

AUDITION!

Blood, sweat... and maybe tears before bedtime

A book could be written on the subject of auditions – one of the best carries the title of this article and is written by Antony Shurtleff, the Broadway casting director of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Cabaret* (tellingly Shurtleff's book is really about acting craft, not auditioning). For many actors, auditions are a necessary ordeal, a ritual of punishment to endure to earn the right to work. But we've all had enjoyable ones – whether we get the job or not. Even if we are good auditioners, each audition takes some toll on us. This might be because of some or all of the following:

First, like any job interview, auditions are stressful and we have to do a lot of them to just get one job. I've calculated that in my first ten years as an actor I must have done around 800 auditions and screen tests. But my CV to 2004 listed only about 70 professional gigs – mostly TV, some theatre and film, and also 17 TVC's. So all up over that decade I'd only been cast in about one in every 10 jobs I'd gone for. Many actors will have done better, and some worse, but one in ten is probably close to the industry average, in NZ anyway.

Looked at one way, that's a hell of a lot of rejection (90% of the time) just to get one measly job. How we must start to regard auditions of course is not as some initiation to be endured resentfully, but as part of our overall job description. We are not just actors when we work. Even the most bankable international actors don't work *all* the time. Auditions require solid preparation, much more than I thought a decade ago when I started doing them.

More on that later.

Second, auditions are only too easy to take personally. Shurtleff is right: auditions are actually only a test of our acting skills, *but* under added pressure, and it is through nerves or confusion about the audition process that we can let ourselves down. We can feel we ourselves are being judged, not our work. With good reason. As actors our equipment isn't some violin or paint brush we can hold at arm's length – we are the canvas, paint and instrument combined. To de-personalize the near constant rejection we all have to find ways to separate ourselves from our work – while still bringing our whole personality and all our vulnerabilities to the work. It's mad making stuff.

Third, in the audition room we work alone. The script, character, director (if present), often the reader and sometimes even the casting director are new to us. Once employed and on set we'll be assailed by bouts of nervousness and doubt, but we have the massive validation that the director and/ or producer wants us there; we also have a team surrounding us to support us to do great work. You can look hard to find such reassurance in an audition room.

One final reason why auditions can take a toll on us is because many of us are flawed individuals made complete by - and to a great extent, addicted to - acting.

If we look at the characteristics of dependency on any banned substance, acting fits the bill in important respects. We crave it, but this craving is never permanently satisfied by enjoying it - even for a long stretch. The more we have, the more we want. When we can't get our fix the need for it can dominate our thinking to the point of obsession. Perhaps actors have more addictive personalities than the average. Some have two personalities: when we work, and when we don't. Others (Johnny Depp a recent high profile and reformed example; Mel Gibson's alcoholism early in his career another) maintain that their chemical abuse was self-medication – the only thing keeping them together. We should not judge: no one outside the profession, no one who hasn't lived with the uncertainty, the insecurity, the boom and bust nature of employment, can really understand the pressures the life of an actor can bring.

At a minimum we could say that at least to a greater or lesser extent we actors are all *thespian* junkies. Not unreasonably we want to work. Casting directors are the dealers, operating in the shady alleys of the industry, that might or might not be able to help us get our next shot. They are the gatekeepers; at least a necessary evil and often, to be fair, important allies and friends.

We come to any audition primed with some assortment of anxiety, fear or need. The causes for these worries, as outlined above, are explicable. But they won't help us do a great audition. We need to understand and manage these obstacles to enjoy auditions. *Because in the end it's not about getting the job.* The audition is a reality we'll have to live with all our acting lives. We can't afford to let them mess us about and undermine our confidence in our ability as actors. Also over time we get better the more we work. To get employed we have to master the art of the audition.

How do we do that?

The old-fashioned way: work.

Don't forget that no matter how brilliant our audition is, getting any specific role is usually well out of our control. Maybe we don't match the look required, or tally with casting already made. Casting really is an arbitrary process where clients, producers and network execs (and in the US & UK writers) – people often with a singular lack of imagination – will always have more say over decisions than the casting director and often even the director. The important truth to understand is that every time you are auditioning for any specific role you are also doing a general audition for anyone who sees your tape. As our morbid trawling through the biographies of Hollywood teaches us, the examples are legion of actors getting work in roundabout ways, and this is one of them. Hype aside, good auditions do bring a definite benefit in the here and now, that has nothing whatsoever to do with whether you get the part: *more auditions*. Only actors who do good auditions get more.

In such conditions all you can productively do in any audition is *satisfy yourself*. Produce work you are proud of, whenever you can. Forget trying to please the casting people or producers. Take the pressure off: focus on the one thing you can: your work. Knowing this is the key to setting your thinking right about auditions. Go in to do the job, not get the job. Make good work your base standard, and get used to doing it whenever you are called to the acting plate: in auditions, in classes, in your work, in your own scene group.

And be mindful that auditions are no different from professional acting jobs in that *creatively* you will nearly always be working on your own.

Most directors interact with actors by giving orders and making suggestions. Nothing wrong with that if (like Peter Jackson) they have a clear vision of what they want and can communicate it thoroughly. It's a great blessing to know you can trust the judgement of such directors and this allows you to get on with your job. But few industry practitioners in any medium – TV, film or theatre - are 'actor directors': people who actually have a useful process that directly helps your performance. And great 'actor directors' – while they give you the warm fuzzies - don't always produce the best films or television if they lack other essential skills (a good visual eye, or a grasp of the overall story).

This is why such importance is placed on casting (and why crews have it drilled into them to be friendly and obliging to actors). Good casting and a good working environment on set help performances.

Professional acting then is in part about taking orders and faithfully assisting the director to tell the story as he or she (quite literally) sees fit. And to fulfill this job requirement we must have a craft well honed and able to produce any kind of truth on demand. But really good actors do more than that. They can produce a fine well-rounded performance *on their own*. They learn to become their own directors, developing a credible character whose life exists outside of just the small part of it being told in this film or play, and making interesting and surprising choices in the playing.

This isn't easy. Solid investigation of any scene or role takes time, trial and error, fine judgement and a lot of work in balancing left/ right brain choices: not too much technical, just enough instinctual. It's also a deeply satisfying process that is its own reward. The blunt truth is, many actors don't do this work most of the time for auditions. And maybe not even for work. The ones that do so consistently will most likely get the job and sustained careers.

It's that simple: do the work. You're aiming to be pregnant with expectation on the day but not at full term: primed, but still a little anxious. Anxious because you have something to show, and you haven't battened down all the hatches, you're not exactly sure how it will come out. Only you know what works for your acting: to thine own self be true. The path will always vary - with every role/ show/ scene it often takes a different key to unlock the script – but give it the time and in the end you'll find your way in.

Then run it different ways – to discover the piece better, and so you're flexible: ready for anything the buggers throw at ya.

Get coaching if you wish and particularly master any accent if one is required. Learn the lines absolutely and utterly frontward and backwards (without working out exactly *how* you will say them). While searching for the words aids spontaneity, nerves will make even well learned lines harder to recall – so you'll get it about right in the audition if you learn them well. Film the scene and watch it back near the end of the process if that helps you, playing back to notice any obvious bad habits creeping in, such as looking down or away too much. Solitude can be important, but at some point you may want to run the lines with a friend. There's nothing worse than almost dying in the audition room from the surprise of hearing the words back for the first time from an actual person. But choose your helper carefully. Your confidence is an asset. Don't put it at risk.

The reward of putting in the hard yards is the right kind of nervous on the day – the sort that comes from actually having something to show, a risk to take. The auditioners are looking for a finished performance – whatever they might tell you. You have to do all the work you would do if you had been cast in the part to get it. When you are recalled you need to repeat it – and when you are cast you often have to discover it all over again. As an actor you are a business, and auditions are a part of your core activity. Rather than a distraction, learn to see them as an essential activity that benefit your craft and promote you favorably at the same time.

In the audition lose your fear of being ugly, wrong or stupid. Such pre-occupations can seize you up. Instead take risks. Many roles have been cast because a 'mistake' was made and suddenly the audition got interesting. So welcome accidents, and different ways of doing it. Lose the vanity, your belief that your acting must always look good.

In the audition room *there is no right way* to do it. There is the way they want – but they may not know what that is until they see you do it. So present your prepared version - and be ready to throw it away in an instant. Good preparedness means you're confident in your choices *and* ready to be flexible and responsive.

In the waiting room it may help to distract yourself rather than obsess about the scene or worry the lines. Sports people employ this technique just before the gun. In fact competitive sport analogies are most appropriate now, in the actual moment of performance. Success orientated people are outcome not process focused. No matter what your current state of mind or worries about your level of preparation and readiness, now is the time simply to perform, and perform well. To ACT.

In the audition room be attentive, listening can help you relax. But most of all forgive yourself for however you feel and remind yourself that your emotional state may well actually be something you NEED to work. Our feeling of excitement/ upset/ anxiety is often appropriate to the scene. Mamet would

even say (as does in his wonderful heresy 'True and False') that our nerves are ALWAYS about the scene. So...

In the first take of every scene, do your version. This shows your commitment and intelligence. React off the reader if they are good. They are the new variable that you didn't have at home, and they may have a little extra gift for you. Most times readers are pretty good. But if they are wooden, or OTT, don't let them put you off your game.

For the second take generally the casting people will give you direction. This is the opportunity you want, because now you can show them you can do something different, with the added bonus that this will probably be closer to what they want – unless of course you nailed it the first time. This might be the reason why no notes are forthcoming but even so ask for some. It's good to get down a different variant. Never mind if what you get told is different from your idea of how it should be. It's more important that you demonstrate flexibility. If you can't get a good re-interpretation from the casting director the second time round just change it – make it different in some way from what you did the first time. At the very least this will keep it fresh.

Just as on set every take is like a cake rising in the oven, your understanding growing as you make those minor little discoveries that keep it spontaneous. Ever tried to do the same scene exactly the same way *twice*? You can't, it goes stale, unless you animate it with something from within. That way it *looks* the same but is fresh because you've added something to the mix at a deeper level, something unpredictable. The camera loves spontaneity. So part of you shouldn't know what is going to happen next. That's what we aim for, getting out of our heads, getting the balance right between observing what we do in a detached way, while being lost in what we do at the same time. Your preparation should never nail down a set performance, but lay down a framework that you can fill out with the discovery of something new each run.

Once again: there is no *right* way to do it.

It's also worth repeating, no matter how good the audition *felt*, that's no guarantee you'll get cast. Equally, sometimes we prepare well and then in the audition room we just *suck*. What works for us changes as we do, and we might be a bit behind the eight ball. We get bad days. Forgive yourself. There's no rules in this acting game of ours, no golden key. In the actual moment it's more like sport than science: you can do everything right and still mysteriously screw up on the day. Such occasional slips actually serve to get us back on our game. We make a necessary adjustment – often subconscious – and then there's the next audition.

For which it won't hurt to remind ourselves of some cheering truths. First, when you get a recall you're good enough to get the job; when you're consistently getting recalls it's only a matter of time before you get work.

Second, the casting directors sincerely want you to be good. Their job is to deliver as many good performances to the director as they can.

Good, bad or indifferent, when it's over always walk out of that audition room and psychologically keep on walking. *Forget about it.* Don't spend the fee – mentally or otherwise. Don't call your agent a week later unless you have dates to juggle. The job was the audition and it's OVER. Employment from the experience is a bonus.

This is the tricky part: letting go of something you have invested your time and talent in for days or even weeks. But let go you must. It is a Zen art they don't teach at any drama school but you must master it unless you sincerely wish to go potty. Every career is a catalogue of small and great disappointments along with the highs, acting included. No degree of success will ever insulate you completely from your own fallibility.

And so it goes. In that next audition, go in to do the job. And you might get it. Someone will miss out if you do. That is the reality. But when you get the part, try and be grateful. This is not an easy job, and you've earned every break you get! This is a competitive business and in the long run repeated rejection has the benefit of getting people who are in the wrong profession out of acting. Acting is a marathon, not a sprint – the prize goes not to the short distance runner, but to those with intellectual and emotional stamina. Worthy qualities, and if you commit to acting it will begin to train you in them.

That's what's happening to me.

Peter Feeney, 15/ 06/04