fashionable rugs
- several fashionable magazines
- perhaps a fashionable lamp
- piano (may be a toy piano)
- table on which are piled pennies and pills
- telephone
- any other items (your choice) which might look nice

Arrange these or other items to create a living room tableau. Follow the scripts and instructions, interacting with the people specified. Change sections via a predetermined signal, preferably a surreptitious one. Allow each section to run at least 20 seconds, with the exception of 1, 14 and 15, which are read through once only. Repeat the phrases or instructions – or vary them as you like – in the other sections until signaled to proceed to the next section. Above all, enjoy yourselves!

This is the fourth version of *A Conversation Piece*: 5 players, Feb. 1969; 16 players, Nov. 1970; 24 players (good grief!), Jan. 1971; 10 players, Jan. 1976. May it henceforth rest in avant-garde peace.

A CONVERSATION PIECE

1. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?”
2. Mumble excitedly to someone.
3. (sing-song into telephone) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice? Hello? Hello?”
4. “Well, now that we’ve got this piece moving, what shall we talk about? Sports? Politics? Religion? Just name it!”
5. Whistle a tuneless tune.
6. Sit down on the couch. Lean over and whisper to the person nearest you. Then sit back and chuckle.
7. (to Noots) “I’d say he was a man who thinks money grows on trays!”
8. “You know, this guy next to me gives me a pain in the neck.”
9. Cough, wheeze, hold you sides. Act ill, but refuse help if anybody offers it.
10. Go around to various people and ask them what time it is.
11. Blow your nose. Turn 90 degrees and do it again.
12. Listen to Zugs. Smile and nod politely.
13. “Oh dear, what happened to Sheila? Oh dear!”
14. Hiss quietly.
15. (mumble) “The end, the end, the end, the end.”

A CONVERSATION PIECE

1. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?”
2. (to Zugs) “Knock knock.” (pause) “Machiavelli.” (pause) “Machiavelli good suit for 80 bucks!”
3. Twitch nervously. Groan a little. Take a pill. Look around in despair for some water.
4. Sit down. Guffaw and slap your knee. Stand up, stretch your legs and sit back down.
5. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice? I said, isn’t that nice?”
6. Toss pennies out into the audience one at a time. Do not aim at anyone in particular.
7. (to Cariole) “Say, what’s your definition of a waiter?”
8. Saw back and forth across your neck with your finger.
9. Play with your hair. See if you can get it to do a trick.
10. Whistle a popular song of the day. For extra credit, whistle “Ta Ra Ra Boom Ti Ay.”
11. (to Boise) “Say, are you going to straighten up your room today?”
12. “And if someone had told me last year that I’d be participating in a thing like this, I would’ve said they were crazy!”
13. (to Boise) “Hey, *I’m* not Sheila. Are *you* Sheila?”
14. Hold your breath. Look as if you might pass out.
15. (in a monotone) “The end, the end, the end, the end.”

A CONVERSATION PIECE

1. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?”
2. (to Noots) (pause) “Who’s there?” (pause) “Machiavelli who?” (pause) “What?”
3. Sit down. Open a magazine and skim through it. Act amused.
4. “Wow, it’s great to see so many familiar faces here today. I don’t feel so self-conscious any more!”
5. (to Hezekiah) “Well, Hezekiah, I see your wife’s back from California.”
6. Flex your muscles unobtrusively.
7. Snicker softly.
8. “Is there a doctor in the room? I have this terrible pain in my neck. It’s been bothering me for nearly a week now. I just know it’s something serious. Why won’t somebody help me? Call an ambulance or something!”
9. Curl up on a rug. Wave one arm in the air like a semaphore.
10. (sing-song, still on the rug) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice? Hey, watch where you’re stepping!”
11. Slowly turn in a circle on your knees.
12. (continuing to turn on your knees) “Illicit transmission systems, whether employed for the circulation of persons, objects or messages, have some noteworthy general features. Once a system of transmission has been worked out, there is some chance that those who use it will be able to transmit more than one kind of item.”
13. “She what? Hmm? She what? She who?”
14. Jump up high in the air once. Then look embarrassed.
15. (out of rhythm with everybody else) “The end, the end, the end, the end.”

A CONVERSATION PIECE

1. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?”
2. Go around to various people and tell them that they’re looking well today.
3. “I’m hungry! Where’s the food? You can’t have a party without food, you know – I mean, a really successful one, one that people will remember for weeks to come. So where’s the chow?”
4. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice? So what, you ask?”
5. (to Zugs) (pause) “Good grief. I always knew she wore low-cut dresses, but I didn’t think that you could see her back all the way from California!”
6. “Hey! Who’s laughing? Stop it this instant! Do you hear? This is certainly no laughing matter! What are you, some kind of mental case or something?”
7. “Oh, I wish I was in the land of cotton, or someplace like that. Anywhere but here. I’m not having a good time, not at all. There’s too much gossip and the like. I don’t like gossip. It breeds discontent. Besides, I’m hungry!”
8. Massage a crick in your neck.
9. “Enough of this! I want to hear a story and I want to hear it right now! And if I don’t, I’ll, I’ll ... I’ll turn myself into a toad, and I’m not kidding!”
10. Squat down, toad-like. Occasionally flick out your tongue.
11. Stand up, as if fully recovered. (to Errol) “I’m certainly glad I wasn’t born in Latvia.” (pause) “Because I can’t speak Latvian, of course!”
12. Listen to Zugs. Stifle a yawn or two.
13. (sing in sing-song arpeggios) “La la la la la la la la la laaaaaa.”
14. Take off your glasses and polish them. If you have no glasses, rub your eyes in disbelief.
15. “Nnn nnn nnn nnn nnn nnn.”

ERROL

meet Hezekiah

A CONVERSATION PIECE

1. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?”
2. Stand on tiptoes and peer out into the audience as if looking for someone in particular.
3. “You know, sometimes you wonder why anyone in his right mind would bother to write a composition like this. I mean, talk about derivative!”
4. (to Hezekiah) “Yeah? So what! Huh? So what?”
5. Sit in a chair and tap your foot rhythmically. Reach down and make it stop.
6. Laugh under your breath. Jingle coins in your pocket.
7. Get down on the floor and look for something you dropped.
8. Go around to various people and peer closely at their necks.
9. “Just look at these rugs! They’re absolutely filthy! Just filthy! But I must admit, there is something attractive about them.”
10. (pointing to Hezekiah) “Look, everyone, look! He did it! He turned himself into a toad!”
11. (to Hezekiah) (pause) “Oh really? Why? Why on earth?”
12. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice? Hi there, chum!”
13. “Sheila? Sheila? Who’s Sheila? Hmm? Come on, someone tell me, OK? What have I missed now?”
14. (whisper loudly) “OK, this is the end now, right?”
15. (whisper loudly) “The end, the end, the end, the end.”

QUEENIE

meet no one in particular

A CONVERSATION PIECE

1. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?”
2. Yawn vociferously. “Well, let’s get this show on the road!”
3. (to the person nearest you) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Hey, I asked you a question. How *are* you? Well? Hey, Buddy!
4. Walk around the room and admire the furnishings. Act impressed.
5. Sneeze wetly into your hand. Sit down in a chair and wipe off your hand on it, trying to be discrete.
6. Sit on the couch. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice? Or sort of nice?”
7. (to the person nearest you, anxiously) “What are you doing?! What on earth are you doing?!”
8. (to a different person) “Wanna purchase a necklace? Or a neckerchief? Or maybe a neck brace, hmm? Hey, how about a necktie?”
9. Mingle with some different people. Make sure that you catch each person’s eye.
10. Walk over to the piano and plunk out a tuneless tune.
11. “Well, we’re two-thirds of the way through this piece and I sure don’t see why we had to have all those rehearsals. This is ridiculous! I thought this was supposed to be some sort of avant-garde composition. Well, big deal!”
12. Look at your hands closely. Roll up your pants legs and look at your ankles and knees. (in a frightened manner) “Oh, my god!”
13. “I know who Sheila is. Yep, that’s right. I know. No one else knows but me, and I’m not tellin’. Not right now, anyway.
14. Blow your nose. Excuse yourself loudly.
15. (whisper loudly to the person nearest you) “Are we done now? Is this thing finally over?”

A CONVERSATION PIECE

1. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?”
2. Scratch yourself in different places. Do it again, harder this time.
3. Slap someone on the back in a firm but friendly manner. Then untie his or her shoelaces.
4. Curl up on a rug. Pretend you are a dormant volcano.
5. (still on the rug) “You know, if you people knew what was good for you, you’d get out of here right now! I think I may explode at any minute!”
6. (still on the rug) “California! Somebody’s talking about California! Why, I used to know someone who’d been there! And the stories she used to tell me. Gosh! Say, I wonder if anyone realizes that I’m still down here on the rug?”
7. (still on the rug) (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice? Hey, watch where you’re walking, OK?”
8. Sit up stiffly. Crane your neck in various positions.
9. Stand up. (to Taft) “Can I help you find something? I’m only trying to be helpful, you know. I guess it’s my nature.”
10. Point frantically at Hezekiah. Look horrified.
11. (to Zugs) “Do you believe in fate? Well, I do. In fact, I think it was fate that brought me here tonight. Do you believe in taxicabs? Well, I do. In fact, I think it was a taxicab that brought me here, too.”
12. “Number twelve? Gosh this thing is nearly over. My, how time flies. I would just like to take this opportunity to tell you all how much I’ve enjoyed being with you.”
13. “You know, it’s a pity about poor Sheila. Tsk tsk, what a shame.”
14. Point to Taft. (to the person nearest you) “Who’s that?”
15. (whisper loudly) “The, the, the, the, the, the.”

BOISE

meet Noots, Errol, Wembley and Klaxton

A CONVERSATION PIECE

1. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?”
2. Sit down on the couch. Pick up a magazine and skim through it, humming contentedly.
3. Fling down the magazine. (to the person nearest you) “Oh, shut up for once!”
4. (to Wembley) “What are you doing? What on earth are you doing?!”
5. Brush lint from your clothes. Find more lint and brush that away, too. Act shocked.
6. (loudly) “Ha! (pause) “Ha ha!” (pause) “Har har har!”
7. (to Errol) “Did you drop something? You want some help? Is it bigger than a breadbox?”
8. Rub your neck. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice? Although my neck hurts.”
9. “You know, considering the amount of time we’ve spent on this piece – much too much time, if you ask me – I’ll be really disappointed if the audience doesn’t give us a big hand for it.”
10. “And another thing – these stupid, hackneyed jokes I’ve heard here tonight. Not very imaginative, if you ask me. Whatever happened to good old American Shakespeare, anyway? ‘To be or not to be, that’s the question.’ Now *there’s* something worthwhile!”
11. (to Noots) (pause) “No, why? Is it crooked?” Have a good chuckle over this line.
12. (to Klaxton) “Nice weather for toads, isn’t it? (a little louder) “I say, it’s nice weather for toads, isn’t it?” (still louder) “Hey, it’s nice weather for toads, isn’t it? Hey fella, can you hear me?”
13. (to Noots) “Are *you* Sheila? Why, *I’m* not Sheila, not at all.”
14. Clear your throat.
15. “The end, the end, the end, the end.”

A CONVERSATION PIECE

1. Sit down. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?”
2. (still sitting) “Hey, I really don’t care how you all are, you know. I was just kidding. As far as I’m concerned, you can all go play with toads. I simply don’t care.”
3. Stand up authoritatively. “May I have everyone’s attention? Hey you! Shut up! This is important, quite important! Your attention, please. It’s really urgent!”
4. “What’s the use? They simply won’t listen to me. They never have, either. Ever since I was just a young lad, people haven’t listened to me. They’d just pretend I was a toad or something.”
5. (to the person nearest you) “My goodness. How about that! Isn’t that something?”
6. Stand up straight against the nearest wall. Cover your lips with your fingertips. Follow other people’s actions with your eyes.
7. Walk to the middle of the room. “Hey you people, listen to me! Everyone shut up for a minute! This is really important! Why don’t you listen to me?” (point to the nearest person) “Stop that this instant!”
8. Pace nervously back and forth. Rub your neck.
9. Look for something in your pockets.
10. Groan a little. Sit down and wince. Pick up a magazine. Groan again.
11. Hold your script out. (to Klaxton) “Hey *I’m* not saying this. *You* say it. It’s too demeaning for me to say it.”
12. Pull up your socks. Cough loudly, holding your side. Stagger around the room, looking for sympathy.
13. (in a monotone) “We’ll all be killed. We’ll all be killed. We’ll all be killed.”
14. (anxiously) “Well, it’s about time! I finally got your attention, and it’s not a moment too soon, either!”
15. (pause) “Aw nuts!”

A CONVERSATION PIECE

1. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?”
2. (to the person nearest you) “Say, don’t I know you from somewhere? Your name’s on the tip of my tongue. Yes, I’m sure of it. Now, don’t deny it, you can’t fool me.”
3. Wander around the room. Bump into people and then excuse yourself.
4. Point to Wembley. “What’s happening to him? (Hold your throat) What’s happening to my throat? I think I’ve got a frog in my throat! Or maybe a toad! Good grief, if there’s anything I don’t need, it’s a toad in my throat!”
5. Pick up a magazine and skim through it, reading aloud a sentence or two.
6. Sit down on the couch and twiddle your thumbs. Cross and uncross your legs. Wave to the people in the room. Bounce up and down on the couch gently.
7. (to Taft) “Hey, fella. What’re you trying to do? Start a riot or something? Now just pipe down. This is a performance piece we’re doing and there’s no room for troublemakers.”
8. “My neck doesn’t hurt. I feel fine. What’s wrong with all of you people? Come to think of it, though, my *foot* hurts a little bit.”
9. “Enough talk, already. I feel as if I’m about to burst into song!” (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that nice?” (hold your throat) “Croak. Croak.”
10. Walk off stage furtively. As you return, run your hands longingly over the piano, looking somewhat guilty.
11. (to Taft) (pause) “Why, I’d be glad to. However, I must confess that, frog or toad, there’s still something in my throat. Well, no matter. (sing-song) “Hello. How are you? I’m fine. Isn’t that ... croak, croak.”
12. Hold your hands over your ears. Cough, then sit on your haunches, froglike.
13. “Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”
14. Shuffle quietly around the room, looking for Sheila.
15. “The end, the end, the end, the end.”