

Top Tips for a Terrific Audition

By Ellen Roeseler

OK. So you've finally decided to take the plunge. You've worked on props, painted sets, and become a season ticket holder – all fun, but merely “fronts” for your real ambition – to be on stage. This is it. Now or never. You're not getting any younger.

First, however, you must get through the most terrifying ordeal faced by humans since time began; the one thing guaranteed to turn even the toughest person you know into a trembling mass of jelly, a blabbering idiot, a graceless clod. You must face – the audition!

Show me an actor who says they don't get nervous during auditions, and I'll show you a good actor – who lies! Everyone gets nervous, everyone becomes competitive, everyone is afraid everyone else is laughing at them. Did I say everyone? Even the most prepared, the most creative, the most well-known of the group gets butterflies in their stomach, especially if auditioning for a part they really want. If they're veterans, they may appear to be calm, cool and collected. 'Appear' is the operative word.

But on the up side, performing for your fellow actors during an audition is the toughest audience you will face. After that, opening night is a breeze! So – how do you get past this nerve-racking experience? Well, I can't do anything about the butterflies, but I can give you some tips that may help you feel a bit more prepared.

Tip No. 1 – Do your homework. Basically, read the play, the whole play, at least once. Scripts are generally available for checkout prior to auditions. Decide on the parts you want, and then read it again, concentrating on just your part. Some directors will tell you ahead of time which parts will be read for each character. Some directors will, in fact, only put those pages out for checkout. If that's the case, use your noggin. Get the whole play somehow, or at least the story, movie or TV miniseries. This may happen especially with musicals, as scripts are rented and not purchased, and there are substantial penalties for unreturned scripts. Before we go on, one special note on musicals. Whether a singer or not, learn the music that's indicated for your character. If you don't read music, find someone who does and have them help you with it. Over 50% of people who attend auditions for musicals at community theatre have to be taught the songs at the audition – guess who the director thinks about casting first?

Tip No. 2 -- Decide on your interpretation. Most directors want an actor to show a strong interpretation of a character and be flexible enough to change it somewhat. Many will tell you how they see a character, some will not. Think of the different approaches to Willy Wonka of Gene Wilder and Johnny Depp. A bit of caution – a strong interpretation may lose you the part, but that's a risk you may have to take. If the director sees the part differently, there's not much you can do about it. The important thing is to stick with your instincts. You'll come across much better and truer as an actor if you do what comes naturally to you rather than trying to guess what you think someone else wants.

Tip No. 3 – Don't be afraid to stretch. Think about your job performance review. Most people are humble by nature rather than braggarts, and become a little shy when it comes time to sing their own praises. The same holds true when auditioning. You feel as though your character interpretation is your creation, and as such, it is vulnerable to the harsh eyes of the world – and you feel exposed and shy, and judged in some way. That's human insecurity. It's also bunk! Believe me, it's taken me many years to come to this realization myself, but after studying the good actors around me and wondering why they always seemed so confident at auditions, I finally figured it out – no one thinks the way you play a character has anything to do with who you are as a person. All they see is what you choose to show them. They also can't see all those layers of potential lurking beneath the surface if you hide them. Bottom line – go for it. Pretend you're overacting; most directors would rather pull you back than have to spend hours pulling the character out of you.

Also, pick the parts you really want and then pick one more to audition for – and designate it your stretch part. Don't care, ham it up, and have fun with this part. It relaxes you for the parts you really care about, and shows the director you have some versatility.

Time for a story! I got one of my favorite parts on a stretch audition. I had read "Dark of the Moon" many times and really wanted the part of the Dark Witch. During auditions, however, it became clear the director was going a bit younger (like 20 years!) for the witches. After taking the severe blow to my ego in style, I decided – what the heck? There was a small part for an old woman, Conjur Woman. Everyone else auditioning for this part was playing it as an older version of the younger, sexy witches. She had very few lines, but her character and lines were integral to the plot. I kept seeing this character as an old, wizened hag, with arthritic hands, long, stringy grey hair, and a voice like a rusty faucet – a true character role, and totally different from anything I had ever done before. Just for fun, I went for it. As soon as I started talking, everyone started laughing, so I hammed it up even more. When I was selected for the part, the director said, "I thought of Conjur Woman as a throwaway part. You gave her an interpretation that had never occurred to me. You made her interesting, and I realized how important her character really is." I had the time of my life playing this role, and was surprised at the praise from other actors who never thought I could "act" this well – I knew I had it in me all the time, but never had the guts to stretch that far.

Tip No. 5 – The Most Important One – HAVE FUN! Never lose sight of the fact that this is play time – and you are doing it because you enjoy it. If there's one piece of advice you follow, it's this one – don't take yourself too seriously, in the theater, or in life. Some people just can't help it, and you'll be able to pick them out right away. If you don't get the part you want this time, there will be another. It doesn't mean you weren't picked to be on the team; if you've helped on crews, you know how important that work is to the production – sign up right away. When you do get the part – and you will eventually – don't forget why you wanted to do it in the first place. Whether it was to challenge yourself, cross an item off your life list, or because you just wanted to see what it was like, there's a reason why we call it a play. The only real work is the audition. Once you've got that under your belt, the fun begins!