

# Be yourself

*A teacher visits the Unified Auditions and brings home some advice*

BY JANETTE FOX KLOCKO



ONE OF THE MOST challenging aspects of my job as a high school theatre teacher has always been preparing students for college auditions. Those brief encounters with college representatives can have a profound impact on whether or not a theatre student is accepted into his or her first- or second-choice school, and how much scholarship money he or she is awarded. I own at least a dozen books on the subject of auditioning, but every year when I send students off to college auditions, I wonder exactly what happens at these events. So last year I went to the National Unified Auditions in Chicago. The Unifeds feature more than twenty colleges and universities and hold auditions in numerous different cities, including (this year) New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas, in addition to Chicago. It's a good opportunity for a student to audition with several different schools within a few days. (The schools each have their own space so students audition for each school individually.)

I did not have any stu-

dents auditioning for B.F.A. programs in Chicago this past year. So without any stake in the process, I was able to convince friends from three different schools that were taking part in the Unifeds to let me observe their auditions. I also talked to many students who were nervously waiting in the hallways of the Palmer House Hotel, where the auditions were held, and I spoke with representatives from three other schools who were not comfortable letting me watch their auditions, but who were willing to share their knowledge with me.

What I'm going to do in this article is detail what I learned about the audition process during my Chicago visit. Before I do that, here's one thing I want to clarify: while there certainly was a broad range of colleges and universities from throughout the country represented at the Unifeds, the schools involved are not, of course, the only theatre programs that conduct auditions. There are plenty of good schools that hold auditions independently, usually on campus. Much of what I'm going to cover here will be useful in any college audition.

## **Organized chaos**

To begin with, these auditions are not for the faint of heart. You've probably heard this before but it's worth repeating: unless theatre is the only thing you can imagine yourself doing, get out now. School representatives I talked to said they see, on average, twelve hundred actors per year and typically accept twenty-six

to forty. So you see what the odds of acceptance are.

I spent two days observing auditions. Each school auditioned in a hotel conference room where there was a table, a few chairs, and sometimes a piano. The rooms were mostly small and close together, and by the time you got five to eight students per school, their parents, and the assistants from the schools' admissions offices you had quite a few bodies in a room or filling the surrounding hallways. There were times when it looked and sounded like a mob scene.

Once the kids began auditioning the scene became even busier. The walls of a hotel are not meant to accommodate incredibly talented high school students with powerhouse voices, each singing two songs and performing two monologues. (These are the typical requirements for B.F.A. musical theatre programs.) The atmosphere was reminiscent of a bee hive—students with their headshots and résumés in one hand, CD player in the other, all buzzing around, humming snippets of songs, repeating their monologue lines, while their parents paced nervously back and forth. Even though the students were in competition with one another for a coveted spot in a school, they all seemed very supportive of each other. These kids, from all across the country, were cheering each other on and telling fellow actors to “break a leg.” I was impressed with the overall behavior of the students. Their demeanor and professionalism turned what could have been a disaster into reasonably organized chaos.

From the moment I stepped into the hotel, I saw hundreds of theatre students. They were easy to spot: you could feel the infectious energy that exuded from these actors throughout the hotel. To me it felt like an opening night. My heart beat faster just imagining the anticipation they were feeling as they prepared to put their egos on the line and prove that they were great actors, singers, and dancers.

## Getting ready

Now I want to share with you some of the things I saw in the auditions themselves, and offer some tips for those of you who may be auditioning this year. These suggestions are based on three sources: my own experience in working with students preparing for auditions; what I heard auditors telling the actors they auditioned at the Chicago Unified; and the comments of students who auditioned.

I'll start with what I know. Get to each audition early and be totally warmed up. When they call your name, smile, try not to look terrified, and follow the lead of your auditor. Most likely they will want to chat before you get started. Remember that first impressions are important, so show your auditor you are a talented, confident performer. Just be yourself and give them straightforward answers to their questions. If they ask, “Do you play an instrument?” for example, answer honestly. Don't try to impress them by lying. *Do* impress them by doing your research on their school and by having questions of your own to ask about their program. They will likely have lots of answers and be happy to share them with you. Keep in mind that schools want to attract the best actors and the auditors want you to be good. They are hoping you are the next Brian Stokes Mitchell, Bernadette Peters, or Mary Louise Parker. They really want you to succeed. Talking informally gives them the opportunity to find out if you are an open, communicative person who they could work with.

When the chatting is over, you will be asked to perform your pieces. Your auditors will let you know whether they want to hear your monologues or songs first, or they will give you the option to pick. If the choice is yours, either do what you are the most comfortable with first, or what shows you off the best.

Don't be alarmed if your auditor wants to work with you. Some do and some don't. But if they offer suggestions or want you to make an adjustment, try to give them what they

want. It is okay to ask questions if you don't understand something, but don't make your auditors justify their requests. Just try to play along. If your auditors simply send you on your way without comment, don't attempt to analyze the encounter. Simply try to do your best—that's all you can do. Regardless of how you feel, thank them and exit smiling.

Here's what I observed. I saw some very talented students audition. They walked into the room seeming



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confident (maybe they were nervous but they did not broadcast it). They were not cocky but clearly appeared to be in control of what would happen during the audition. The majority of them came prepared with a CD and boom box that had two versions (a sixteen-bar version and a thirty-two bar) of their accompaniment. Several times the auditioner asked for the longer version even though sixteen bars was all that was required. I was impressed that all of the students were ready to meet the request. Also, many schools asked for one contemporary monologue and one classical, while others wanted two contemporary ones. Many stu-

dents were asked to perform another contemporary piece even though they came with a classical. Not all the students were able to do that. The ones who were most prepared had several monologues ready to go. I suggest you have an arsenal of monologues and songs and be ready to do whatever the auditors ask. Be sure to read what each school expects, as requirements can vary considerably. Even if you are prepared, things can get very confusing if you are auditioning for fifteen different schools over the course of two or three days.

I've always noticed how stressed my own students get when trying to decide what to wear for an audition. I thought that most of the actors I saw at the Unifieds wore appropriate clothing. Remember, you are selling your talent, not your body. Female actors should stay away from short skirts and low cut blouses. I saw very few blue jeans (personally I do not believe they are appropriate for an audition). What I did see were young men in nice slacks, with a belt and dress shirts, and even a tie or two. I don't think you have to wear a tie, but you need to look nice and not sloppy. The young women wore a wide array of styles, but again, nice slacks and sweaters or blouses seemed the most appropriate. A reasonable-length skirt is fine, as long as you can move in it. Just bear in mind that first impressions may be the only impression you have a chance to make at an audition.

### **The audition**

After watching more than forty students audition, I feel it is safe to say that new technology is not always the best choice. The boom boxes *always* worked. Those who brought their computers or iPods inevitably wasted time and ended up frustrated or freaked out before they even began because of technical glitches. The boom box is simple and reliable—plug it in and hit play. Have both versions of your song taped, or even better, on CD, and maybe have an extra song in case someone asks for something more.

When you sing, own the room. Sell your song and don't be afraid to belt even though you will probably be in a very small room. If there's space, scoot back a bit—don't sing or perform on top of the auditors. Putting some space between you and them will allow the auditors to get a better and more comfortable look at you.

When you perform your songs and monologues, put your focus in front of you, but don't use the person auditioning you. That puts pressure on him or her to react to you and that's not their job. That said, I did observe several auditors ask kids to "play off of them" as they performed the song or monologue. That request invariably changed what the student did. There is a reason they do that—they want to know if you can make adjustments. I saw actors who had fantastic monologues, but they could not do anything different when they were directed to play in the moment. I also saw mediocre monologues that became brilliant performances when the students allowed themselves to really be in the moment and use the person auditioning them. It was an incredible transformation.

The ability to play and make adjustments tells the auditor three specific things: one, that the actor is directable; two, that she can play the moment; and three, that the actor is willing to listen and really hear what was she was being asked to do. As a director, I would much rather cast an actor who is a hard worker and can take direction over a polished performer who can't take direction or hear what the director is trying to get across.

Here's another basic tip: always remember to invent the other character in your song or monologue. Your best work will come out of your reaction to the "imaginary" character even though she is not actually onstage with you. You need to hear what the other character is saying to you or how she is reacting to you.

Of course, your songs and monologues must be polished and appropriate to you and the programs you are auditioning for. Do your research

on your material, the writers, and the genre of the piece. Read the scripts and *know* the shows. Chances are high that your auditor will know the show as well. How can you possibly understand all the given circumstances if you have not read the show? This includes songs as well. Do not perform your songs a cap-pella—this is not *American Idol*. They want to see you act moment-to-moment through the song, not just sing pretty. Also, do not sit! I could not believe the number of monologues that were delivered from a chair during the Unifieds. These auditions are not acting for film—you are training for stage work. Auditors want to know if you can move and use your whole body to communicate the story. If you must use a chair, sit briefly, then stand up and tell the story of the song or monologue believably and compellingly.

Thank your auditor as you leave. This is the last chance you have to leave a memorable impression. Remain positive, even after you leave the audition space. Do *not* discuss how things went in the audition until you are well out of earshot of the auditor as well as other students who might be waiting their turn. I saw a student coming out of an audition and she immediately turned to another actor waiting to go in and said, "Oh my God, I really screwed up my monologue. I got lost in the middle and had to start over and it just sucked..." During this barrage of negativity, the auditioner came to get the next person and overheard half of the actor's comments. *That*, unfortunately, was the last impression he had of this beautiful and talented young woman.

### **The students' point of view**

I talked to many students and they had a lot of wisdom to share. I heard several of the same suggestions repeated as different students echoed the thoughts of others. In one instance, I talked to a group of three Chicago-area students who auditioned for several different schools. Emily, Brittany, and Ben were more than

willing to share their thoughts on the whole process. Here are a few of their more interesting comments: “Know your monologues [and songs] backwards and forwards so you can be relaxed.” “*Don’t* bring your parents!” “Be comfortable in your own skin. Be confident and focused.” “Sell yourself and your personality. You are *performing*. This is a performance.”

I’m going to interject a thought about parents and auditions—my advice would be to do what will make you the most comfortable. If you have a relationship with your parents that creates tension, then leave them at home. If they will be supportive and help you to feel more comfortable, bring them along. Some students feel like having their parents onsite puts even more pressure on them, and that is the last thing you need at an audition. Some feel like they need them there. So do what will work for you—this is about you and what you need to help you make your way in the world for the next four years

Emily, Brittany, and Ben said that, for the most part, the auditors made them feel relaxed and at ease. Some even offered constructive criticism. They added that a few auditors seem to rush students through their auditions.

I reminded the three that it was not the auditors’ job to smile and make students feel comfortable, that they are there to find good actors. If you find yourself in a situation where the auditor seems to take little interest in you and your work, all you can do is your best and not let the encounter drag you down. Besides, I believe this sort of audition experience is the exception, not the norm. All of the auditors that I observed were incredibly friendly and really made the students feel comfortable.

I talked to two other students, Claire and Chris, who had auditioned the previous year and were at the Chicago Unifeds to start over. Chris decided to take the year off (even though he had been accepted to the college of his choice) and was now truly ready to buckle down and get serious. Claire had been accepted into

several programs last year and decided that the school she chose was just not a good match for her. Both said if they had known last year what they knew now, it would have been much easier. Both had some great advice to students auditioning for the first time. “First of all, don’t *stress* so much,” said Claire. “It is not about how perfect your audition is. The auditors are really good at seeing your potential and are very forgiving. They want to know what you can do. But never go into an audition with anything you are uneasy with. Your pieces should be second nature to you. Also, wear something comfortable—what you might wear to a job interview. Don’t show too much skin, and wear something that shows who you are and makes you feel confident.”

Chris, who worked at Disney World this past year, said, “Don’t let your fear take over. They want you to be good and there is no wrong or right way. Be confident and go into your audition thinking that you are what they are looking for in an actor. Don’t be afraid of the Unified auditions. It is a great way to audition for many schools at once. Go visit the campuses of those you really liked. And don’t bring your parents to the auditions!”

Chris emphasized the importance of not postponing the work you know you need to do in preparation for auditions. For example, learning your material, losing the extra ten pounds you put on, and working with a vocal coach. He also shared a side of the process that I did not witness myself, but heard about occasionally from other students. “Don’t mingle with other students because they will try to psych you out,” said Chris. “They make faces and say things that could devastate your confidence. They all want to be the best.” I never witnessed this myself, but if you do encounter this sort of behavior, my suggestion would be to politely excuse yourself and move elsewhere.

One of the obvious things you learn during the Unifeds is that there are many good schools to choose

from, and that they are as interested in you as you are in them. So don’t make the mistake of focusing on being accepted into a single program—you have plenty of options. If you’re not accepted into a conservatory or a B.F.A. program, there are numerous well-rounded B.A. programs around the country and they all need talented actors. So do your research, and hedge your bets—just as you would if you were applying to academic programs. I went to a small liberal arts college and I would never have discovered my passion for directing and teaching if I had been in a B.F.A. program specifically for acting. Open yourself up to the unlimited possibilities that are out there, and don’t give up. All you can do is your best and the rest is up to them. Deal with what you have control over—how you dress and present yourself, how prepared you are for your audition, your choice of material, and the choices you make with that material. That’s all you can do—you have no control over whether or not a school accepts or rejects you.

Finally, I’m going to repeat myself and remind you that you are one of many who want to pursue this crazy profession. If you can do anything else—do it! If not, set your goals, and pursue an acting career. Do it because it is your passion and because you have something to share with other human beings and because this form of communication is the only thing you can do. Do not do theatre “because you want to be a star.” As Stanislavski said, “Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art.” Get a degree and learn everything you can—you will need it. Strive to learn the craft of theatre and a process you can rely on so that when you get the opportunity you are prepared and ready. See you at the auditions. ▼