

# The seven deadly sins of auditioning for college

*Advice from the other side of the table*

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**BY TRACEY MOORE AND AMY ROGERS**

EVERY YEAR, hundreds of hopeful acting and musical theatre students approach the doors of the university and ask to be let in. The process for these young people—most of whom are juniors or seniors in high school—involves some kind of audition. The majority are good citizens who put a lot of thought and effort into preparing. Often, they enlist the help of their high school theatre teachers, seeking them out for advice and coaching.

Over the years, we've seen a lot of entrance auditions—some good, some bad—and we've become very familiar

*Janielle Kastner performs a monologue in the Thespian Festival Individual Events Showcase—without committing any of the sins described in this article.*



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“I went into every audition trying not to assess my performance, because being too obsessive and self-critical doesn’t help you in the audition process. I went to the Chicago Unifieds for most of my auditions, where I was literally walking down hallways going door-to-door for various schools. I knew that the decisions weren’t even up to me; they were made by a few theatre directors behind a table with my headshot and résumé. All I could do was present myself and my talent, and hope I was what they were looking for that year for their freshman class.”

with the basic do’s and don’ts. We call the “don’ts” the Seven Deadly Sins because it’s entirely possible that one or more of these problems will prevent a student from succeeding in the audition room. Unlike an audition for a show or a three-month summer stock contract, an unsuccessful college audition has implications for the next four years and beyond. It can have consequences for scholarships, access to training, and networking opportunities, all of which will affect subsequent decisions about a career in the theatre after graduation.

In this article we offer, for the consideration of auditioning students and their teachers, our thoughts about what constitutes a Deadly Sin in the undergraduate theatre program audition setting. We share our observations about these sins—and suggest ways to avoid them—in the hope that understanding what the audition committee is thinking will help more students walk through the doors of the college they prefer.

### **The First Deadly Sin: Over-Coaching**

It’s the student who suffers the consequences of all audition-related sinning, but this first one is really the responsibility of the teacher. Coaches, these thoughts are addressed to you.

Let’s rip the band-aid off quickly. One of the main goals of any audition is to let the auditors see the person in

front of them as clearly as possible. This is never more true than in the college audition situation, where the folks behind the table are trying to suss whether this student has the basic skills (upon which we can build), the desire to learn (without which we can’t build), and the personality to become a member of a freshman class ensemble that will stay together for four intense years.

When a student is over-coached, we decision-makers often can’t see him at all, thanks to an over-zealous teacher who has given him planned gestures, planned vocal stylings, planned pauses, and planned emotions. All we can see is a plan.

No matter how good the coach’s plan is, it’s still the teacher’s, not the student’s. And believe me, we can tell which is which. It’s like a student essay that has been cribbed from the Internet, or written by a parent. You’d know, right? And so do we.

Here’s a metaphor: an auditioning student is like someone standing behind a pane of glass. The pane of glass is the monologue or song. If the glass is clear, I can see the student well. I may be aware of the glass, but it doesn’t stop me from “seeing” the student—in fact, sometimes the glass (the text or music) helps me put the performer in focus, or context. If your fingerprints are all over the glass, I can’t see a thing.

Bottom line: ease up on the prescriptive coaching, teachers. Don’t smudge the glass.

### **The Second Deadly Sin: ‘Alone in the Universe,’ Parts One, Two, and Three**

We’ve borrowed a title from *Seussical* to illustrate a three-part point that auditioning students ignore at their peril: there are always other people in the room (and usually in the material, too).

*Part one: the imaginary scene partner.* Often students spend so much time worrying about what they are going to do in the audition that they forget there’s supposed to be an imaginary person out there to whom they are speaking or singing.

Sometimes, during the audition process, we have an opportunity to work with the applicant. If a student shows promise, but seems to have been misdirected (see Sin Number One, above), we’ll take a few minutes to work with her. The first and most frequently asked question we pose is, “Who are you talking to?” Much of the time the student has no idea. Many of them haven’t read or seen the play or show—they found the song, or pulled the monologue out of a collection. Sometimes they’ll reply with a character name—“Romeo”—which isn’t going to mean much unless they’ve studied the play. (A classic example was a Juliet who eagerly answered “Romeo!” but who, when pressed to explain the relationship, said, “Um... brother?”)

Very rarely do we find students who have an understanding that characters are involved in relationships, and that relationships have a direct bearing on how a monologue or song unfolds. You would speak differently to a friend than you would to a parent, right? You would deal differently with a police officer than a younger brother. So, the more specific and personal the “imaginary person” is, the more you’ll be able to understand the relationship the character is in, and the more you will be able to connect to the piece.

Bottom line: if you’re auditioning, spend as much time choosing or get-

ting to know the imaginary person in your scene or song as you do the character you're playing.

*Part two: the musical partner.* In a musical theatre audition, when you are asked to sing a song, you'll almost always be provided with an accompanist. So—news flash—you aren't really alone up there.

Although it's a tricky partnership that must be forged on the fly, you need to realize that the accompanist is a part of your audition. Don't ignore what's coming from the piano. Usually the accompanist is trying to help by playing with rhythmic energy or quiet lyricism. The saddest thing for us, sitting behind the table, is when a student loses the melody, and goes out of tune—and then proceeds to completely ignore the pianist, who is pounding out the correct notes in an effort to get the student back on track.

Bottom line: musical theatre students need to show us that they understand that they are making music. We've given you a musical partner. Work with him.

*Part three: Hello, we're out here, too!* When you audition, you're going to be sharing the room with us—sometimes several of us. This doesn't mean we want you to deliver a song or monologue directly to us (please don't make us your scene partner), but it does mean that your awareness and consciousness needs to take into consideration that there are other human beings sharing the room with you.

Bottom line: you are not alone. Use the help that's given. Enjoy the moment.

### **The Third Deadly Sin: Making a Bad First Impression**

This is another multipart sin, because there are so many ways to make a bad first impression. Once made, the first impression is very hard to change, and can be the kiss of death for an auditioning student. That's because this is a high-pressure situation for us, too: we only have five minutes in a room to figure out who this potential student is, what she is capable of, and whether we want to spend the next four years with her.

*Choosing and preparing material.* A wonderful recent audition involved a girl who came in dressed really funky—pink hair, a really urban look. The first song she sang was “Out Tonight,” from *Rent*. She came into the room, saying, in effect, “This is who I am” (her true, funky, urban self)... and then she did something totally different. Her second song was “Infinite Joy,” from William Finn's *Elegies*. This song can be interpreted from many perspectives, and she chose to do it in an intimate, personal way that was drastically different from her first song. In a very short space of time, she showed the audition committee that she could be her sassy self, or she could take on the life of another person, another character: She understood the importance of being able to transform herself.

The opposite example would be a recent audition in which a young man presented a monologue from *All My Sons* side by side with one from *Boy's Life*. Fine choices, and lots of room for contrast, but they were (unfortunately) identical presentations—the same gestures, the same inflections, the same energy.

One of the questions we hear frequently is “what should I do for this audition?” A student's decisions about what to sing or what monologue to present are as basic as deciding who they are and how they wish to be seen. Monologue and song choices are how the students introduce themselves to us.

Black fingernails and piercings may be essential to a student's sense of identity, but most college theatre programs are looking for a clean palette. Likewise, we must interpret decisions about preparation (not memorizing the words or music well, not reading the play, not following the instructions for the audition) as part of the student's work ethic. Actors think nothing of spending six weeks in rehearsal for a production, but many won't spend six hours preparing for an important audition! It's a problem.

Bottom line: present material you know and care about, and which you can do really well.

*Following the rules.* Students may not realize that one reason we hold auditions is to see whether they can follow instructions. Following the rules at our audition is an indicator for future success at the university and beyond. College is full of procedures, prerequisites, and responsibilities, and we want to enroll students who have the fortitude to complete a degree program and graduate. The excuse, “I didn't know it had to be sixteen bars,” when that specification was in writing on the website and highlighted in materials mailed to the student's home, does not bode well for that student's success in the college classroom.

Recently one of our theatre students lost a four-year, full-ride scholarship because—despite several conversations, numerous phone calls, and e-mails—he was unable to get a course add form signed and delivered to the registrar's office within the first three weeks of the semester. Failure to deliver the form meant that he was not enrolled as a full-time student, and therefore ineligible for the scholarship. (This was not our policy, it was the university's: we, too, have to follow the rules.) At auditions, we observe students' behavior and ask ourselves: does this student have the potential to eventually manage a show business career that includes a day job, night rehearsals, auditions, acting classes, and the New York City subway system?

Some kids may think it's cool or different or indicative of an artistic temperament to break the rules. They may think we will remember them more if they stand out from the crowd. We *will* remember them, but not in the way they would hope.

*Dress.* If you are given instructions about dress for the audition, follow them. If there is a movement portion to the audition, and students have come with tight jeans, short skirts, high heels, flip-flops, or precarious hair-dos, despite instructions to the contrary, the audition committee will not be very sympathetic. Likewise, formal wear (cocktail dresses, suit

jackets) should be eschewed. Wear sensible shoes; nothing is easier to spot than a young girl wearing high heels for the first, uncomfortable time.

A word about costumes: don't. A girl recently came in to audition with a boa and a baton tucked into the back of her pants so they couldn't immediately be seen. In the middle of "Show Off," from *Drowsy Chaperone*, she pulled out the boa, and then, a little bit later, the baton. This surprised the audition committee, and not in a good way. It indicated to us that she was not savvy, that she had spent her preparation time on the wrong things, and in costuming herself, that she had not followed instructions. It also showed a lack of understanding about how a moment can be accomplished theatrically without the literalness of props.

*Bad behavior.* It's been said a million times, but it doesn't always sink in: an audition begins the moment one sets foot in the building. What you do outside the audition room can be just as crucial as what you do in the five minutes of your audition or interview.

Recently, we learned from our student monitor (and, yes, we ask) that an auditionee had been saying unkind things about a nearby theatre program—trashing their auditions process and denigrating their students and faculty. As it happened, one of us had taught at this school, had left on good terms, and still had a lot of friends there.

One of our goals as college educators is to try to create good future citizens of the academic and professional theatre community. If it appears that a student's personality runs counter to that goal, we will be reluctant to invite them into what is, essentially, a very small and interconnected world.

Bear in mind that the top tier schools are vastly competitive. Everything counts. To do well in an audition, you must be the best version of yourself. The audition committee will make note of how you enter the room, your hygiene, whether you are rude or polite to others, how you listen, how you interact in social situations.

Bottom line: the whole five-minute audition is a first impression. If we see problems, it's hard for us to form a second impression that's different.

### **The Fourth Deadly Sin: Stage Voice and Other Vocal Problems**

Although the problems of Deadly Sin Number Four aren't all deal-breakers for a college auditions committee (after all, we're not looking for perfection), these vocal issues can be red flags or, at the least, can put students into the "wait list" pile. "Stage voice" refers to an actor's habit of using a different voice when acting than he does when speaking normally. Auditors have similar terms for other bad vocal habits or conditions that have not been checked.

For example, "cry voice" is a term used to describe the practice of pretending to cry by putting a false wobble in the voice, or pitching the voice higher to indicate the character is upset. "Cutesy voice" is a silly term for singers and actors whose sound is so bright that they appear younger than they are. "Vocal fry" is the tendency to let the voice dwindle to a raspy whisper at the end of every phrase.

These issues can and will be addressed in college if the university has the voice and diction faculty to do it, but they might prevent a student from making the cut if enough others audition without evidence of these habits. Fortunately, these issues are all something that high school teachers can mitigate—by catching them soon, recommending speech therapy or voice teachers, and being vigilant in rehearsal and performance situations so these bad habits don't settle in. Speech impediments can be trickier, since some students may not have had an opportunity or resources to address the problem.

Nodes or evidence of damage to the vocal cords *are* usually a deal-breaker for musical theatre programs. This problem, which can be caused by misuse of the voice or a combination of physiological factors, can take months or years to fix, and sometimes even requires surgery. Some of us be-

hind the table are voice teachers, so hearing someone with nodes will be like nails on a chalkboard. The first thing we want to tell these students, is, "Stop singing, stop talking." No singing and no talking will make it a very short audition.

Bottom line: high school theatre teachers should discuss voice and speech problems with their students, and recommend professional treatment where it's indicated.

### **The Fifth Deadly Sin: Talking Heads**

Some young people, accustomed to viewing actors only on television, film, and computer screens, believe that acting occurs only from the neck up. Many seem to have forgotten they have a body.

From our perspective behind the table, this sin can come in two varieties: the uptight body and the essence (he thinks) of cool. The uptight body is characterized by stiff gestures, stiff arms, frozen legs, and tense fingers and hands. If this performer makes a gesture, it's usually a parallel gesture (common in speech and forensics training) in which both hands or arms do the same thing, mirroring each other.

The "cool" variation has a slumped or non-energized body, feet that shuffle or walk more casually than the dramatic moment would warrant, and a nearly closed mouth that allows very little sound to escape. Both of these physical behaviors are indications that the actor is not physically involved in his or her performance.

At some colleges, curriculum may be in place to turn these young people into strong, open, physical actors. But other programs may not have that option. We don't recommend that teachers try to fix this problem with choreography, because the stiff student will do the choreography stiffly, and the cool student will still be cool (and the teacher will be guilty of Deadly Sin Number One). But a teacher can investigate the given circumstances, stakes, and acting choices that these students have

established for their songs or monologues, and see if perhaps there is a greater physical investment or physical life that can be explored. We don't need to see much, just a glimpse that shows a foundation for physical presence, so we know there is something we can build on.

Bottom line: if students are interested in our theatre programs, we would like to see that they are in touch with their bodies, all the way down to their feet.

### **The Sixth Deadly Sin: Pushing**

There are students who simply work too hard, all the time. And when onstage pushing is combined with a personality that pushes offstage, too, it can be a deadly brew. Sometimes this isn't visible in the audition, but becomes apparent in the interview. That's one reason why most college auditions include an interview component. It's worthwhile for a student to spend a few minutes thinking about how they wish to present themselves in an interview. Generally, some form of the questions, "Why have you chosen this career?" and "Why have you chosen our school?" will be asked.

We recommend taking a moment to consider how you want to respond.

In an audition room, we reflect: the work may be excellent, but what about the personality? Believe me, we college theatre people are not tyrants. We are aware that getting into the right school can be, for some students, a stressful and traumatic process. We know that auditions are nervous-making, and that there is a lot of pressure bearing on a very few minutes. But we also need to see that students are interested in college because they hope to learn something and, ultimately, that they want to become actors. This means we are looking for students who are interested in taking in as much as they are putting out. Many of us are interested in forming a core of ensemble members who will work and grow together. We don't wish to see an eighteen-year-old who already knows everything.

Bottom line: a sponge is more attractive than a bulldozer.

### **The Seventh Deadly Sin: Absence of Joy**

One of the brightest moments in our day happens when a student comes

into the room and actually seems happy to be there—happy to be sharing this time, this space, and her talent with us. Though we have listed this sin last, please don't disregard it. This is actually one of the most important elements of an audition. It is so important that it can sometimes cancel out one of the other sins.

We are looking for students who love to act and sing, and who are genuinely enjoying this opportunity to perform, nerve-wracking though it may be. A performance career has enough hardships as it is, and this audition will be the first of many to come. If the student isn't enjoying himself now, it does not bode well for his future.

Bottom line: we want students who love the work, and show it. We can teach skills, but we can't teach joy.

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