

# TIPS FOR AUDITIONING FOR A MUSICAL

## Before the Audition

If at all possible, get to know the show for which you're auditioning. Find the script and read it. Find the cast album and listen to it. That isn't possible all the time, but it is possible most of the time.

Read the audition notice carefully. What do you have to prepare? What should you be ready to do? Should you wear dance clothes or shoes? If they ask you to prepare an old-fashioned show tune, don't bring a song from *Rent* because you think you'll sound better. Maybe they'll think you sound great and maybe they'll think you're a jerk who can't read. If you don't understand something, call and ask. But don't call just to call -- make sure you have a legitimate question. And bring a pen.

Bring a good photo if at all possible; it'll help them remember you. If you bring a photo, don't bring one in costume (it'll make it harder for the director to see you in this role) or a wedding or prom photo. It's better not to have a photo. (Except for an Equity audition, when it's required.)

If you don't know a word in a monologue or song you're preparing, look it up. There are few things worse than mispronouncing a word in an audition and making it clear you don't know what you're saying. Make sure you're pronouncing any foreign words correctly. Also, make sure you understand the context of any song or monologue you're doing. Singing a sad or dramatic song cheerfully just because you heard someone else do it that way is a sign to the director that you're lazy and you don't do your homework (two common examples are "Everything's Coming Up Roses" from *Gypsy* and "Life of the Party" from *Lippa's Wild Party*, neither of which are happy songs).

Don't forget to proofread your resume. Nothing looks tackier than misspelling the name of a character you played or a show you were in (check the program or cast album if you're not sure). And don't pad your resume with fictional credits -- some directors may check with other companies to verify credentials and to see what working with you was like. Actors are not immune to the reality that their reputations will follow them; the same is true for musicians, technicians, etc.

## Preparing Material

Choose a song you know and love. Don't decide two days before the audition that you're going to learn a new song. If you don't know any songs, learn a few right now and sing them all the time, so that the next time an audition rolls around, you'll already know the song well. The same applies to monologues.

Some auditions will only let you sing 16 or 32 bars, but many directors want to hear a whole song. Still, don't choose a really long song, or if you do, only perform part of it. The same goes for monologues, unless a specific length is mentioned in the audition notice.

It's okay to cut a song down to make it shorter, but never change the melody line or lyric of a theatre song. The director or music director probably knows the song and they may decide that you don't respect the material. Don't add a high note at the end if it's not there. Don't add jazz riffs to show how well you sing jazz. Sing what's on the page. (The same may not apply to non-theatre songs.)

Don't plan to sing a cappella. Don't plan to sing with an accompaniment tape unless you ask ahead of the audition if you may and offer to bring your own equipment.

Choose a song that's appropriate for your personality. A sixteen year old girl should not sing "Hey Big Spender" or "Love for Sale." A middle-aged man or woman should not sing something from *Rent*. Singing a song that is obviously inappropriate for you may work in a concert or revue, but in an audition it will just be distracting and take the director's focus away from your voice and your presence.

Stay away from show tune chestnuts like "Tomorrow," "What I Did for Love," "This is the Moment," etc., and as a general rule, avoid hit shows written in the last few years. A director is listening to so many people sing that he or she will remember the person who sang the lesser known song more than the twelve people who sang the same song from *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. The same applies to monologues -- for God's sake, don't use Neil Simon.

Don't choose a song to show off your range. Choose a song that will make you sound your very best. If you have a good voice and you're what the director is looking for, they'll test your range. Show-off pieces are not appropriate for an audition.

Have your music clearly marked where you want the accompanist to start and stop, and DO NOT hand the accompanist several loose sheets of paper. Either tape the sheets together accordion-style (if there are four pages or fewer), or put them in a binder,

preferably in protective plastic sheets. If you're using a published book of music, don't give that book to the pianist unless you're positive it's going to lie flat on his/her music stand. Tell the pianist exactly what you want him or her to do, where to start, where to end, how fast to play. A great way to communicate your perfect tempo to the accompanist is to quietly sing the first line or so. And don't expect them to "fake" an ending for you; make sure what's on the page is what you want.

DO NOT hand the piano player a "lead sheet" (this is music with only the vocal line and chord symbols, but no piano part). Jazz musicians use lead sheets; theatre musicians don't. Some piano players can play from a lead sheet, but many cannot. And don't hand him or her a photocopy of music from a chorus book, with only melody and no piano part (you'd be amazed how many people do this). There's no point in sabotaging your own audition...

Make sure you've run over your song with a pianist before the audition. Too many performers learn a song from the cast album, then go out and buy sheet music. When they get to the audition and the accompanist starts playing, they discover – too late – that it's a very different arrangement in a different key, with a different intro, a different ending, etc. A sure recipe for disaster. Don't expect the accompanist to transpose the song to your key.

Don't choose a rock song unless you've heard it and rehearsed it with solo piano. Most rock songs (songs from Rent, Tommy, Top 40 songs, etc.) don't sound very good on solo piano.

Don't choose a song with a really difficult accompaniment. You never know what kind of pianist will be at the audition. They could be great or they could be barely competent. If you give them music that is beyond their capabilities, it will ruin your audition. Also avoid hard-to-play keys -- for some unknown reason, pianists hate lots of sharps but don't mind flats. If you're not sure if it's hard, ask a friend who plays piano. Also, it's perfectly acceptable to bring your own accompanist along to play for you – as long as he or she is really good. Don't bring a mediocre accompanist or one who "fakes" your song just because he's your friend...

#### **At the Audition**

If there's a form to fill out, print legibly. There's nothing worse than being unable to read your contact information. It could cost you the role. Make sure the L's and 1's look different in your e-mail address.

Be yourself. Don't try to project a false personality. It will show. Dress in your normal clothes, clothes and shoes in which you feel comfortable. Don't wear really high heels if you're not used to them. Don't wear a costume. But you should also dress appropriately for the show for which you're auditioning; in other words, no sneakers or jeans if you're auditioning for My Fair Lady and no suit and tie if you're auditioning for Rent. If the callback is on another day, wear EXACTLY the same thing you wore at the first audition. It'll help them remember you.

Be friendly. Come in, say hi to everyone, and tell them your name. Don't ask them their names. If they want to introduce themselves, they will, but chances are they don't want to introduce themselves to dozens of actors over the course of a day or evening (especially if there are several people involved in casting). Contrary to conventional wisdom, you don't have to announce your song and what show it's from. Let them be surprised just as an audience would be – it'll keep the director interested.

Turn off your cell phone, pager, watch alarm, etc. while you're there.

When you do your song or monologue, do it like it's opening night, with all the energy and excitement you use in performance -- even if you're in a small room. Let them see how great you can be.

When it comes to auditions, THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS OVER-ACTING. Most actors are so afraid of over-acting they deliver bland, energy-free performances at auditions. There is no such thing as over-acting -- no emotion, no reaction can be too big if it makes sense in the scene. Don't be afraid of jumping off the metaphorical cliff. Go for the jugular. Just make sure all your choices make sense in the context of the scene or song.

Most monologues are too long and performed too slowly. And most cold readings are performed too slowly. You'll never get a black mark for picking up the pace...

Don't make any excuses. Don't tell the director or music director you're sick. Don't tell them your voice isn't as good as usual. Nothing is more annoying. Just do your best.

No matter what, DON'T choreograph your song. Most songs require little or no movement; just stand still and let the director focus on your voice and your face. Keep your gestures to the bare minimum. Don't shift from foot to foot or sway. Just remember that every physical move you make distracts from your voice and your face.

If you make a mistake during the audition (for example, you miss a vocal entrance, forget part of your monologue, mispronounce a

word, forget a step in a dance audition, etc.), don't stop and ask to start over. That makes you look ill-prepared and unprofessional. It also makes the director wonder what you might do in a similar situation in front of an audience. Just keep going and don't worry about it. The director doesn't care if you forget something, but he does want to know if you have poise when something goes wrong.

Don't smile when you sing unless it's a happy song... or unless you're auditioning for a theme park or a cruise ship.

When you're doing a reading, there are two things that are more important than anything else. First, be honest. Don't manufacture emotions. Use what's there on the page. Second, be surprising. If it's a dramatic reading, look for humor. If it's a funny reading, look for what's touching or bittersweet or dark. If there's anything in the reading or scene you don't understand, ASK. And for God's sake, relax.

When you're looking at a cold reading, ask yourself three questions about the scene: What do I want? Where is the power? Where is the love? Not all three will be relevant to every scene, but they will be most of the time. If you don't know the context of the scene, ask. If there isn't an opportunity to ask, make up your own. Any context is better than none at all.

Remember that pimps, whores, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities are all people too. In other words don't resort to silly clichés when you play someone unlike you. Don't play the "blind," play the man. Don't play the "hooker," play the woman. Play these characters as people, not "types," and the director will be impressed. Ask the same questions as with any character -- what do they want, etc.

If you're reading a scene with another person, think about how you can make the other person look good -- this will calm your own nerves since your focus will now be off yourself, it will make you look to the director like a you're really generous actor, and it'll make the other actor relax a bit, making the whole scene work better.

Generally, don't use an accent or dialect unless you ask first if the director wants one. And don't do it unless you can do it well.

No matter what, be flexible. If the music director asks you to vocalize higher or lower than you're comfortable, do it. If the director or music director asks you to try your song again, only this time in a different style or with a different attitude, do it. If the director asks you to try a reading in a different way, do it. No excuses, no expressions of disbelief, no nervous giggling, just do it.

Don't try to memorize the reading they've given you. They don't care how fast you memorize. Don't make them think you're more interested in memorizing than exploring character. It's a reading. They expect you to use the script. They won't be impressed if you don't.

If you've read this far, you're about to learn the Great Secret that all great auditioners know -- instead of focusing on how you do, how to get that part, how to impress the director, make it your goal to "make his/her day." Find a song or monologue he doesn't know that will delight him. Make him laugh when you come in and again when you leave. Tell him you saw his last show and loved it. Directors hate auditions almost as much as actors do -- make this arduous task a little less hellish for the director and the others running the audition and you'll be remembered. And you'll also feel better yourself...

And don't forget to thank the director -- AND THE ACCOMPANIST -- on the way out.

### **After the Audition**

When the cast is announced, don't be depressed or angry if you weren't cast or didn't get the part you wanted. It's hard to be rejected, but you have to remember that being cast is only partly about how good you are -- it's also about whether or not you are appropriate for the roles they need to fill. You might be the best actor and/or singer they've seen, but if you're totally inappropriate for the characters they need, they can't cast you.

And don't ask the director (or anyone else) why you weren't cast, unless you really want to know. Some directors won't like being put on the spot that way; others will be okay with it. But be prepared to take some criticism and don't argue about that criticism.

For more great advice on auditioning, read Michael Shurtleff's excellent book *Audition: Everything an Actor Needs to Know to Get the Part*, or the book *Thank You Very Much: The Little Guide to Auditioning for the Musical Theatre* by Broadway producer Stuart Ostrow.