

Commons Room

A Slice of Campus

Act Naturally

Four MBA students stand in a circle, projecting their voices at an imaginary black hole in the floor.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!"

At five after the hour, one more student rushes in to join her classmates. "You're just in time for *budigas*," says Theatre Arts Teaching Artist-In-Residence Kathryn Spitz. "Ready?"

The students chant in unison:

"*Budiga, budiga, budiga ... Dugiba, dugiba, dugiba ... Gudiba, gudiba, gudiba...*"

At first glance, these projection and enunciation exercises look more like a finals-week meltdown than a business school class. But the unusual teaching methods are designed to give students a big edge in the workplace.

In the corporate world, it's no secret that communication and interpersonal skills are key. *The Wall Street Journal's* employee-recruiter surveys consistently rank these abilities among the most valued. So last year, the University's Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business called in an expert.

Enter Spitz, a professional actress who has worked with such talents as Lisa Kudrow from the *Friends* TV series and Linda Hamilton, the star actress in the film *Terminator*. Spitz brings her stage and screen know-how to the classroom in a new graduate course, "Developing Your Business Style Using Theater Techniques."

By learning acting techniques, students not only hone their presentation abilities but also develop what Spitz calls their "off-the-cuff"—meaning improvisational skills they can use in key career moments, from job interviews to elevator face time with the CEO.

After *budigas*, deep breaths, and black-hole yells, the class is ready to rehearse for next week's final presentations. Spitz introduces the first speaker: "Ladies and gentlemen, Rebecca Bamberger." Bamberger approaches the podium, poised and confident. Throughout her speech, she holds her pony-tailed head high, barely glancing at her notes. But even a natural like Bamberger has something to gain from this class.

"Your intro needs to be streamlined," says Spitz. "Overall, I think your



off-the-cuff is good, but don't rely on it too much, because sometimes you include more detail than necessary."

At the end of class, the students view videotapes of their performances. On the wide screen, it's easy for them to see their own tics. All of them have something to overcome—one student waves his hand back and forth unconsciously; another sways while speaking. But they're all improving.

Next week, in final presentations, they'll have a chance to do even better. Another opportunity to perform. What more could any actor—or corporate executive—ask?

—Elaine Vitone

A Good Yarn

Sophomores Emily Frank and Ashley Graby walk down a quiet hallway of Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, following the faint sounds of laughter and talking ahead. The air smells crisply sanitary, and the walls glow with a waxy, soothing light. The playful chatter grows louder, and the two

students turn right into a warm, brightly lit room.

Inside, children clothed in hospital gowns, surrounded by their families, are playing with toys or concentrating on games. The Pitt students sit down at a small rectangular table, lay out crochet hooks and colorful bundles of yarn, and take on new identities—Frank and Graby become Lil' Grannies for this visit.

In 2004, Pitt students Blair Giffin, Noreen Hossain, and Jessica Ehresman decided to create a community for students who enjoy knitting and crocheting, and the Needle Nerds were born. During meetings, the Nerds teach each other different yarn-working skills and share project ideas. They also volunteer at Children's Hospital, a major focus for the club, where they adopt the pseudonym "Lil' Grannies."

"It's not about the children being sick," says senior Blair Giffin, a business and economics major. "It's about us going there and teaching them a fun



Giffin