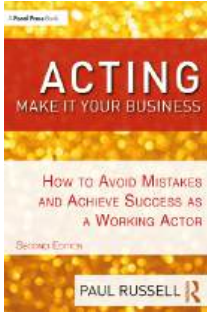


# Acting Fundamentals: A Free Guide



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# Audition Preparation

**Be First, First**

*“I try to get the audition material in my bones, not just in my frontal lobe. Which means it’s not just a question of memorizing the material but understanding it and digesting it so that when I work in the room what the casting people are going to see is an actor portraying a human being in that play, in the circumstance prescribed.”*

—**Bonnie Black**  
Actress

The better prepared you are for an audition, the better your chances of winning the job. OK, so that’s a no-brainer. But often in auditions, it’s obvious—and shocking—that a large number of actors have been lax in getting ready for what is essentially a job interview. Ill-equipped actors will come into the audition lacking music for musical auditions or appropriate audition material to match the project. Some will not have learned the audition material given to them by the auditors, or they learned it in a rush on the way to the audition.

That last one peeves me the most—actors learning material at the last minute. As often is as possible, I give out appointments anywhere from one to two weeks prior to the audition date. I want every actor coming in to hit a home run. That’s my job. I’m here to help actors get employment. A week or two of notice is a generous amount of time to prepare and often a rare gift in our frenetically paced industry. Some actors will put off looking at the audition material until the day of the audition call. My reprimand to them begins like this: “If you were interviewing for a Fortune 500 company, would you be as careless in preparation with them as you are now with me? Why aren’t you prepared?” Applying for work as an actor involves professional preparation as does applying for a job in the civilian world. No excuses.

Sometimes excuses are given, and they’re laughable. One of the more popular dog-ate-my-homework excuses from actors is “My agent didn’t tell me I had to prepare something.” Oooooohkaaay. So you’re an actor, going to an audition . . . what the hell do you think the auditors want of you!? For you to stand there silently and we’ll all be amazed as talent oozes from your pores? Even if there is truth in the pitiful excuse that your talent rep didn’t provide you with adequate information,

wouldn't it be kind of smart, as an actor, to *ask* your agent or manager, "What am I to prepare?" The person in charge of giving out appointments is not going to call a talent rep and ask for the client to schlep in and stand and do nothing, although . . . I am reminded now of an awkward audition where, uhm, we almost did just that.

For the film *The Siege*, a crying man was needed. Why the role wasn't the responsibility of extras casting, I have no idea, but we got stuck with auditioning crying men. Older crying men, in their sixties. No lines, no moans, no wails, just silent tears. The men would come into the small cubicle of an office, sit in a chair before a video camera, and cry, silently. Talk about uncomfortable. With each crier, I had to turn away and look out the window onto the street twenty floors below. I was both embarrassed and nervously amused at the absurdity of the situation. God, what an actor has to do to get money. But! The actors *knew* what they were to prepare before walking into the audition! They had to cry! The sexagenarians came in with professional grace, and as asked, each delivered the saline flow required. After seeing a dozen men wail without sound and emptying a box of tissues, the role was finally handed over to extras. Whether "Crying Man" made it into the final cut, I don't know. I tried watching the movie on an overseas flight. After ten minutes, I turned it off and went to something more entertaining: video hangman.

## Being Prepared

Auditors generally will not call back an actor who is unprepared. Now when I say "call back," I don't mean a callback for that particular project. No, that would be generous. I mean I will not call back a previously unprepared actor, *ever*, for any other project in the future. The picture and résumé of someone who is not prepared quickly go into the trash. Why so hard-hearted? There's a lot of competition among actors. I can easily find another actor who is prepared and has his or her shit together. Casting directors don't look fondly on actors who waste our time. Nor do our clients. Come in unprepared for an audition and more than likely you'll never see those auditors again in relation to employment.

Once, when I was casting a musical for the Asolo Theatre Festival, the director confronted unprepared actors quite bluntly. The audition setup was typical. The actors were to come in with two songs and prepared sides. A surprise in the audition room for the actors, and to me, was the director asking auditionees, without prior notice, to do a monologue (it was going to be a long and interesting day). Many of the actors fumbled and hemmed and hawed; most were not ready for this curveball. In days gone by when monologues by actors in auditions were standard practice, this would not have been such a challenge. But this director would stop the actor mid-excuse and with a gentle but firm reprimand say, "You don't have your tools. You're asking us to hire you. You're asking us to put you in front of a paying audience, people who can barely afford a ticket, and you're here unprepared for the job interview. Why should we hire you?" Shocked that an auditor called their bluff, the actors would scramble for another excuse, but before two

## *Audition Preparation*

words could be uttered, the director would raise his hand to them and advise, “Stop, stop, stop. I don’t care what your reasoning is; you have no valid excuse, as an actor, to be unprepared. You can’t be an actor without your tools.” And he’s correct—so correct that more of us auditors should follow his lead in confronting unprepared actors.

### **Preparation Begins With Opportunity**

Preparation must begin once you receive the good news that you’ve gotten an audition. Ask questions. Whether represented or not, ask for detailed information from the person contacting you. Many of the important questions to be asked, such as those that follow, seem elementary. But I have met actors in auditions who had no clue as to what they were auditioning for.

### ***Audition Appointment Question Checklist***

- ✓ If Self-tape: What is the deadline and to where/whom is the audition to be sent?
- ✓ If live, online audition via what video platform?
- ✓ Full address of the audition site?
- ✓ Exact appointment time and date?
- ✓ Who is going to be in the room (or online, or watching the self-tape)?
- ✓ Who is involved?
- ✓ Commitment dates?
- ✓ Is there a script available?
- ✓ Can I read the script?
- ✓ Are there sides? (often overlooked but obvious question)
- ✓ What else am I to prepare?
- ✓ Title of the project?

OK, OK, I know that last question seems obvious, but sometimes a talent rep will only give his or her client a character name and hope that the actor will know that Prospero is from *As You Like It*. Or is it *Measure for Measure* . . . or *Death of a Salesman*? I wish I were making up the prior example; sadly, I’m not. Similarly, I once invited a lovely young actress to audition for Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*. Unfortunately, she sang “Many a New Day” from *Oklahoma!* Her agent had misinformed her. The young actress believed that she was auditioning for the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Me & Juliet*. Oops.

### ***Words of Caution***

Be careful of the things you say; auditors will listen. On occasion, the people assigned to casting a project go beyond talent reps and call unrepresented talent to offer an audition. If you’re receiving an audition directly from the auditor, casting director, or an assistant, don’t interrogate them for information, which might seem

justifiable to you but in actuality is inappropriate. The following examples are true questions/statements I've received from actors on my directly offering them an audition:

- ☉ How old is the director, and what's his experience?
- ☉ If I get the job, when am I able to leave if I get a better job?
- ☉ I'll audition, but only if my significant other can audition as well.

When I encounter inquiries like these, I do one of two things. The first option is to cancel the appointment and give it to one of the actors I have on my hold list. The second option is to let the actor audition. But . . . if after the person has auditioned the other auditors express an interest, I'll let them know of the disposition the actor displayed when I gave him or her the appointment. Often that information alone dissuades the auditors and they move on to another choice. Why? Because the questioning shows that the actor is not focused on what is primary to his or her career: work. Casting personnel, directors, and producers desire actors who are focused on the work.

### **Be First, First**

Auditions are like a race. Second and third place count for little at the finish line. In the audition race, the actor must always maintain first place, even in preparation.

### ***Be First, First Checklist***

- ✓ If putting yourself on tape (on-camera), do so as quickly as possible, and submit your audition without delay.
- ✓ For in-person auditions ask for an early appointment. Rarely is an actor allowed to choose an audition time. If you are, ask to be seen early. The auditors are at their most alert at the beginning of the audition process.
- ✓ Get the audition material as quickly as possible. The more time with the material, the better prepared you'll be.
- ✓ Get the script whenever possible. Sides and character breakdowns are not enough.
- ✓ Know the character, not just the character's given audition moment.

### **Performance in Audition, a.k.a. They Want It All**

In an audition, auditors want a fully realized performance. The creative team looks to the actor to deliver, from whatever audition material was provided, the full, finished product that will eventually appear on stage or screen. This is the actor's challenge. Compress a character's full journey in the story into the abbreviated audition material. For audition purposes only, an actor is required to put the character's entire arc from the production into the scene given for the audition.

## *Audition Preparation*

To begin on this journey of incorporating the character's arc into your audition, some homework must be done. That homework includes reading and research.

### ***Read a Script Before an Audition***

If available, read the full script—don't skip those scenes that exclude your character. Action in other scenes may directly affect your character's journey. Don't scan the script searching only for your character's lines. Read the script fully and discover the world in which your character lives.

Sometimes a script may not be available. Mostly this will occur for film and TV auditions. When a script cannot be procured, try to get the sides for the other characters that are being cast as well. If you have a talent rep, simply ask him or her for help with this. At least by viewing several pieces of the puzzle that is the script you'll get a better understanding of the story, the writer's voice, and the character's journey in relation to others.

Another ploy for finding a full or partial script that may or may not be openly available is searching the Internet. Often, scripts are placed online for private use between the writer and creative personnel. Search engine spiders may have searched those pages. The hunt may take some effort, but the results will be worth the time. In the search box, enter in key words such as the title, writer's name, character's name, or lines from your sides, and you may hit pay dirt.

### ***Research a Script Before an Audition***

Many written works for stage and screen are based on historical events; reference a distinct era; explore science, religion, and cultures; or are based on the lives of actual individuals. Fictional or not, there will be some aspect of the story—its people, locale, language, or the influence of its period on the characters—that you can study to better your understanding of the world the author has created. Do your homework. Go online and Google information needed to learn more about the character and the story's time period, plus retrieve information about the writer, the production, and the producing entity. The more informed, the better prepared an actor will be for the audition.

### ***An Arc Ain't Just a Boat With Horny Animals***

It's OK to fess up and admit that you may not be familiar with the term *character arc*. It refers to the full emotional journey that a character travels within the story. So let's say you're auditioning for Desdemona or Othello in *Othello*. As an actress/actor, you'll need to translate all the emotions and experiences of Desdemona/Othello from the entire play into the one or two pages that have been pulled from the script for your audition. Even if given a monologue, the same rule applies. Put the character's full journey into that one monologue while keeping within the context of the scene.

Of course this sounds preposterous and difficult. How dare we ask that you present to us the character's entire journey in fewer than fifty words from a scene

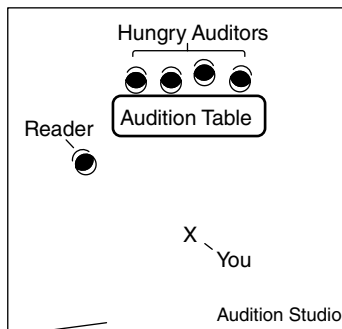
that has little to do with some aspects of that journey. Well, that's the challenge that is being placed upon you as the actor if you want the job. You're asking us to hire you. We're asking you to bring in an opening-night/first-screening performance that will convince us you're worthy of the audience's hard-earned money. That ticket revenue goes toward your salary. There are no free rides. You have to work for what you want. Work hard.

### ***Copy That? Seeing a Production Prior to Auditioning***

If the casting director instructs you or your representation that you should see a particular current stage or relevant screen production of what you're auditioning for, even though you're auditioning for a sequel, reboot, tour, or regional version of that same stage or screen product, DO IT! View the production. The instruction indicates that the director wants you to be familiar with the tone of the production and performances, and/or the director wants a near photocopy of what is being presented. Before fearing that you're being asked to photocopy a performance, ask whoever gave you the instruction to view a performance if that is what the director is seeking. If so, this doesn't mean that you have to imitate, just assimilate. Bring in an imitation and it'll be plastic and false. Assimilate the style of the performance while making the role your own.

### ***Creating the Audition Setting as Part of Preparation***

Prepare for your in-person audition as it would occur in the audition setting. If it is a scene in which your character has a dialogue exchange, drag, beg, or Craigslist.org a practice reader for the other role(s). Place the practice reader in front of you where a reader normally is set in an audition room. Where's that?



Readers are set to the left or right of the audition table. Play off the practice reader without touching her or having her getting up from her chair. For auditions put to tape (on-camera), the reader is often slightly left or right to the camera: your chin forward towards the camera. For self-tape, place your "reader" slightly to the left or right of the camera; your chin forward towards the camera.



### ***To Memory or Not to Memory?***

Ah, the most-asked audition preparation question: Should an actor memorize lines for an audition? Learn the *material*. Memorize the text if you want but not the *performance*. Memorization or semi-memorization of the text boosts your chances greatly. This will free the performance plus demonstrate that you are prepared and serious about the audition. Approximately 10 percent of actors who have auditioned for me (and casting colleagues) take the extra effort to learn the material. It's that 10 percent who get called back and/or hired.

Darrie Lawrence is an advocate for memorization. "I now actually memorize the text," Lawrence admitted. "I used to think that was not important. The memorization process makes you think about the scene and what the other person is saying. You can only figure out what you're going to say if it's really clear what the other person in the scene is going to say. Memorization makes you analyze the script."

But . . . wait!

Memorization or semi-memorization can be an actor's downfall when improperly used. DO NOT memorize text to actions and movement. Avoid being a victim of a manufactured or "learned" performance. Don't make memorization or semi-memorization of the text your primary focus. Treat text memory as an accessory. Keep the script/side in hand. Audition anxiety and nerves play havoc on the memory, so use the script/side for when nerves make the memory falter. *Fumbling for lines is deadly*.

### ***Manufactured by Rote***

One of the biggest failures for an actor in an audition (and in performance) is presenting a manufactured, mechanical reading/portrayal/interpretation. In other words, getting trapped into road map acting where movement, readings, or singing has a preset course and never ventures into discovery and exploration. Be spontaneous! Especially for screen work! Don't memorize the performance. Putting text to memory is OK if you're solid with the lines. But memorizing the performance becomes audition by rote. When that happens, you'll be asked to move on out the door.

When I was a young actor I fell into the manufactured-by-rote trap, a dangerous practice that can happen both in auditions and in production. With one role I got snared twice, first in the rehearsal process and then later in an audition for a subsequent production of the same show. My first entrapment was brought to my attention when another actor bluntly acknowledged my failure in rehearsal. I was cast as Mordred in a production of *Camelot*. Eager and woefully ignorant, I wanted to demonstrate to the director that I was prepared for the role by the time we had our first read-through. Prior to that first day of rehearsal, I learned my lines, inflections, and motivations. I thought the readings that came out of my mouth were on point. Wrong.

At the first read-through, I plowed ahead with my learned performance. After one of my scenes with King Arthur, I heard behind me a heavy sigh followed by a quiet, disapproving male voice. “Manufactured. Plastic” came the critique. The disapproval was in reference to me. It came from Fred Carmichael, who was playing Merlin. Apart from being an actor, Fred was also a prolific playwright and a founder of the Dorset Theatre Festival. I didn’t let him know I had heard his criticism. I was crushed. I so desperately wanted to be good that I blinded myself with misguided ambition. I was determined to learn from my error and make immediate repairs. I tossed away the manufactured Mordred and started anew. Fred was a brilliant and mischievous man. Upon reflection, I believe that he intended for me to hear his comments.

But did I fully learn my lesson? No.

A year later, I was at the AEA audition lounge in New York, auditioning for the malevolent bastard son of King Arthur in another production of *Camelot*. Arrogant that the role would be mine again I re-created my performance of Mordred’s “Seven Deadly Virtues” just as I had performed it a year prior. The result was like pulling a comment out of context. I wasn’t matching content (material) to form (an audition). I was presenting a fabricated reproduction of a performance that had been appropriate for an audience of several hundred, but my revival wasn’t suited for viewing by a single auditor.

### ***How to End Manufactured by Rote***

Prepare audition material (singing, sides, monologues) while doing mundane chores or activities. Practice the audition piece in settings that have nothing to do with the material. For example, if you’re an actress auditioning for Lady Macbeth, rehearse the “out damned spot” scene as you wash dishes, fold laundry, or commute to your survival job. If you’re an actor auditioning for a screen role, rehearse the sides while waiting for your next rideshare or jogging in the park. Focus on the present activity. Don’t worry about the hands, movement, and all other baggage. If you’re honest in character, any activity will flow naturally if you focus on what you say while concentrating on the chore or task.

This exercise will provide you with several advantages. You’ll gain greater flexibility when given direction or adjustments in the audition. Also, it will prepare you for audition distractions (director spilling coffee while you read, reader halitosis, cow-hoofed pianist, etc.).

Rehearsing the audition material outside of its intended environment, as written, will open up discoveries. You’ll hear new interpretations. You will be stronger in the audition room when the director begins adjustments. You’ll feel secure because, hey, if you can be Maggie from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at your local grocery store, you can be Maggie anywhere in any situation. The point of this exercise is to listen. By listening you discover. Listening is acting, and acting is listening.

Bonnie Black learned an audition preparation technique that would help her listen better. “In terms of learning lines, whoever you’re speaking to, take a pencil and underline the operative words and phrases, whatever sentences that are important

## *Audition Preparation*

to hear from the other character. Just doing that helps you further understand the scene,” Black explained. “Also when you looked at the page, subliminally what was going into your head was not just, ‘bullshit, bullshit, bullshit,’ then my line but actually what the people opposite of you were saying that would spur you to your response. It’s a good way to look at a scene and understand what is happening.”

Black further enhances her listening skills with another technique: “Something else I do is rather than just say my lines out loud, I’ll say the other people’s lines out loud, doing my line in my head as opposed to doing their line in my head and then my line out loud. I use this reverse process to deepen my understanding and to increase how much I’m hearing the other character. Acting is reacting. It’s important to hear what is being said.”

Kelly AuCoin gets “off book as quick as I can.” A generation or so younger than Black, AuCoin goes digital with memorizing his, and the lines of others in his scripted material. He does so with the aid of an app called “Rehearsal.” An actor vocally records the audition scene, and in playback, it will run the opposing character(s) lines back to you as you self-rehearse.

NOTE: This is also a great tool for self-tape for when a live reader is not available.

Selenis Leyva is also a memorization advocate. “Ideally, memorize the script. You can really connect with the reader, with the camera and whoever is in the room,” Leyva suggested.

### **Audition Monologues: “Out Brief Candle . . .”**

Audition monologues are dead. Dead, when it comes to professional auditions.

Some scholars in academia continue to teach an outdated philosophy that professional auditions utilize monologues. *Bzzz!* Wrong answer, thanks for playing. Beyond collegiate black box theaters—in the too often unforgiving reality of professional auditioning—audition monologues have become near impractical. They’re the yard-sale equivalent of VHS tapes gathering dust atop yellowed *TV Guides* in a shuttered Blockbuster.

Audition sides are used for 99.99 percent of professional auditions. An audition side, for the newly informed, is a section of dialogue, a scene, or a monologue found within the project’s script. Prior to auditions, the director and/or casting director decide on the sides that are to be prepared by the auditioning actors.

The progression away from audition monologues to audition sides evolved as TV and film began to dominate the entertainment market. Sitcoms and Shakespeare rarely dance together. When they do, it’s an unsightly tango.

Story through soliloquy is a dying craft. Often when I cast language plays (i.e., that Shakespeare stuff), auditioning actors, inexperienced with metered dialogue (even those actors with industry Ivy League credentials), rush through the chosen slice of Bard, grateful just to be over and done with it. After this happens, I’ll write on my notes, next to the actor’s name, “Jet Ski.” Like a Jet Ski skims across water, the actor has skimmed across the text. No depth. No subtleties. No substance. This type of audition is caused by a fear of the text, a lack of understanding of the language, and, most important, an inability to communicate a story. Doesn’t matter

if it's Old English or present-day English, storytelling through soliloquy suffers interpretation by the speaker because modern communication skills are faltering. We speak *at* each other rather than *to* and *with* each other.

Advancements in communication technology (and the abuse of it) contribute to the growing inability of people to engage others directly without aid of keystrokes. Communicating themes, ideas, and story with clarity through spoken and written word has deteriorated dramatically as we quickly instant message, text message, and e-mail each other with abbreviations masquerading as one-on-one connection. "BRB!" "AFK," and "ROFLMAO" assault communication skills and are by no means personal. Imagine if ole Billy Shakespeare decided to apply similar shorthand texting onto his Prince of Denmark. Hamlet's "To be or to be?" might have been reduced to "2b/not 2b?" Without our knowing Hamlet's mental rifts, we'd be under the misimpression that the Dane was seeking a room on the second floor of Elsinore.

Another reason audition monologues are bound for burial is modern society's lazy listening skills. Dialogue and information come hurtling at us at lighting speed. Dialogue is reduced to sound bites, quips, and clips. Our ears demand information in short, preferably loud, bursts. Before electronic amplification, people engaged in listening. Listening was an active skill. Now it's become a passive activity, where we rely on technology to carry out the work our ears and gray cells once did. Can't hear what's being said on TV? Click on the remote and raise the volume. Can't raise the volume? Is the narrative too long or requires thought? Tune out and switch the channel. The modern ear doesn't want to exert effort on listening. Technology is supposed to do that for us. But technology gives little to no aid in our evaluating the themes, through lines, and arc of a detailed story. Monologues are detailed short stories but not short enough for our slothful, internal sound systems. Not having a remote to change a live person to someone else more engaging or not being able to raise their volume, we tune out the speaker as our interest wanes.

Audition monologues lumber on to the grave with little purpose except for use in school auditions, nonunion summer stock cattle calls, community theater try-outs, and paid auditions. Those instances and a few Shakespeare festivals are the only venues keeping the coffin for audition monologues from being nailed shut and placed into a hearse. For years I have been trying to wean one of my Shakespeare clients away from asking actors to audition with monologues of the actor's choice. Why? Actors at my level of casting no longer have monologues ready for use. When I contact talent reps with a monologues-of-the-actor's-choice audition, I get a reply of complaint. Talent reps balk because their clients charge into anxiety overdrive. Many actors who graduated from school in recent modern times left monologues behind in the black box of college theater. For some of them, monologues are an unpleasant memory best left at school, like the hangovers from all-night keggers.

Having an actor learn a monologue, when sides are offered, is a time-waster. Most auditors and I prefer to go straight to what the actor is auditioning for—the role we want an actor to portray. We're not interested in hearing/seeing another

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role from a quasi-related monologue. We want the meat. Not a soy and gluten substitute. If the actor is being seen for Hamlet, I have him read Hamlet so that I can be assured he's capable of playing that role. That's my priority. When there is a role that has monologues, more than likely the casting director or the director will assign to the actor one or two they want to see and hear. I couldn't care less, at that moment, if the actor can do a Chekhov monologue. Save Tolkachov's rant of abused husbandry for when I'm auditioning *Summer in the Country*. But wait . . .!

Don't level your wobbling furniture with monologue books just yet. As mentioned previously, there are instances, especially early in an actor's career, when an actor needs a treasure trove of contrasting monologues. Monologues ready to go at an instant.

### ***Instances for Monologues***

- ✓ Enrollment process for performing arts schools.
- ✓ Regional combines such as SETCs, NETCs, and UPTAs, require auditionees to perform monologues—brief monologues, preferably sixty seconds or less in length.
- ✓ Community theater and school production auditions rely on monologues as a barometer for an actor being right for a role. (I hope they catch up with the real world. It will better prepare the community theater and/or student actor who later wants to venture onto professional auditions.)
- ✓ Paid auditions with casting directors and talent reps. It's rare that talent reps would ask prospective clients to do a monologue for the agent in their office. The agent today, in signing talent, prefers to see the actor's work in production on screen or stage. Monologues by actors today in the offices of talent reps is 1940s' film-lore fantasy.

### ***Alternative Monologue Resources***

When I was an actor, I was very independent and stayed far away from monologue books. My reasoning was "Hey, thousands of these books are being sold. Why should I be using the same audition material that is being used by thousands of fellow actors? Screw that! I need to find better resources." And I did. Stay away from the audition monologue books. Find new resources to enrich your monologue treasure chest.

- ✓ Comedy albums / Stand-up routines

Say what? What's a comedy album? Comedians, like recording artists, once issued records that contained material from their act. Bob Newhart was gold for me. (As of this writing I did an Amazon.com check: Bob Newhart and the comedy albums of other comic wits are for sale.) When I was a young actor, I came across his comedy album *The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart*. I hit a jackpot. I began using several of his comedic monologues including "King

Kong & the Night Watchman” and “The U.S.S. Codfish.” I was scoring home runs at auditions with both for two reasons. First, the material matched my humor and personality. Second, hardly anyone knew of the material’s existence. Auditors loved hearing something unfamiliar. And they loved hearing something funny.

✓ Films

They’re a great, untapped resource for monologues. Research older films: classics, the art-house obscure, and the independents. Often, the writing is skilled, crafted with layers and color.

✓ Classic and modern literature

Jane Austen unknowingly gave actresses many wonderful opportunities for monologues. Michener and Hemingway are wonderful for actors as well. The essay books of Michael Thomas Ford, and David Sedaris offer great comedic material for the modern day.

- ✓ Political speeches and addresses by statesmen/women
- ✓ Archived radio shows from the 1940s and before
- ✓ Classic television drama and well-written sitcoms

### ***Monologue Treasure-Chest Elements***

Unless specifically asked for, monologues as a barometer of actor talent are dead beyond school, stock, and paid auditions. *But*, once in a while, you may be surprised by a director like the one from the *Asolo* who suddenly, without warning, asks you to do a monologue on the spot (Oh, shit!). Screen projects may shock you with a monologue request—it happens. These scenarios are the *exceptions* and not typical of the majority of present-day auditions. For those very rare monologue moments and for the common scenarios in which a single voice is called for, every actor should have the following in his or her treasure chest:

- ✓ Two to four comedic classical monologues
- ✓ Two to four dramatic classical monologues
- ✓ Two to four comedic contemporary monologues
- ✓ Two to four dramatic contemporary monologues

### ***Audition Monologue Essentials***

Choose material that fits the project for which you’re auditioning. Don’t bring in Brecht or Shakespeare for Neil Simon or Aaron Sorkin and vice versa. Matching your material to the audition may seem obvious, but far too often, other auditors and I have witnessed actors do the opposite.

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For the combined regional auditions, investigate the shows being produced in each theater's upcoming season. Match your monologue to the productions in which you'd like to be cast.

For general auditions, be realistic and objective when choosing material that best matches your abilities as an actor. If you're a 5'4", 130-pound, red-haired, Irish nineteen-year-old female, there's very little hope that you'll ever be the Marquis de Sade, the genital-flaunting fellow in Doug Wright's *Quills*. Choose material that suits you with characters that match in age and gender.

If a monologue for a screen project is requested, and it's not from the project for which you are auditioning, choose material that embodies the voice of the project's writer(s).

If appropriate to the audition, go for comedy. Far too often, in general auditions, actors scream out drama with crocodile tears. Give yourself and the auditors a break.

Stay away from topical monologues that involve a personal health crisis. The auditors on the other side of the table may be directly affected by cancer, HIV, and so on. When this happens, we focus on our own experience with the health issue and not you. This guideline also applies for avoiding monologues involving disaster, natural or manmade, and terrorism. If a similar event has happened recently in the real world, we will fixate on the tragedy and not you.

Unless you or a friend of yours is a brilliant and accomplished playwright, *avoid material written by you or a friend!*

If you need to give a preamble to explain the monologue and/or scene in great length to the auditor, toss the material and find something else.

Don't explain well-known material. An actor, before his audition, once offered me the following: "I'll be doing a scene from *The Odd Couple*. You may not know it. There's this guy Oscar who is a slob and another guy called Felix. They live together, but not in a homosexual way."

Avoid monologues that involve props, violence, or both. As I mentioned, I once had an actor pull a knife on me during his monologue. He may have thought he was being real. I thought he was fucking crazy.

## ***Audition Monologue Postmortem***

Audition monologues (ones not chosen as sides by the auditors) may be dead in most professional auditions, but you never know when a resurrection will occur. Times and trends change quickly. Best to be prepared and have several audition monologues at the ready.

## **Musical Theater Audition Preparation: Into the Words It's Time to Go**

For musical theater or screen musical auditions, be more than just a pretty voice with great technique. Approach your audition piece as two separate entities conjoined—that is, dialogue and music. Many musical performers forget that the

lyrics in a musical number are dialogue or soliloquy written to tell a story. Always remember the basic rule: Lyrics are not just random words placed to accentuate the pretty notes. Many of my clients and I want to hear the story in a song. Take the notes away from the lyrics and dive into what is being told. OK, if it's Tim Rice, a lyricist known for the occasional clunker, you may find yourself wondering about the intellectual depth of a lyric that reads "Only goes to sho-wa, greatest man since No-ah . . ." (there are exceptions).

After learning the notes, breathing, and phrasing, approach the text (lyrics) as you would in the exercise to defeat manufactured by rote. Separate the lyrics from the music and speak them in conversational form while doing chores and tasks. Listen to what you are saying. Then add the music and do the same exercise, focusing on both the chore/music while in character. Also, sing the song to a live individual as if in a conversation. Use pets as a last resort. Connect.

Prized is the musical performer who can connect. Connect themes to within lyric and song. Connect to an audience. Connect to other actors onstage or screen. Often in auditions, I am sung at, not sung to. Yes, breaking into song is unnatural and false. And that is part of the problem for musical performers: The perception that breaking into song is false. As a result, the presentation becomes just that—presentation, false bordering on theme park. Singing doesn't have to be "I stand here, stare forward like a deer in headlights, occasionally give gestures, and go for the money note, baby!" No. That's crap. Singing is storytelling. Musical actors would do themselves a great service by performing in and studying language plays such as Shakespeare.

When I direct a musical, in rehearsal I instruct actors to think of their song not as "musical theater" but as a monologue, separating the lyric from the music. I encourage the singer's solo to be more of a soliloquy. I do the same for musical numbers that involve more than one singer. The lyrics are dialogue, an exchange of thought. I focus on that exchange, which is basically communication. Whether that communication is between actors onstage, on-screen, or actors and the audience, communicating with clarity is connecting. Solid, defined connections must be made by an actor to his or her song for the song and actor to connect to the audience.

When I was directing a popular Wildhorn musical at a regional theater, one of my male leads, who is stronger as an actor in plays than as a singer in musicals, had trouble connecting emotion and movement to lyrics. After I told him to focus on the song as a soliloquy of lost passion, diminished hope, frustration, and redemption, he improved dramatically, but another step to connecting remained.

The notes are not to be forgotten. I'm not speaking of the melody. I'm speaking of the underscoring. After the actor from the Wildhorn musical scored some success connecting to the lyrics, we then sat at the piano with the musical director. Repeatedly I had the musical director play a section of the song for the actor. It's a great rumbling and churning passage, filled with raw angst. I instructed the actor to listen to the underscoring as it raged with anger. Wildhorn was giving musical clues as to the character's internal fury and angst. Eventually the actor connected. The staging and emotion easily followed.



## *Audition Preparation*

The next time you listen to a song you want to audition with, forget the melody for a moment. Listen to what the composer and orchestrator have placed under the melody. Emotional clues and colors abound. I have listened to some scores in my musical theater collection for decades. Every time I listen, I hear new layers. Listen to the layers. Exploit those layers. Layering is a key to success for every actor.

### ***Know What You're Singing About and to Whom***

Actors who have no clue as to what purpose a song serves in the musical's story and to whom it is sung commit the biggest errors in musical auditions. When I was casting *Crowns* for the Asolo Theatre Festival two actresses auditioned with "Sister" from *The Color Purple*. Each was stopped barely two measures into the song. The director stopped the first; later, I brought the second to a halt. Why? Neither had a clue as to the context of the song or to whom the character was singing. When both were asked the same question—"Who are you singing this song to?"—both ladies went momentarily blank and then sheepishly replied similarly that they were singing it for themselves, for courage. WRONG! The song is about seduction. To know that is as simple as watching the movie or seeing the musical onstage or the archive video of the original production. When that adjustment was given to the young ladies, my, how the song flourished and came to life, no longer just a melody with pretty notes.

### ***Are There Overused Audition Songs?***

Many academic advisors, directors, and other sages will tell musical actors to "stay away from overused songs" when auditioning. Personally, I say screw that advice. The unwritten law prohibiting use of "overused songs" in auditions is bull. The BS comes from auditors "musical theater authorities" who are lazy listeners. I, and some of my casting colleagues, have no problem hearing countless renditions of "Defying Gravity" from *Wicked* and "Anthem" from *Chess*. If an "overused song" is presented well, I'm a happy casting director. Reach for that money note beyond your range in either "Defying Gravity" or "Anthem" with a screech and you're history.

There is a specific audition situation for which, with great reluctance, I will suggest that actor-singers avoid using songs auditors regarded as being "overused." In the world of combined auditions, the people sitting behind the auditor tables resent, with passion, hearing a song more than once. Why? Lazy listening skills. Part of my casting training began as an auditor during combined auditions at Straw Hats in New York. During our breaks, when all the producers and other auditors, eyes heavy with audition glaze, would stretch in the halls outside the audition room, we'd talk about the previous two hundred or so actors we saw. No matter how great a performer, singers would often be bitched and moaned about, and passed on, if they sang a song the auditor felt was overdone. I couldn't believe the shortsighted negativity I was hearing from the "people with power." (Those "power people" were or are mom-and-pop-type Dollar Tree budget venues.) A person's

ability to sing a song well, with great skill, should be the barometer for talent rather than the number of times the song has been heard.

If you sing and interpret a song well, do it. But don't become hooked on a couple of songs at which you know you kick ass. Having a songbook that covers all genres of music is key to versatility. Variety is welcomed and necessary.

### *An Actor's Audition Songbook*

An actor-singer must have two to four selections from each musical genre included within his or her audition songbook. For each genre in the songbook, you need an up-tempo, a ballad, and a sixteen-bar cutting. Directors, musical directors, and casting directors will want to explore your range, technique, and versatility.

### *Necessary Genres for the Singer's Songbook*

- ✓ Legit Broadway (Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Gershwin, Styne)
- ✓ Pop—Contemporary Broadway (Lin-Manuel Miranda, Lloyd Webber, Wildhorn, Larson, Lippa, LaChiusa, Schwartz, the newest rising star composer)
- ✓ Sondheim (a note of warning on Mr. S. later)
- ✓ Country/Folk (Woody Guthrie, Carter family, Stanley brothers)
- ✓ Gospel/Spiritual
- ✓ Blues
- ✓ Rock
- ✓ Pop (nonmusical theater pop music)
- ✓ Jazz

NOTE: When singing Rock, Pop (i.e., radio hits), Jazz, Blues, Gospel/Spiritual don't—repeat—*don't* sing the song as if you're presenting it in a concert or cabaret performance. Nearly all songs have a story; some are linear. Tell and connect to the story. But choose a bubble-gum pop song that's basically ramblings between a repetitive, catchy hook, like with Miley Cyrus's "Party in the U.S.A." and you're dead in the water; party over.

A contemporary, musical audition mistake being made too often is actors singing Top 40, and all they deliver is vocal acrobatics: There's often no depth for storytelling, no journey of story that evolves and grows, no personal (or character) perspective. Having these preceding factors is imperative. A musical audition isn't karaoke.

### *Looking Beyond the Familiar*

When it comes to filling the musical audition requirements of your songbook, there are many wonderful songs from flops, lesser-known musicals, and older musicals that haven't been beaten into the pavement by "revivalitis." Revivalitis is a plague on Broadway in recent decades. If the show was not a movie first or a Disney-cartoon-turned-musical, it's more than likely a revival. Sometimes the revival is a revival of a revival of a show that closed a mere several seasons prior!

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Revivalitis leads me to a pet peeve for many auditors. A revival seems to equal validation to a number of actors that a play or musical, which long ago opened as a hit, ran, closed, and then faded from memory is now worthy of the actor's notice because it's been revived. Once a musical revival hits New York, the songs from that show flood the audition circuit for the next five years. Same thing happens with revived plays and their monologues. When Shakespeare is dusted off and brought back to the Broadway stage, actors suddenly discover verse that has been in existence for centuries. To those late bloomers I say, "What the hell took you people so long to learn this material?! Is a multi-million dollar revival required to validate your regard for a previously successful and widely known text or song?" When actors come in with songs and monologues from current revivals, the first thought of the auditor is "Lazy actor." Best advice for seeking new material for a songbook is this: Don't follow the misguided herd down the revival road. Find strong material that is obscure, and you'll be looked on as being resourceful.

### ***Matching a Song to an Audition***

Choice of song is important. What you audition with should match what is being sought by the auditors. When I audition a show that requires actors who can sing country or folk music while playing guitar or banjo, my client and I want the same type of music in the audition. Not *Hamilton*. When I'm auditioning a Lerner and Loewe musical, I want Legit Broadway, prior to 1960. Not *Hamilton*. When I'm auditioning actors for a gospel musical, I want authentic spirituals. Not *Hamilton*. Shocking as the following statement may seem, there was music and musical theater before *Hamilton*. It's an interesting piece of theater, but it's time for the HamilSquad (*Hamilton* fanatics) to look beyond the Founding Father rap history lesson musical, which they will do as soon as the next cult musical catapults beyond cult status to commercial success (remember *Rent* before *Hamilton* obliterated our memory of it?). Because a musical is contemporarily popular does not mean that it is to represent, in your auditions, every musical style. You *must* audition with music that is in the style of the musical for which you're auditioning.

Many of my casting colleagues sit at audition tables in frustration as singers present musical material that does not match the project being cast. One of the best examples happened when I was casting a musical for which the singers were asked, in advance, to prepare and present a gospel song or spiritual. One girl, a bit off on genre, brought in Donna Summer's 1970s' disco hit "Last Dance." Oh. My. God. Just because a song was originally sung by a black woman doesn't make it a gospel number! Next!

### ***Singing From the Show***

I strongly disagree with another unwritten law for audition song choice. It forbids an actor-singer from singing a song from the show for which they're auditioning. Bullshit. If I'm seeking Laurey in *Oklahoma!* of course I want to hear her songs from the potential Laureys I'm auditioning. When I go to Dunkin' Donuts

and want a doughnut, I don't ask for a bagel. Same logic should apply to musical theater auditions. If I'm seeking Marius in *Les Misérables*, I want Marius, not Freddy Eysnford-Hill from *My Fair Lady*. I'm always astounded when asked by an agent or actor, "Is it OK to sing from the show?" Of course it is!

### ***Singing Sondheim: Everybody Says Don't***

You may have heard about this musical theater audition law: Don't sing Sondheim. Why not sing the songs of a genius? Here's why good Sondheim is bad for auditions (personal heavy sigh of disappointment):

Competent audition pianists are rare. Few can adequately play the complexities of Sondheim.

Competent singers of Sondheim are rare. Few can adequately sing the complexities of Sondheim.

I'm a great fan of Stephen Sondheim. I'm not a fawner, yet my hands trembled when I first met the man whose work I greatly admire. I love his work so much that it pains me to advise against using his material in auditions. I do suggest you have at least one or two songs from the Sondheim canon in your audition songbook. You'll never know when you'll be requested to sing Sondheim at an audition.

If, without request, you boldly plan to take on a Sondheim song for an audition, either bring a Sondheim-competent pianist of your own or, if sans personal pianist, be very confident that you can pull off the song no matter what happens with whoever accompanies you.

On a personal note, when an actor succeeds with Sondheim in one of my auditions, my day is brighter. Don't ask me my thoughts about actors who sabotage Sondheim.

### **The Working Actors on How They Prepare for Auditions**

Everyone has his or her own formula for audition preparation. Books, school, and coaching can offer guidelines and tips, but being that we're all unique, no two people will cookie-cutter their process and have identical audition preparation techniques.

I asked The Working Actors, "How do you prepare for a successful audition?" Selenis Leyva advocates time for the actor to be alone with the material. "I *love* to be alone before I go in," she said. "Before I leave my house, as I'm getting ready, I say the lines. I'm *living* in *that* character. I really start, really early on to feel that person before I get on the train or get in the car. I start to *feel* them. I make little notes of how they do their walk." (Leyva spoke about how this preparation—now mostly for screen work—comes from her theater background). "I think theater actors prepare differently. But for me, having alone time, before walking into an audition is *key*. I need to let go of energies. I need to kinda center myself, again and know why I'm there. And be honest with the work. So for me, alone time is key, and as a mother that has not always worked." We both laughed. "Life gets in the way of an actor's life; of an actor's routine. For me that's been the hardest part about being a mother *and* an actor is that I've wanted to be *very* selfish at times

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because I've *needed* to and my kid is like banging on the bathroom door. So it doesn't always work out. My biggest pet peeve is, I need alone time. And anyone who knows me, "knows 'you got to leave her alone preparing.'"

Kate Hamill puts herself in a positive mind-set. "Right before I go into the audition room I think of something I'm really proud of that I did in my life," she said. "So then when I walk into the audition room I'm thinking, 'I'm pretty proud of myself.'"

But her positive reinforcement strategy doesn't end with the audition. "[I] have a snack in my bag that I can eat right afterwards. [It's] like it's your little treat." She giggled. "I do that. So now I get my little snack. It's a lot of work for something when you don't know if you're going to get the job. So for me when I accepted that that auditioning is its own reward that's when I started doing better. If I focus on 'that job, that job' it does feel like I'm putting in a lot of effort for nothing."

Charlotte Rae, found it useful to reach out to fellow actors. Rae spoke fondly of the supportive camaraderie among her peers: "Actors, we all help each other. I'll coach my friend, who is a wonderful actor, and he'll coach me. It's good to have some input."

Mark Price, like Rae, also seeks the input of peers. "I can't just go and do an audition," Price stated. "I always go and do a coaching for the audition or I work on it in a class. One thing I realized, with auditioning: Class never really ends."

Bonnie Black approaches her preparation with questions. "I ask myself, 'What is the event? What do I need?' I always ask myself those questions. Those questions to me are key to success," Black firmly declared. "I have to be playing a verb. I have to need something. That's why I'm there in that audition space. I'm also fond of 'How am I like this person or how am I unlike this person?'"

Black also has an exercise similar to mine for combating manufactured by rote: "I try to flop around physically, not just sit in a chair or lie in bed and murmur the words to myself but actually move around and do the audition while I'm washing the dishes or doing the laundry. Sometimes it's pretty amazing how when you're not concentrating on the text . . . you power-phrase your way through the scene. Something new will come to you."

James Rebhorn found that his most useful preparation for an audition was having as few distractions as possible prior to his appointment. "I try not to have anything going on before an audition. I don't want to have to be rushing around doing taxes or buying groceries. I try to keep the day as free as possible." The time of the audition appointment was equally important to Rebhorn. "I like to have my auditions late in the morning, when I'm still fresh. I try to avoid late in the afternoon because I know the auditors are tired." But Rebhorn stressed that he put the audition into perspective with his life responsibilities and routine. "I try to think of the audition as nothing more than just part of my day's work," Rebhorn confided. "I don't want to make it too special and invest too much in it either. I want to look at it as, 'Well, and afterward, then I'll do my laundry, then I'll do the grocery shopping. . . .' The audition is just one of the events of the day."

Michael Mastro has a more metaphysical approach toward his audition preparation. "I definitely use visualization," Mastro emphatically acknowledged. "I find that incredibly helpful. I believe that what we hold in our mind is what we draw to us. The way I'm using my mind and what I'm choosing to focus on is what I make

into my reality. I did *Judgment in Nuremberg* on Broadway. I got to play the role of Rudolph Peterson. It's a plum role. It's a role I knew they would try to get a name for. I prepared at least thirty hours for that audition. I worked on the role like it was mine. When you work on an audition for thirty hours, you have really got something incredibly specific in your mind . . . there is a magnetism about that people cannot resist."

Mastro not only utilizes visualization of himself in the role for which he is auditioning, but he also visualizes himself at the actual audition. "I find it's very helpful to visualize," Mastro reiterated. "I love to know where my auditions are going to be because I like to sit in [the space] figuratively the day before and the morning of, even on the subway on the way to the audition. I see myself walking into that building. I know that building. I know that elevator's slow so I better get there early. I see myself going up in the elevator, and as I'm getting closer to the audition room the heart starts pounding (this is in my visualization). The nerves start. The little demons start. And if I'm visualizing beforehand I can pause that video in my mind and have a conversation with the demons. I can practice dealing with them in advance. I can practice with the feelings that are going to happen before I walk into that audition room, before that casting director, who maybe I'm a little resentful of because they were rude to me once before and I can talk to myself and that little demon about that. I say things like, 'Look. Let's let go. Forgive that person.' I take myself as specifically as possible through the audition several times to give myself the opportunity to practice."

## You Are What You Wear

Just as the preparation of material and technique are important to approaching an audition, so, too, is the preparation of your appearance. The first thing auditors view when you audition is your attire. *In those first five to ten seconds of your audition, 75 percent of an evaluation is made about you!* Carefully choose your attire! This is an interview for employment, not an informal cast party; dress appropriately. The most important rule about attire at an audition is this: Don't let what you're wearing become a distraction or fodder for couture bashing.

## Dressing for General Auditions/Meet and Greets/Combines

Time to reference your adjectives from the personality questionnaire. This section's following dressing guidelines are strictly for the following situations:

- ✓ Academic auditions
- ✓ Talent representation meetings and auditions
- ✓ Paid auditions/seminars
- ✓ Meetings/auditions with casting for the auditor's future reference
- ✓ A theatrical season audition
- ✓ Auditioning/meeting a gathering of auditors for various producing entities
- ✓ Screen projects for which the actor's personality to the role and/or project is essential

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### *Essential Dressing Guidelines for General Auditions/ Meet and Greets/Combines*

- ✓ The Wow! Factor: You, and what you're wearing, must "pop" and "wow" people upon their first seeing you, making them want to know more about you.
- ✓ Dress for your personality and age.
- ✓ What you wear must *impressively*, and *precisely*, define your personality within the first three seconds of a talent rep, casting director, or auditor seeing you.
- ✓ Dress as if dressing for a first date (that isn't a college-age, pizza-night, hastily-tossed-together-apparel date).
- ✓ Imagine that you're a celebrity, and paparazzi are following your every public moment. Ask of yourself, "Is what I'm wearing something I proudly want photographed and splashed on screens online around the world?"
- ✓ Don't dress as if you're going to a wedding or business meeting (unless that's your personality).
- ✓ Dress to flatter your body type. Entertainment is often reflecting real life. Real people—civilians—come in varying shapes and sizes, and so do actors. Embrace and flatter the body that envelopes your personality.
- ✓ Have off-the-rack clothing tailored to fit you as if custom-made for you. For less than the price of a movie ticket, you can have clothing tailored at a dry cleaner's shop. You'll look fabulous!

In my private, and academic, master classes, I offer the personality questionnaire exercise. After the actors know what the questions and answers reveal about who they are, I send the actors off with homework to coordinate several options of apparel to wear for when meeting with a prospective talent rep. The outfits corralled and paraded into class must match the actor's personality, plus their adjectives.

During class, I have each actor stand individually before me. Before evaluating if their apparel has the Wow! Factor, and displays their personality clearly, I try to not notice what they are wearing. Once the actor is positioned, I then lower my head and read from the piece of paper the adjectives they wrote down on days prior. The scene typically goes as follows:

An actor with a nice physique, in his early 20s, stands ten to twenty feet before me. He's nervously dreading this moment. I keep eye contact with him—ignoring whatever clothing choices he's made. In my hand, I hold the paper with his adjectives. I bow my head and read aloud his responses, "Youthful, bright, joyful, energetic, fluffy, cute." I raise my head. I look to the actor. For the first time in that session I notice what he's wearing. Too often the next words I blurt out are, "What the #%@^?!"

The actor has chosen to wear a wrinkled long-sleeved dark dress shirt, tightly buttoned, with the shirttail hastily tucked with flabby, accordion folds into black dress pants. The shirt is formless and baggy. His gently gym-sculpted torso is lost within a cotton-polyester baggie. A necktie strangles too tightly around his collar. Clunky black dress shoes—possibly Walmart chic—weigh him to the floor.

Referring to his answers in my hand, I ask, “What about what you’re wearing says ‘youthful, bright, joyful, energetic, smart, playful’? Why are you dressing like a beleaguered, forty-something, fast food restaurant manager?”

The actor typically replies, “I thought this looked professional.”

“For White Castle,” I answer. “You’re not matching who you are.” I tell the actor that he can still be “professional,” but he’s associating “professional” with the civilian world, corporate America. Wrong thinking!

In this example scenario, our actor could have worn a tight-fitting, high-quality, jewel-toned short-sleeved T-shirt and high-end slim or boot-cut jeans. Both cuts of the T-shirt and jeans to provide a silhouette that flatters his gym-toned physique. For footwear, he could have gone with boots or clean, unblemished upmarket athletic shoes or “fun” casual, possibly trendy/funky loafers.

In these evaluating my students’ dress scenarios, I often do an instant makeover using what they are wearing. If our example actor had to utilize what he was wearing for an audition or meeting directly after class I would suggest making his appearance more youthful and more him by offering the following: Remove the tie. Roll up the shirtsleeves to mid-forearm. Unbutton the top two or three buttons, untuck the shirt, and, if time permitted, suggest he get the shirt tailored (which can be done cheaply and quickly) to fit and compliment his torso.

The entertainment industry isn’t stuffy offices where dressing as Brooks Brothers or Talbots clones is common and expected. Our industry is about personality. Individuality. We sell image!

### *Matching Your Adjectives to Your Packaging*

What’s your image? Your image *is* partly your product. That’s what you’re selling. What you wear *is* the packaging for your product. A talent rep or casting person will be looking at your attire and interpreting what it says about you.

You need to be keenly aware of who you are and how to market yourself properly. If you’re youthful and trend-forward, don’t dress Connecticut conservative for the interview. If you’re often cast as a corporate persona, don’t dress like Willie Nelson for a meet and greet. Dressing opposite of your personality sends confusing signals to the person you’re meeting. In general interviews, talent reps and creative personnel want to get to know who you are so that they’ll know how they can utilize your look and personality. The same holds true for general auditions, the combines, and academic entry auditions.

**CAUTION:** If your personality means that you dress in torn, wrinkled, hasn’t-seen-the-laundry-since-Pop-Rocks-were-cool rag-wear, don’t you dare wear that worn and dirty clothing to an interview. Talent reps will look at you and think, “How can I send this filthy, poorly dressed person out to casting, directors, and producers and expect this actor to make a good first impression?” The only time that it is advisable to dress shabbily for an interview is if the character you’re being considered for wears grunge clothing and the casting personnel are expecting that look from the actors.

**NOTE:** These guidelines are also to be implemented in your daily life as an actor. The more you match what you wear to who you are, the more people will



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respond favorably to you. If you're single you may—like some of my master class students—find your social life becomes more active.

When selecting your clothing options, either from your closet or during shopping, compare your adjectives to the apparel. Do they match? If not, move on and find clothing that will have the Wow! Factor and coordinates with your adjectives.

### What Is “Professional”?

Presenting yourself in freshly laundered, thoughtfully put together, apparel that adheres to the preceding guidelines.

### Additional General Auditions/Interviews Dress Guidelines: Men

√ Recommended	vs.	⊘ AT YOUR OWN RISK ⊘
√ Clean clothing that reflects your personality.	vs.	Clothing with holes (intentional or unintentional). Soiled clothing that smells OR looks like it could produce an offensive odor.
Young or trend-forward male: solid color T-shirt.  √ Casual guy: casual dress shirt with top button opened.  Serious, mature, or corporate male: fully buttoned, pressed dress shirt.	vs.	Young or trend-forward male: T-shirt with advertising or offensive slogan/image.  Casual guy: Casual dress shirt from a fashion era long dead.  Serious, mature, or corporate male: Wrinkled dress shirt with frayed cuffs and/or collar.
√ Young or trend-forward or casual males: high-quality, clean-in-appearance denim jeans or khaki pants.  Serious, mature or corporate males: pressed, clean dress slacks.	vs.	Young or trend-forward or casual males: Jeans that are torn, appear soiled, or are soiled and wrinkled khakis.  Serious, mature, or corporate male: Dress slacks from a fashion era long dead.
√ Minimal jewelry.	vs.	Nose, cheek, lip, brow, or tongue piercings and/or lots of bling.
√ Clean shaven or neatly trimmed facial hair.	vs.	Several days of stubble; facial hair that is out of control and for maintenance requires a weedwacker.
√ Clean shoes.	vs.	Shoes with holes; laces untied; stains.

## General Auditions/Interviews Dress Guidelines: Women

√ Recommended	vs.	⊘ AT YOUR OWN RISK ⊘
√ Clean clothing that reflects your personality.	VS.	Clothing with holes (intentional or unintentional). Soiled clothing that smells or looks like it could produce an offensive odor. ⊘
√ Formfitting or form-flattering dress or two-piece that is current, fashion-forward, and not too revealing.	VS.	Dental floss masquerading as clothing. Clothing that makes a bolder statement than you. ⊘ Shapeless potato-sack-like dresses.
√ Youthful, trend-forward, or casual females: high-quality, clean-in-appearance denim jeans or khaki pants. Serious, mature, or corporate females: pressed, clean dress slacks or a dress that reflects personality.	VS.	Youthful, trend-forward, or casual females: jeans that are torn, appear, or are soiled and wrinkled khakis. ⊘ Serious, mature, or corporate females: dress slacks from a fashion era long dead.
√ Minimal jewelry.	VS.	Nose, cheek, lip, brow, or tongue piercings and/or lots of bling. ⊘
√ Subtle makeup.	VS.	Heavy makeup. ⊘
√ Clean shoes.	VS.	Shoes with holes or stains. ⊘

**Dressing for Character-Specific Auditions/Interviews**

Dressing for a stage or screen character does not mean that the actor should be in costume for the audition. It's more like a watermark on paper. You can see the watermark faintly; it doesn't obscure or overpower what is on the page. Same goes for an actor's character audition/interview apparel. The clothing gives a subtle hint of character and is not the focus of the audition.

All within our grouping of The Working Actors agreed about being subtle in dressing for a character. James Rebhorn put it best: "I think an actor should dress appropriate to the character, but don't go out and rent a military uniform if you're auditioning for an army general. If I'm auditioning for a position in authority, then generally I'm wearing a suit and tie or a sport coat and tie. If I'm auditioning for a farmer, generally I'm wearing a plaid shirt and jeans. I'm not trying to dress *like* the

## Audition Preparation

character, but I do dress to try to *suggest* the character. Why put an obstacle in the way by dressing in blue jeans when I'm auditioning for the president of the United States? Also, if I'm auditioning for the president, I take the earring outta my ear." Rebhorn chuckled.

### Character-Specific Auditions Dress Guidelines

√ Recommended	vs.	⊘ AT YOUR OWN RISK ⊘
<p>√ Dress in the style or manner that is similar to the character you are auditioning for, when possible. If not possible, dress as if for a general audition.</p> <p>√ Subtle suggestion. If auditioning for a professional type, wear business-style clothing. If auditioning for a rural character, wear clothing such as jeans with a flannel shirt that gives a subtle suggestion.</p>	<p>vs.</p>	<p>⊘ Costumes. Keep your treasured Civil War costume collection in the closet. Along with the pirate shirts and sashes that were worn by too many actors for the <i>Les Miz</i> and <i>Hamilton</i> open calls. ⊘</p> <p>⊘ Accessorize. If auditioning for a blue-collar type, leave the lunch pail and hardhat at home.</p>

There are occasions, especially on the West Coast and in commercial casting, when actors wearing costumes to auditions is common practice. Darrie Lawrence recalled a commercial audition she attended in which the character was a housewife preparing breakfast. Lawrence arrived in "casual apparel that could be worn to the mall and not seem out of place." To Lawrence's shock, the audition hallway was lined with actresses donning bathrobes, hairnets, and fuzzy slippers (this business is truly weird). For commercial casting, heavy accentuating of character dress is customary. Fine; keep it there where it belongs, in commercials.

Don't bring costumes to theatrical and screen auditions unless requested by the casting personnel. Actors are rarely asked to dress like the character for a Legit audition. For a film, Bonnie Black was once asked to dress as close as possible to the character for which she was auditioning: Martha Washington. Imagine the faces of bemused tourists as they encountered several dozen Martha Washingtons in powdered wigs and hoop skirts on the streets and subways of New York City. Only gay pride is more festive.

But that's nothing unusual compared to what Phyllis Somerville once encountered at an audition. "I went into an audition, I think it was *The Departed*," Somerville said. "I don't recall the part, somebody who was ill. An actress auditioned in a nightgown and she had one of those rolling poles with an IV with her. I've seen actors auditioning come in as cops, I've seen the waitresses, I've seen the nurses, but I've never seen anybody who came with a gown and IV. The casting agent actually said to the actress, 'Take that off. Put some clothes on and then

come back in.’” Somerville then laughed heartily at the recollection: “It was a little creepy-crawly.”

Creepy-crawly. That’s how the nerves feel for most involved in the audition process (including those of us about to watch you). We, like you, nervously hope that you’re prepared and match what is needed. If you follow the basic audition preparation guidelines I’ve laid out and combine that homework with your talent and intelligence, you should be more than ready to walk through the audition room door.

But what happens once you enter the room or studio? Are you primed to avoid audition room pitfalls? Are your talent and preparation enough for you to ace the audition? If you answered “yes,” then please get into the line of foresight-lacking individuals who rush into war armed but don’t carefully think through what happens once the conflict begins or how to peacefully resolve the ruckus. In an audition, you face a talent skirmish of actors. The ones who know how to jockey effectively around the landmines of the audition process are those who win at more auditions than they lose. How many audition landmines have you unknowingly stepped on? Turn the page and discover how to finesse your audition technique.

# *Staging Intimacy*

Theatrical intimacy refers to the whole spectrum of physical intimacy, including hugs, hand holding, kisses, and simulated intercourse.

Staging intimacy can be daunting and murky, but it doesn't need to be. Remember, theatrical intimacy is just storytelling, and we have already introduced the tools to cover the mechanics. Now, let's look at the other best practices, tools, and techniques for staging intimacy.

## **WHO IS IN THE ROOM**

Before staging intimacy, decide who is going to be in the room. This is a decision that should be made with the actors involved in the intimacy. There are pros and cons to having extra people in the room, but it always comes down to what the actors prefer.

If the actors prefer to work without their castmates in the room, then ask everyone other than the actors involved in the intimacy and the stage management team to step out. If the actors interested in having their castmates in the room, invite the ensemble to stay. Some ensemble members may have a boundary about observing the choreography, so no one should be *required* to watch the process.

## **VULNERABILITY**

Vulnerability, chemistry, or connection are elusive and can be tricky to establish between actors. Often, directors look for "chemistry" in auditions, with the hope that they won't need to tackle it later in the process. Sometimes actors take it into their own hands and try to fall a little bit in love with their partners.

This next technique is for practicing vulnerability, not creating chemistry, because we need to maintain separation between the truth of the characters and the reality of real life.

Chemistry is ambiguous. Vulnerability is a skill that can be taught and practiced. Vulnerability is setting aside, temporarily, the desire to protect oneself from emotional or physical harm. A common way for theatre practitioners to talk about vulnerability is being "open" or "available."

Thanks to evolution, our desires to protect ourselves in dangerous situations center around two major regions: our heads and our torsos. Something coming flying at you? You duck and cover your head. Projectile headed towards the center of your torso? You wrap your limbs around your soft center and turn to protect it. Our bodies naturally want to protect these precious, vulnerable regions. Many of us protect those vulnerable areas from emotional or social threats with our physical habits. We cross our arms, cross our legs, or take our bodies off center by sitting into our hips.

For the purposes of staging intimacy, we want to leave those vulnerable areas open to our partners. Agreeing, even just for the purpose of an exercise, to leave your center exposed and to take up space with your body can be scary. The energy that arises from that fear can make you more responsive to impulses, create connection, and may even result in emotional response. That's vulnerability. It may be exciting and uncomfortable as you start working on it.

Because we don't want to be actually afraid when we are on stage, we can practice standing in this vulnerable place, open and exposed, in training and rehearsal. We are training the body to embrace living in an open neutral position, bravely open to what the world has to offer. While you may have an emotional response to being physically open to a partner without any social mask or behavioral protections, all you need to do is just stand there. The sharp edges of fear and discomfort will fade as your body adjusts and being open and vulnerable will become as natural as stuffing your hands in your pockets.

### **Practicing Vulnerability**

There are lots of ways to practice being open, available, and vulnerable. The first step is to practice vulnerability by yourself.

- Set a timer for five minutes.
- Stand or sit in an open, neutral position with soft ankles, knees, and hips.
- Allow your arms to fall to your sides.
- Choose a point on the imaginary horizon and breathe to it.
- Notice if you want to shift side to side or if you want to look away.
- At the end of the five minutes, notice what your body wants to do to cover or protect your center and get you out of that vulnerable state.

If you are an experienced actor, this is probably easy. But this straightforward exercise can be challenging for those newer to studying performance. You may have already outgrown the sting of vulnerability and stillness. With a group of first-timers, there is likely to be a chorus of giggling and shuffling as they negotiate social norms and try to get comfortable. Give them a minute to let that pass.

The longer they can embrace the openness of this position the more vulnerable they are to the audience. If they can bring this openness on stage with them, the audience will feel deeply connected to them.

If you are a teacher of performance, encourage actors to work on living in this position in everyday life. Standing in line at Starbucks, chatting with friends, washing dishes, folding laundry, or walking across town. Ask them to check in with their bodies throughout the day and make sure that they are keeping their centers open. The idea is to expose the head and center in non-threatening situations to acclimate to having them exposed during performance.

## Partner Up

Being vulnerable by yourself is a lot easier than being vulnerable with a partner. As actors need to be vulnerable not only with a partner, but with a whole sea of people, they need to practice with a partner.

- Establish the Button.
- Go through the Boundary Practice and check in on Fences.
- With your partner, stand (or sit) about an arms length apart, facing each other in an open, neutral position with soft ankles, knees, and hips.
  - Allow your arms to fall to your sides.
  - Unclench your fists.
- Breathe through parted lips.
- Allow the talking and giggling to fall away.
- Look at their partner, open and vulnerable, and breathe.
  - Don't stare through each other, but see your partner.

After the exercise, identify the impulses you felt to protect yourself and pull yourself off center. Remember that the desire to protect yourself is evolutionary, not a character flaw. It takes practice to set aside survival instincts.

## Put It in Motion

Vulnerable, intimate moments rarely happens in static neutral, so let's introduce some movement.

- Repeat the set up for Partner Up.
- When you have found that open connection with your partner, step your right foot forward a foot length into a gentle lunge.
  - If you are sitting bring your sit bones to the edge of the chair and allow your feet to stagger front and back underneath you.



- Staying upright, center open, imagine a giant exercise ball between you and your partner.
  - The gentle pressure between your center holds it off of the floor.
  - It has some give, but never deflates.
  - If it is helpful, support the sides of the ball with your hands to clarify the image and then allow your arms to drop to the side.
- Begin to pass the ball back and forth from your centers.
  - Work very slowly.
  - Resist the desire to pick up the pace. Speed is the enemy of vulnerability.
  - Keep the movement in the major muscle groups of your legs, rather than hinging from the pelvis.
- Work here for five minutes.



Like before, identify the impulses you felt to protect yourself. Recognizing habits is key to letting them go. If you can work and stay connected to your partner for five minutes, move on to the next step.

## Introduce Touch



- Repeat set up for Partner Up.
- When you have found that open connection with your partner, step your right foot forward a foot length into a gentle lunge.
- Imagine the ball from Put it in Motion and shift it back and forth a few times.
- Ask your partner for permission to touch their palms.
  - Ask “May I touch your palms?”
  - Make sure you get a “yes” before you proceed.
  - If you don’t get a yes, practice this exercise with a thick slice of air between your palms.

## STAGING INTIMACY

- Bring your palms to your partners.
  - Keep your elbows slightly bent.
  - Release your shoulders.
  - Use muscle level touch (share some weight/pressure with your partner through your palms).
  - Don't push your partner over.
- Shift the ball back and forth, maintaining this connection.
  - Make sure the shift is happening in the legs, not from hinging at the hips.
  - Make sure to keep your center upright and facing your partner.
- Feel the pressure of your partner's palms, give and take energy by exchanging weight.
  - Maintain eye contact and remember to breathe.
- Stay here for a few minutes, connecting and shifting back and forth, keeping your center open.
- Now, try giving and taking the energy more from one side of your body than the other.
  - Both partners give and taking energy at the same time.
    - For example, Partner A may be taking more on their right and giving more on their left.
    - If you don't have permission to touch your partner, you can do this with that thick slice of air.
  - Keep the center open even while your hands move forward and backward.
  - Stay grounded and keep shifting through your feet.
  - No leader or follower, just listening physically to your partner.
  - Continue to seek eye contact and breathe.

### **Moving Together**

Now, let's practice moving this connection and vulnerability through space.

- Repeat set up for Partner Up.
- Keeping your center open, give and receive energy with steps forward and backward.

STAGING INTIMACY



## STAGING INTIMACY

- Maintain eye contact.
- Go slowly.
- Breathe.
- Keep that connection.
- Start to open and close the distance between you and your partner, by taking a few steps together or apart.
  - The ball between you is still there- it is growing and shrinking- continue to imagine holding it up.
- Play with different Distances.
- Introduce touch.
  - Remember the Button.
  - Be aware of your surroundings and remember your partner's boundaries.
    - If you don't have permission to touch your partner, work with that thick slice of air from the previous exercise.
  - Use touch to close distance.
  - Use touch to open distance.
  - Keep that ball between you.
  - Don't rush.

By the end of this step, the partners have established boundaries, been physically vulnerable together, moved together, exchanged energy, and explored opening and closing distance within their partner's boundaries. At this point, they would be well equipped to begin rehearsing an intimate scene.

## STAGING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Theatrical sexual violence is the consensual staging of a non-consensual story.

One of the most intimidating types of intimacy to stage is sexual violence. While the techniques are the same—boundaries, desexualized language, etc.—the inherently traumatic nature of the scenes, albeit imaginary, raises the stakes. Directors may be tempted to address this by opening up the rehearsal space to emotional processing and discussion of sexual trauma (their own and/or the trauma of the ensemble), but this is a mistake. Theatre is not therapy and directors and choreographers are not trained counselors, and you can do more harm than good by opening the door for a discussion of trauma.

Instead, lean even harder into the technique. Be especially sure to invest in desexualized language. Remind your cast early and often to practice self-care

practices with De-Roling and the Button, so that they're not carrying the trauma of their characters out into their real lives.

Some combinations of Ingredients that are particularly helpful for staging sexual violence. If Partner A is closing distance while Partner B is opening distance, what we start to create is a chase. If Partner A in that same opening and closing score is seeking eye contact and Partner B is avoiding eye contact, we can start to create a narrative about power and pursuit without needing to say you're chasing and Partner B is trying to get away. That language, even though it's not directly related to the "intimate" contact of the scene, can be sexualized and triggering.

Begin with desexualized language during general blocking. Whereas in the scene that doesn't contain sexual violence, you might just ask the actor to back into a wall or to back into a door frame. If you're asking them to back into a wall or back into a door frame as part of a scene that contains sexual violence, you may want to consider using the desexualized language. Can you close the distance between your back and the door? Can you close the distance between your shoulder blades and that wall?

Take breaks early and often while staging sexual violence. A two or three minute break every half hour can give the actors a moment to breathe and check in with each other. Don't pressure the actors to tell you how they feel. Ask them if they have any questions about the choreography or if they want to review anything.





### **De-Roling in Sexual Violence**

De-roling is especially critical here. If your actors are having a hard time, give them lots of breaks, but also facilitate de-roling to reaffirm that they aren't stuck their characters and that their relationship as colleagues is preserved, no matter how toxic the relationships of the characters might be.

### **STAGING NUILITY**

“Nudity,” in this context, means any level of dress (or undress) that is less than what an actor might wear to a rehearsal on any given day. Any nudity, from full nakedness to an actor removing a shirt, should be included in the casting call to ensure that the production hires an actor who will be comfortable with it.

During the first week of rehearsal, let the actors know what date(s) the nude scene(s) will be blocked and when you want them to start working at the show level of undress. Let them know the level of nudity needed to support the story and how it will happen (e.g., “you enter in a towel,” “you take off your shirt,” “you and your scene partner remove your clothing together”). In between blocking the scene and the day when the cast begins working in the nude, actors may work at any level of dress or undress they prefer. It's like setting an off book date, but for clothing.

Have the costume designer or dresser make sure robes are ready immediately offstage for actors who have nude scene, and ask if the actors want the robes handed

to them or draped gently on them. More than once I have seen overly enthusiastic dressers startle the daylighters out of an actor by flinging robes over them as if they were trapping wild animals.

The costume department may also be able to provide a pair of sweat pants and tee shirt dyed to match the actor's skin tone. This way, when the lighting designer sets the color levels, that actor doesn't need to be standing there naked for an extended period of time. Modesty pouches, tape, and pasties are all helpful for many types of nudity. Talk with your costume designer about how they can help you support the actors in this process.

With any intimacy on stage, it's important to have conversations with the entire production team regarding cell phone use during rehearsals, and this is particularly important in the case of nude scenes. If a show has nudity, consider banning phones except on breaks or when out of the room.

If there will be production photos of the nude scenes—and I argue that there should not be—include that in the casting notice as well. But there is very little reason for having a production photo of a naked actor—you're probably not going to use it in a mass mailing or in your portfolio. It may seem like a dramatic or vulnerable moment to take a picture of, and it is. But oftentimes the moment that would serve your portfolio best is the moment right before or right after the nudity. Help the photographer find those moments.

A common and well-meaning mistake that many directors make is to let the actors work up to the nude scene by asking them to rehearse in stages of undress (e.g., a bathing suit one week, topless the next, and fully naked the week after that). This attempts to ease the actors into it, but imposes a structure that might not fit—the actor may have different personal boundaries than the ones you imagine, or not be bothered at all and find the in-between stages a distracting nuisance. Giving them the option to dress as much or as little as they like between blocking and “off clothes day” puts the control back with the actor where it belongs. They might want to start working nude right away, or build up to it, or adjust to whatever mood they are in that day.

## **Have a Backup Plan**

No director wants to hear that they may need to change a moment they are happy with, but sometimes there are more than just boundaries to contend with. Actors drop out and need to be replaced, or a big donor complains about the simulated sex and the artistic director says you need to change it. Not everything is within your control.

The good news is, you can control the result of an unexpected event by having a predetermined backup plan for moments of nudity. After you have staged the nudity, stage another version that serves the same storytelling purpose. The hope for a backup plan is that you never need it, but you always have it, and it is something that you had control over creating. Without a backup plan, your cast

and crew might be left scrambling to solve the problem and they might lose track of the story.

Backup plan examples might include the following:

- The lights dim as the actor begins to remove their belt.
- The view of the partial nudity gets rotated upstage, so the audience can only see the clothed back of the actor.
- Add another layer (undergarments or an undershirt) so that the actors can remove a layer of costuming without being exposed.

Create the backup plan, rehearse it, tech it, and set it aside.

### **Additional Thoughts**

- Telling an intimate, vulnerable, or violent story can be difficult, not only for the artists working on it, but also for audiences. Consider your audience (and the artists) and how a particular story might impact them. Just because you *can* stage graphic sexual violence or nudity doesn't mean you *should*.
- Sexual violence committed against (or committed by) members of marginalized groups can reinforce damaging social narratives that can contribute to real-world trauma and violence. This is often a season planning consideration, but check throughout the process of casting and staging as well. Storytelling is powerful, so be thoughtful in yours.
- Just as you would ask if you are the right person to direct a particular play, consider if you are the right person to stage a particular intimate narrative. Queer intimacy benefits from queer input as intimacy for disabled characters needs the perspective of disabled artists.



# Psychological Gesture

## Michael Chekhov Exercises on Physicalizing the Objective

*Anjalee Deshpande Hutchinson*

### *Introduction*

Acting for a grade can be very confusing. Acting classes housed in academic settings, such as undergraduate programs, set up a supposition that acting is like many academic situations in which there are singular right and wrong answers, a system that students have been conditioned to accept since kindergarten. The pressure to find the “correct” answer engages the actor’s mental capacities in such a way that it often takes over the process of creation. Yet as most acting teachers know, the mental capacities are only one component of what is needed when undertaking the process of creation. And in the initial phase, intellect alone fails to inspire. When asking student performers to articulate their acting choices, students often squirm, uneasy about the “correctness” of their answers. Character objectives when identified purely by thought process, analyzing the given circumstances of a play, are seldom gleaned from a place of inspiration. More often they are “figured out” by making a first attempt at an answer, an answer to an academic question rather than an experiment in response to a creative impulse.

So how do we as educators and artists, within an academic setting, train performers to engage their full imaginations and playfully follow their creative “hunches” before allowing their mental capacities to refine and polish their choices? How do we clarify for students that grades are based on the creative quality of their choices in relation to the given circumstances without paralyzing them with fear? The way we do it is by giving them the tools to circumvent the intellect and glean creative inspiration from a multitude of different access points to their imaginative capacities. One of the most effective tools for doing just that is Michael Chekhov’s Psychological Gesture.

As his student, Chekhov’s understanding and approach to Stanislavski’s work was always from a playful point of view rather than from memory,

a strict commitment to authenticity or an intellectual understanding of narrative. Chekhov's work strayed even further away from intellectual approaches after a spiritual reawakening mid-career when, after a breakdown, Stanislavski supported Chekhov's return to health by introducing him to hypnosis, Eastern spirituality, and the work of Rudolph Steiner which in turn introduced Chekhov to anthroposophy. Anthroposophy, as defined by Steiner, is a philosophy which "postulated the existence of a spiritual world comprehensible to pure thought"<sup>1</sup> but fully accessible to humans through the development of consciousness and spiritual perception.

Towards that end, Chekhov's approach to objectives, obstacles, and tactics embodies a playful, spiritual point of view. This approach asserts that performers can draw down visceral corporeal imagery from a Jungian type of creative unconscious, housed in the actor as well as in all of humanity. This takes the pressure off the actor to deduce the "correct" objective for her character and instead invites the performer to pursue multiple creative possibilities for her character objective through the exploration of imagery and physicality.

Within this powerful method is one of Chekhov's most useful tools: Psychological Gesture. This tool not only engages the physicality through vivid imagery, it does so through intuitive kinesthetic response. Psychological Gesture asks the actor to play with physical archetypes in multiple creative ways. Actors experimenting with character physicality and movement are offered the opportunity to see what choices resonate deeply. In this way performers used to working with traditionally analytical methodologies are asked to enter the pursuit of finding an objective backwards, allowing them to first intuit what characters need rather than deciding intellectually what they *should* need. Once the main Archetypal Gesture is unearthed, the actor then takes the next step and colors it with the emotional qualities the actor associates with the character. This takes the focus from the deeply rooted archetypal metaphor to the specific character psychology. Only after the archetype (which symbolizes primal desire) and character psychology (which clarifies emotional need) are both discovered through physical explorations, do we allow the actor to then analyze the objective through an intellectual lens. This end component of analysis, rooted in the intellect, completes the comprehensive process of character development but circumvents the learned behavior of starting with intellect first. Once all three components of the character objective are revealed through a distinct physical manifestation, actors can continue to explore by establishing a gestural character vocabulary. These gestures are produced by continuing the physical investigations into character through the same means that the original Psychological Gesture (the physicalization of what is commonly referred to as the Super Objective) was first discovered. Through these investigations, artists identify several gestures (spiritual, habitual, emphatic, occupational, etc.) that reflect traditional character analysis, including meaningful understandings of obstacles, fears, tactics, and even character biography. This

vocabulary becomes metaphoric shorthand for the character that can offer any number of physical variations resulting in a nuanced but consistent performance as the character grows and changes throughout the course of a play. These tools can also be used exclusively as internal tools, offering tangible creative ways to access the inner life of the character throughout the play.

### *Exercise: Introduction to Psychological Gesture*

\*Adapted with permission from *Acting Exercises for Non-Traditional Staging*; Michael Chekhov Re-Imagined, by Anjalee Deshpande Hutchinson.<sup>2</sup>

1. The PG Warm-up
2. Archetypal Gesture
3. Psychological Gesture
4. Using the Psychological Gesture (PG)
5. Creatively using the intellect to serve the imagination.

#### **Exercise Goals**

- To access creative impulses and find ways to manifest them in performance.
- To circumvent the intellect as the first stop in finding acting choices.
- To explore Character Objective through the Physical Imagination.

#### **What You Will Need**

- Open space to move (ideally a studio space or theatre).
- Students dressed to move.
- 1–3 hours depending on time available, best suited to 8–16 students at a time; best practice would be two 1 and ½ hour class sessions or one 3-hour rehearsal. If splitting into two classes, consider stopping after teaching the full PG exercise (#3) which defines the tool fully before allowing for the creative use of the tool in character work for the second class.
- Optional: Have everyone read a play together (before class) that you can reference easily during the work. If you decide to use a play, have them select and memorize a few lines from one particular character you want the whole class to focus on.

#### **Physical Setup**

- Chairs moved out of the way or preferably out of the space.
- Jackets, coats, and backpacks and other personal items moved out of the way or preferably out of the space.

- Students begin anywhere in the room, eventually (although not from the start) they will need to be arms-length apart from each other and be able to see you.
- Teacher/Facilitator can move through students or be off to one side.

## Directions

### *Part 1: The PG Warm-Up*

A good way to begin working with gesture is to have the ensemble move around the space and call out some archetypal personae (examples below) and ask them to find a gesture for these personae as soon as they hear the prompt. If a person takes too long reacting to the prompt, point out to them that they may be trying to think about a solution to the prompt instead of reacting to it kinesthetically. This is a symptom of “looking for the right answer.” Ask them to instead fulfill the first gesture that comes to their body (not their mind.) It doesn’t matter if it makes sense to anyone else or even to them. Sample archetypal personae:

- King
- Servant
- Hero
- Queen
- Mother
- Lover
- Villain
- Seducer (or Cad if they know the word)
- Temptress (allow gender to be specific so that actors try on both)
- Orphan
- Father
- Mad Man
- Crazy Lady
- Witch
- Monster
- Feel free to add more!

Once they begin, encourage them to make full body gestures in tableau. I encourage this by prompting actors to extend the gesture through the whole body. The first gestures help actors to think in terms of archetypes free of positive or negative connotations, so encourage them to examine the choices they make. For example:

Did you give us a gentle mother – are all mothers gentle? Can you give us a mother that may or may not be gentle but is still mother?

Ask the actors to go from one extreme to the other in the gesture, starting at the opposite extreme to begin. If your gesture is a gesture that unfolds, start at the most folded, contracted place your body can be and then transition before reaching the end. Then ask the actor to sustain the end a few beats.

Ask them not to rush, to have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Ask actors to add some resistance to the movement but at the same time to notice and release any unnecessary tension in the body.

Have half the actors sit where they are and watch the other half. Run through a few more archetypal gestures (AGs). Then switch. Once both sets of actors have run through a series of archetypal personae (APs), discuss with them which archetypes looked similar on all the actors and which didn't. Then ask how this may correspond to the Jungian idea of universal unconscious (the idea that the human unconscious is filled with archetypes that have been created by the whole of humanity and/or society, not by the individual.) Note also the very unique interpretations and how that is okay too – giving rise to the instinctual kinesthetic response.

Then ask if they gave their APs a value judgment (unintended quality). Good or bad. Note that you didn't give them a quality, and if they applied one, that this is not archetypal. A hero who kills one person to save others is not completely good. An evil dictator who cares about their children is not completely bad. These are exciting and complex descriptions of multifaceted characters, but we are not there yet. We are only looking for the archetypal form of the person before we layer story, either good or bad, onto them. If there were any AP that everyone had trouble keeping neutral, ask them to go back and try some of those APs again. Ask them to work to remain neutral in terms of a value judgment, but to give them a full gesture in tableau that extends through their whole body. When they have run through them, ask them what has changed.

### *Part 2: Archetypal Gesture*

With your ensemble, take one session to work through all of the following archetypal gestures. If you have not worked with gestures before, allow the group to go slow and make sure the participants work hard but do not hurt themselves.

There should be resistance: "You get out of this what you put in!" but ask them to avoid strain in regards to their own body. Every actor must be aware of the limits of their own personal capabilities, and if they have an injury they should modify the exercise to allow for the greatest range of motion without further injury. If you do not have "To the Actor" by Michael Chekhov (the main reference for Archetypal and Psychological Gesture), it is okay to have them improvise

each gesture: “Give me the biggest possible push” so long as they are being mindful of their own limitations and what their body can do.

Ask them to:

- Start from a place of stillness.
- Find the one full body gesture that embodies this Archetypal Gesture.
- Let go of judgment, there should be no value judgment to the gesture, it is neither good nor bad, it just is.
- Have a clear beginning middle and end. Beginning and end should be physical opposites (left to right or up to down, etc.). An equivalent would be the preparation for the action, the action and the aftermath (sustained release). The sustained release should last for a few beats at least.
- Have a sense of form (an attention to the whole body in space).
- Have a feeling of ease (a focus on the movement as satisfying/gratifying to perform in some way).
- Have a feeling of beauty (an attention trying different ways until that one that strikes you as most interesting/captivates the imagination is found – and then a sustained ending point).

Then have actors repeat the movement for 3–5 minutes until they feel it is the strongest representation of the gesture. With each gesture, when actors become comfortable with the physical movement, ask them to incorporate first their breath (inhale should begin the prep, exhale should be middle and end) and then their voices (with sound not words) as an extension of the body. Ask them to use their deep diaphragmatic voices emanating from their abdomens and groins. Urge them to sustain the last moment (just like the sustained release of the physicality) instead of abruptly ending in a glottal shock.

Gestures<sup>3</sup>:

1. Push
2. Pull
3. Throw
4. Drag
5. Smash
6. Lift
7. Gather
8. Tear
9. Penetrate
10. Reach
11. Expand
12. Contract
13. Wring.

### Part 3: Psychological Gesture

Once you have worked through all of the Archetypal Gestures, have one to five actors stand and demonstrate one of the Archetypal gestures for you. They can all show at the same time. Then ask for a descriptive “quality” from the other actors. They can be more abstract at first. Give them some examples:

- Cold
- Hot
- Damp
- Sticky
- Swishy
- Dry
- Hollow
- Etc. – feel free to add your own!

Ask the five actors to add each quality to the physicality as they once again fulfill their Archetypal Gesture. A cold push. A hot pull. A damp tear. A sticky gather, etc.

Then have everyone play with abstract qualities attached to the AGs they were already playing with. As they play with the abstract qualities and AGs, add tempo – or as Chekhov refers to them, the quality of *staccato* or *legato*. What happens when the movement becomes slower and rounder? What about quicker and sharper?

After experimenting for a while, introduce one character from the play you are working on if you are working on a play in class or performance. If you are not, often times a fairy tale character that everyone is familiar with works well. Everyone can work on the same character to start. Ask the actors to list some emotional qualities of that character. Examples could include:

- Honest
- Grieving
- Heroic
- Whiny
- Arrogant
- Cruel
- Etc. – add more of your own as you see fit.

Once you have gathered enough emotional qualities about one character, ask all the actors to experiment with these emotional qualities added to the AG they have explored. You can call out each of the qualities and give them time to attach them to their AG. The cruel lift. The grieving throw. The heroic smash. Etc.

Ask them to consider their characters and then ask them all to get up on their feet and move around the room (stopping when they want to work on a PG) and play with at least three different archetypes that may fit their characters, and three different emotional qualities for each archetype. Recommend that as they start with AGs, they try polar opposite AGs to give them new information. If one AG seems right, try the polar opposite gesture to see what you find. Push/Pull, Smash/Lift, Expand/Contract. Once they find a few archetypes they like, they should then work on attaching a few different qualities they like to each of the AGs until they find some particularly interesting PGs. Ask them, what are these PGs to their characters? The greatest desires? The deepest fears? Their internal/external struggles? Moment to moment struggles in a particular scene?

#### *Part 4: Using the Psychological Gesture*

Once they have been introduced to AGs and PGs and have found their unique character PG that resonates, ask the ensemble to begin moving around the space working with the PGs. Imagine that there is a scale of 1–7 on how much your character reveals (consciously or unconsciously) about the inner sensation of the PG. Level 7 is large and abstract, the biggest possible physicality of what is going on in regards to the sensations of the PG. Level 7 is abstract and full body. Level 1 is the same internal energy of Level 7, just contained, beneath the surface – but radiating out energetically all around. Michael Chekhov referred to this tool as “Veiling.”

Tell your actors to plant and give the full PG when you call out. Call out a few times and then ask them to keep experimenting while moving about the space. This movement could mean stopping and planting to work an AG at full 7 in terms of energy and abstract movement, or using the PG in a more concentrated way at a 1 or 2 while continuing to move. You can be flexible with moving and/or stillness, they don't have to adhere to a rule in the exploration.

Coach your actors:

- Reveal what's beneath the surface at a 2
- At a 6
- At a 3
- At a 1
- At a 7
- Etc.

Coach your actors to:

Expand and make your movements as big as they can possibly be while still maintaining the PG. This largest expression is the gesture at a 7 (out of 7). It can be abstract, grotesque, or cartoonish but the PG



must still have all the beginning, middle, and end components in it. It must also be full body.

Now ask them to take their PG to a 5, so less abstract and more realistic on the surface than a gesture at a 7 but more abstract than a gesture at a 2.

Now ask them to take their PG to a 3 and a 1 etc. One should be hardly perceivable. It is not an outward PG but rather one that is happening continually on the inside. Or is communicated perhaps with a glance or a breath. A helpful catch phrase is “Have the gesture just up and underneath everything you are doing” or “Just behind the eyes. Smash with your breath. Gather with your gaze.” Etc. Chekhov used the useful word “simmer” – have the PG simmering just below the surface.

Coach them not to ignore their legs and the bottom half of their body! The energy should be up and underneath but “low” and underneath as well: full body movement even when it is completely veiled. When actors are in “simmer mode” – be sure to make them aware that the energy is simmering up and underneath their whole body, not just their face, eyes, torso. Have them practice the “whole body simmer.”

If there is time, it is nice to allow half the ensemble to watch the other half during this exercise and then switch. This will allow your actors to see how the large abstract movements still emerge in the veiled expression of them.

When you are ready to move on, ask actors to perform the PG internally at full 7 but externally explore stillness. This is asking the actors to feel the gesture inside but to *try not to show us* the gesture (per se) in movement (although some small movement/expression/breath may surface.) For example, if the actor’s PG is a painful tear (ripping, not crying), have them imagine they feel a painful tearing within them, but in this moment they must remain still. It is often engaging to demonstrate this with one or two actors who may have particularly resonant PGs for the whole class. Then have all the actors explore moving around the room. Or sitting down, standing, etc. Then have a few actors with different PGs moving about the same room with the full resonance of their PGs underneath (internally). And then have one of the actors add a line of text with the PG attached (or have them improvise fairy tale character text). Have all the actors run lines with the PGs attached. Tell them to feel a full 7 underneath but only reveal at a 1. Maybe have them drop into their gesture at a full 7 physically before saying the line again with the PG up and underneath.

Split the group and run the exploration of the internal/external PG again. Ask the actors onstage to end with a point of stillness or a pause and send what they are experiencing out into the audience. Hold them there for at least 3 seconds and then release. Ask what the actors in the audience saw or felt when actors were radiating out

into the audience without moving. Most likely your audience members will affirm that the radiation of what is beneath the surface is a very powerful tool in communicating to spectators what the character is feeling and/or going through without the actor having to physically “show” a thing. This is the power of a strong PG. It never has to make it onstage; it lives up and underneath – simmering vibrantly below the surface creating an energetic performance experience for everyone.

The PG is most often used as an internal handle on the character, a way for the actor to understand and manifest the character onstage. It is generally not a visible gesture in performance, although some actors find that the contained gesture, deeply veiled is very exciting when it “appears” in the exploration of a scene. An internal smash can manifest in the tapping of nails on a desk. An internal lift can appear in a smile or a lifted spine. A PG attached to a line becomes supported physically as well as vocally and can take on a whole new meaning.

Chekhov refers to these discoveries as “improvisational jewelry,” explorations that result in exciting physical texture in performance. Texture that is decidedly not created through the intellectual answer to questions such as “what are the character’s habitual gestures?”

#### *Part 5: Creatively Using the Intellect to Serve the Imagination*

(Post-exercise reflections for new leaders to consider as the discussion points.)

As you walk around observing the work, pick one or two actors who have created something resonant. Have the other actors stop and ask them to watch those specific actors you selected. Ask actors in the audience if they perceived an image or metaphor in what they have seen.

Give them examples of other kinds of metaphors that have come out of PG work:

- She was tearing her heart out and throwing it away.
- He was happy to destroy – smashing something joyfully.
- She was lifting something to watch it fall.
- Etc. – add more as you find them in your work or that of your ensemble.

Ask them to consider (and share) the metaphors that could be interpreted from their own character PGs in relation to the role of their character within the play. Ask how their PG metaphors could be revealed throughout the play and how the metaphors of each actor’s objectives play out over and over in different ways, like a refrain or the chorus of a song throughout the story. Psychological gesture is an Archetypal Gesture that has a quality (or more than one) added to it.

This gesture is the physical manifestation of what many generally call “the Super Objective.” Ask actors how their PGs reveal their character’s greatest desire?

Then ask the actors to engage the intellect to complete the PG work. This can be explored through discussion or in writing assignments.

Ask:

- Did any other AGs and PGs resonate in your exploration?
- Can PGs change for characters in a play?
- Is one PG an overarching PG and then are other PGs revealed within the original PG?
- Could other resonant PGs actually be scene PGs or monologue PGs?
- Do they change?
- Are there conflicting desires?
- Could your character’s greatest disappointment be revealed through a PG? Maybe a PG that is the opposite of one you were playing with or maybe one that resonated differently?
- How can a PG be an obstacle that your character constantly strives against?

This process asks actors to connect a character’s primal AG desire (the “Will” sphere as Chekhov calls it), to the character’s emotional qualities (the “Feeling” sphere) becoming the PG. The last section then asks actors to creatively engage in text analysis (the “Thinking” sphere) to further flesh out possibilities for obstacles and tactics from a similar place of instinctual kinesthetic response. Once those discoveries are made, the intellect is utilized to house these gestures (whether externally or internally) in specific sections of the story from which all of these revelations were inspired.

Instead of looking for the objective through the intellect, we find it through the body. These modes of exploration allow the actors to “play with” different kinds of objectives, landing on the ones that resonate most deeply with them in the physical exploration process. This practice of engaging the “Thinking Sphere” last allows intellect to be in service of the imagination, asking ultimately for metaphors that connect the physical Psychological Gesture to the given circumstances of the character and the play.

Although Mark Monday writes in his excellent Chekhov textbook *Directing with the Michael Chekhov Technique* that the PG consists of only two parts; the form and quality of action,<sup>4</sup> I believe adding this final component, the intellect, back into the formula to complete the full interpretation is most satisfying to the student actor. The intellect is used as a tool to articulate the creative and physical discoveries in an artistically engaging way. This gives the actor full access to her/his creative capacities. This ownership yields a pride in the work that resonates with a fully embodied performance. It also places the character within the greater arc of the play.

Physicality on its own cannot continually ignite the actor's imagination to its fullest potential, regardless of how creative that physicality is. Creative physicality must be paired with metaphor and story that awaken the desire in the artist to pursue. Kids jumping on a trampoline will do it for a while, but they are bored easily. Kids imagining that they are trying to touch the sun, that they are Icarus flying, become inspired. The inspiration continues when they continue the story, imagining themselves touching the sun and then falling from the heavens to earth, which in turn awakens a continued desire to pursue. It also launches a desire to imagine what both the flight and the fall would look and feel like and how the transformation occurs. The intellect gives the physicality home and direction within the story.

### *Conclusion*

Psychological gesture is an ideal tool for revealing character objective through the physical imagination: a combination of kinesthetic response and the fertile creative capacity held in the unconscious. By experimenting with character need through gesture and then continuing the exploration with detailed emotional imagery that saturates the gesture, we allow actors to “play with” different kinds of physical objectives, landing on the ones that resonate most deeply with them in the exploration process. Only after they have landed on particularly interesting movements that are exciting to embody are they asked to interpret this movement and how it connects to the play. Intellect is utilized in service of the imagination, asking for a metaphor that connects the physical Psychological Gesture to the given circumstances of the character and the play.

Given the tools of physicality and imagination as entry points, and the encouragement to explore central questions about the world of the play and its people through these entry points, we allow our actors to create beautiful renderings of complex humans that reflect deeply engaging embodied understandings of character. It is not enough to have students answer the question, “What is your character's Super Objective?” We want students to show us. And when they get comfortable with their own hunches as well as embracing creative ways to physicalize those hunches, then we get students less squirmy about “getting it right” and more excited about showing us exactly what they imagined, discovered, and created today.

### *Notes*

- 1 “Anthroposophy.” *Merriam-Webster*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthroposophy](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthroposophy).
- 2 Hutchinson, Anjalee Deshpande. *Acting Exercises for Non-Traditional Staging: Michael Chekhov Reimagined*. Routledge, 2018. Exercises 3.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3: The Rapture/Veiling and Refrain/P.G.
- 3 Chekhov originally had only seven gestures<sup>1</sup> but The National Michael Chekhov Association (NMCA) offers additional gestures, which have been

employed by many actors. I include them here because they are very useful in practice. Mark Monday, Artistic Director of the Great Lakes Michael Chekhov Consortium includes “Opening and Closing” to the list<sup>2</sup>, which NMCA houses under a separate category of exercise. Sarah Kane of the The Michael Chekhov Centre UK has developed a whole series of exciting additional Vocal AGs that expand on Chekhov’s gestures and the work of Rudolph Steiner. She describes merging the work as integral, and that “Chekhov work is anthroposophy in practice.”<sup>3</sup> Expanding or contracting this list to suit your lesson plan is optional.

<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, Michael. *To the Actor*. Routledge, 2005.

<sup>2</sup>Monday, Mark. *Directing with the Michael Chekhov Technique: A Workbook with Video for Directors, Teachers and Actors*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017.

<sup>3</sup>“Notes on Contributors.” *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 4.3 (2013): 437–439. doi:10.1080/19443927.2013.858902.

- 4 Monday, Mark. *Directing with the Michael Chekhov Technique: A Workbook with Video for Directors, Teachers and Actors*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017.

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