

Your best shot

The right material, prepared with care, will help you beat the audition odds

BY JEANINE GANGLOFF-LEVY

YOUR DREAM: to spend the next four years of your life studying theatre at a top conservatory. Do you feel lucky?

Thousands of college-bound students strive to become professional performers—and most conservatories offer space to only a handful of freshmen each year. Acceptance rates for aspiring B.F.A. acting candidates at Carnegie Mellon University, The Juilliard School, and North Carolina School of the Arts hover around 2 or 3 percent, while even lesser-known schools with newly established B.F.A. degrees have become increasingly competitive.

Some students applying to these programs come from stellar performing arts high schools with experienced teachers who are still working professionally in the business. Other students come from arts-disadvantaged schools, armed only with raw talent and a dream. Whichever category you find yourself in, you must find a way to showcase your talent, taste, and personality in two minutes or less—roughly the length of a commercial break.

As a theatre educator, I've spoken with many different students who have undergone this process, both successfully and unsuccessfully. I've also asked a number of school representatives for their thoughts and advice from the other side of the table. Here are some of my findings, to help

you on your journey from application to audition to acceptance letter.

School requirements: read and re-read

The first step in your audition preparation is to figure out exactly what you need to do for each school on your short list. What kind of material, specifically, does each college ask to see? How long should each piece be? Is your amazing Chekhov monologue considered classical or contemporary in the eyes of the school you are auditioning for? Should you have back-up pieces prepared, and if so, what sort? If one or more of your audition pieces is a song, what about accompaniment? Will there be a group warm-up or dance call (which will greatly affect your wardrobe choices on the day)? Make a list of each school and write down their complete, exact requirements and guidelines before you even begin to choose your pieces—no, really, write it all down.

Most colleges ask actors to present a standard contrasting package: one comedic and one dramatic monologue, totaling no longer than three minutes, with similar parameters for musical theatre auditions. But many schools' requirements are different, so you must read, re-read, and make a list to avoid an error that might ruin your chances. Some acting programs

want to see how you handle Shakespeare; some ask for anything but. Some musical theatre programs ask for sixteen bars of an unaccompanied song, while others favor longer selections, with recorded accompaniment. Some allow choreographed movement while you sing, some don't. And what about the audition before the audition? A growing number of schools now pre-screen candidates by recorded submissions; are you keeping an eye on *those* requirements and deadlines?

More than half of the students I talked to were thrown off a few days before the audition—or worse, during the auditions themselves—due to an instruction they had missed.

"There were so many schools that I was applying to, and I was reading all of these different requirements," confessed Manon Stieglitz, at the time a senior at LaGuardia High School in New York City (the performing arts program that inspired *Fame*). She's now in the B.F.A. acting program at Rutgers University. "I saw that North Carolina School of the Arts required three monologues: one contemporary, one classical, and I thought I saw 'one of your choice.' So, I had two classical and one contemporary. But it *said* two contemporary and one classical. A couple of nights before [the audition], my friend and I were talking, and she said, 'What other contemporary monologue did you



choose?’ And I was like, ‘What?!’ I freaked out.”

She quickly found another contemporary piece, memorized it, and performed it as best she could—but that mistake cost her confidence at that important audition. “I was mad at myself,” Stieglitz said.

A student we’ll call Hector, from Repertory Company High School for Theatre Arts, also in New York City, went to his audition for Marymount Manhattan College and performed his two monologues. The auditor turned to him and said, “Do you have a song for us?”

“I forgot that we had to do a song!” Hector recalled. “So, I said, ‘Of course, of course,’ and she said, ‘Go ahead,’ so, I slate a song, and sang it.... It’s just a song that I remembered doing sophomore year, when we learned about auditioning. I forgot about it until that moment.”

The proper vehicle

Once you’ve listed all the requirements, it’s up to you to choose suitable audition material. This daunting process requires patience and reading a lot of plays—complete plays by legitimate playwrights. Ditch the monologue books, unless you’re using them as a gateway to other work by writers who speak to you: those pieces tend to be overdone. (Musical theatre aspirants in search of those magical sixteen bars have their own pitfalls to avoid; seek advice from knowledgeable voice coaches and such reliable Internet sources as the blog on MyCollegeAudition.com.)

There is no such thing as the perfect audition monologue or song, though some pieces are stronger choices than others. You should find playwrights, composers, and pieces you are personally drawn to; look for speeches that are not narrative (you don’t want a lot of past-tense verbs) but have a clear relationship, with a strong objective your character is seeking here and now. And avoid anything gimmicky. “Authenticity” is the number-one thing reps say they are looking for at auditions, so find

something you love to do that really shows who you are.

“Choose something that is castable for you,” advised George Judy, head of the theatre program at Louisiana State University and the artistic director of the Swine Palace theatre. That doesn’t mean castable in a high school program, where teenagers have to play all ages and types; you might have been brilliant as Tevye, but that’s not what a college rep wants to see. “Avoid scenes that have built in problems like dialect, style issues, or great emotional challenges that take a full rehearsal period to create. Do something you can nail and that will make me want to know more about you as you are right now.”

Self-written (or friend-written) pieces are frowned upon, but you might successfully craft a monologue from a work of fiction, Judy said: “If you show an understanding of literature, both dramatic and otherwise, and show an ability to pull a piece from a novel.... that can be a plus.”

Whatever the source of your material, the LSU professor added, less is more. Don’t feel you have to fill the time allotment for each college; instead, carefully trim your pieces down to the appropriate length.

“Short is always better than long if it gives you the opportunity to show what you can do,” Judy said. “I have never seen a good audition that was too short. Most often they feel too long. If you can nail a minute, that is better than two minutes of pretty good.”

Don’t procrastinate

If you’re already a senior with college auditions looming within weeks, this particular piece of advice might be coming too late—but underclassmen, take note. Across the board, when asked what they would do over if they had the chance, students said they would start earlier and spend more time preparing their pieces. Most found that working on their pieces for even a month was too little time.

“It’s really hard to manage,” Manon Stieglitz admitted, remembering all the college applications to complete, essays to write, teacher recommendations to corral, tests to take, high GPA to maintain, and everything else that had to be done during that first half of her senior year. “It’s really stressful. I’ve never cried this much in my entire life, because there is just so much. There’s so much at stake.”

Hard as it seems, if you can give yourself several months to choose a monologue and work on it, you’ll end up with stronger pieces, and you’ll be much better prepared on the day. A successful college audition takes time and sacrifice, and that often means turning down a fun weekend of gossiping with friends and escaping your parents. It might also mean putting less energy into the high school theatre program you love and are now a leader of: if you are serious about studying theatre in a top-tier program, that’s the next stage you need to be thinking about.

“I did not have that much of a social life last year,” said Stieglitz, who instead focused on getting good grades and perfecting her monologues—and she got into Rutgers.

Dress the part

An audition is essentially a marketing pitch: you are presenting yourself as a product to potential schools.

“We look for students who have a sense that auditions are an occasion. They look clean and well-dressed in a comfortably casual or appropriate way that shows them to their best advantage and serves the needs of their pieces,” Judy said. “A touch of individuality or personality is always good, if it is not overbearing.”

“Don’t overdress,” cautioned David Howey, head of the acting program at University of the Arts in Philadelphia. “This is not a family wedding or a Saturday night out. The applicant should be comfortable and authentic. In other words, dress to express yourself.”

Most reps agreed that simple is best. Avoid heavy makeup, excessive jewelry, anything too tight or

revealing, or with a distracting print. Choose flattering silhouettes and colors (not black or white) that put the focus on you rather than your clothes. You should feel grounded and free to move, while allowing the auditioners to see your body and how it moves.

Footwear is a key concern, especially for young women. “No high heels,” instructed Debra Hale of Florida State University. “It throws off an actor’s alignment and affects her ability to breathe freely.” Hale suggested newer-style character shoes with a slight heel as a good option.

Guys, make sure your audition shoes are professional and polished.

Students who have survived the audition gauntlet recommend test-driving your entire wardrobe, down to the last accessory: practice walking across a hardwood floor, sitting in a chair, etc. Make sure you like the way everything looks and feels (and sounds).

“At my University of Minnesota audition, I didn’t feel comfortable,” Stieglitz recalled. “I was wearing—it was the smallest thing!—I was wearing these socks that kept falling down. So while I was doing my monologues, I was thinking about the fact my socks are falling down. I didn’t feel good. You have to show that you are confident.... You want to feel good in your body.”

If you are lucky enough to receive a callback, wear the same thing you wore to the first audition. As Michael Shurtleff writes in his classic book *Audition*, “Auditors frequently make mental or written notes of what you are wearing to help identify you. If you change costumes, they frequently get confused.... So choose your outfit wisely, and wear it every time you stand before the auditors so they can remember you.”

That’s good general advice but true for college hopefuls as well.

Mind games

Imagine walking into a waiting room, sitting down with a few dozen other people your age, who all want what you want, and waiting for an audi-

tion to determine your fate for the next four years and, perhaps, the rest of your life. Everyone seems beautiful and talented and, above all, determined to do better than you. And you’re supposed to enter the audition room feeling relaxed and confident?

Hector said his fellow auditioners in the waiting area made him more nervous than the actual audition. “They were all like, ‘I know I got this, and anyone who is in my way, I’m going to crumble them to a pulp.’ The waiting room was that tense. And it was just disgusting.” He felt as if he was all alone, in the crosshairs of his competition, even though in a few months those same hostile characters might be his college classmates.

“I might see you here next year—don’t be looking at me like you want to kill me!” Hector remembered thinking. “I guess it was a psych out, I don’t know, but it was just like, why?”

Bring a book, an iPad, or something else to protect yourself from the unpleasant atmosphere of the waiting room. Some of the students I talked with started to go on auditions together, which seemed to alleviate some of the pressure—but what do you do if you get called back, and your friend does not?

“It can get really awkward really fast,” said “Allison,” another LaGuardia graduate, recalling her audition for Purchase College. (How awkward was it? She asked me not to use her real name in this article.) “When I was up there, a lot of my friends had done the morning session. I did the afternoon session with one other person who I am friends with, but not that close with. We were talking and hanging out, and we had a really nice time. Then Purchase does callbacks, and I got one and he didn’t, and that’s what’s hard about the whole process.... You don’t really know how to handle it.”

A different mind game plays out in the audition room, only this one is more like the World Series of Poker: some panelists seem determined to show no expression whatsoever, while others project warmth and helpfulness—impressions that often

turned out to be false, students said.

“It can be hard to audition well when you feel like there is no energy coming from the people watching you,” said Monica Rae Summers, also from LaGuardia. Hector called it “talking to a wall.” But you have to hang tough: a cold reception might very well turn into a callback.

“I think it’s nice when auditioners are friendly and they seem like they want you to do well,” Manon Stieglitz said. That wasn’t her experience at one particular conservatory call. “It was awful,” she recalled, but the school must have liked her, since they sent an acceptance letter.

For as long and as hard as students prepare for these auditions, I can’t blame them for wanting some sort of approval on the spot. But you cannot judge what is going on in recruiters’ minds by simply reading their faces. Go into the room and do your job. Do not think of the panel as the enemy, but do not look to them for validation, either. Do not read into every chuckle or yawn. Blank stare? Embrace it, and remember that your audition is for *you*. After all, you might have paid a hundred bucks for the privilege of standing in that room and performing for these people, not to mention all your time and travel expenses—so you might as well have fun!

What they want

I asked George Judy if he could recall an instance of a particularly awful and unsuccessful audition. His reply was, “So many... I have had auditions where people took their clothes off strictly for shock effect. I have had auditions where the actor seemed to attack the directors with abusive language. The actor who apologizes for their work or is unprepared is an embarrassment, for them and us.”

So, obviously, appropriate material, well prepared, professionally presented. What else are colleges looking for?

“Authenticity” (there’s that word again!), said FSU’s Debra Hale. “Being yourself is impressive. Not overly anxious, but happy to be acting and doing what you love.” She wants to

see “someone who seems comfortable in their own skin. Openness. A trainable voice and body... Sense of humor is impressive. Taking a risk.”

“Intelligence reads immediately,” Judy added. “The trick is to make [us] respond to you as a person we want to know more about and spend more time getting to know. We want actors who know how to have fun while taking the job seriously.”

Through it all, students and faculty said, remember *why* you’re auditioning. Work hard, enjoy the process, and do your best. There is only one you, and being you is enough. ▼

The portfolio

The design student's show-and-tell

THOSE OF US WHO want to work in theatre design and production have our own kind of audition—the portfolio review, which is essentially a show and tell about the work we have done in the theatre. At the center of the conversation is the candidate's portfolio, a collection of photographs and other documents, in digital form or hardcopy, that establishes a framework for the interview.

A portfolio is a useful and necessary tool that stage managers, designers, and production artists use to show others what they have done and what they can do. For many of us, the first time we show a portfolio will be at a college interview. A portfolio gives your work (and therefore the interview) a visual context. You can point to specific examples that display your talents. You can talk about the fabric you used for a costume you designed or the techniques you employed painting the scenery. With your portfolio at hand, the person interviewing you will have a clear understanding of the scope and scale of the project. They can see it. They can ask questions about it. They can begin to gauge a context for your experiences, the level of your talent, the types of situations and theatre spaces you have worked in, and the tools, materials, and technologies with which you are familiar.

What's in it

"Only show things you really like," was the advice on portfolio content from Peter Sargent, dean of fine arts at Webster University.

Sargent and other college representatives we talked to for this story said they are most interested in seeing materials that reveal the process of making theatre, rather than the finished product.

SUSAN DOREMUS



"For me, what the student brings in the portfolio is an introduction to what they're thinking about and what they're doing," Sargent said. "So I'm more interested in a conversation around the portfolio than necessarily the slickness of the work. What's most important is to see how the student has thought through the process."

"We all like to see process," said Stirling Shilton, professor and technical director at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. "I don't want to see finished pieces that are matted and behind anti-glare glass. I want to see what you scribble in the corners of your notebook. I want to see what you give the carpenter on the shop floor. I want to

see that kind of process stuff."

"It's kind of like remember in fourth grade, they always made you show your work?" said John E.R. Friedenbergh, director of theatre at Wake Forest University. "I want to see your work. Show your arithmetic. Let me see the steps that you're doing so I understand what I'm looking at and how you're thinking about it."

Chuck Meacham, technical director and professor of theatre at the University of Evansville, recommends getting started on your portfolio by making a list of all the productions you have worked on. "Under each of these, write what you did specifically to help make the show happen," he wrote in this space last year. "What made each experience valuable to

you? What is unique about the experience that you could show in your portfolio? What materials should you include to support your experiences with each production?”

High-quality photographs can be used to illustrate production values, the specifics of a performance space in which you have worked, and the process you used to create ideas and develop a project.

In addition to photographs, your portfolio should include research images, sketches, swatches, samples, trim details, paperwork, drafting, renderings, rough drafts, and anything else you can find to illustrate how you think, work, create, and solve problems. You can show the development of an idea by including a research photo, the original “napkin sketch,” the pencil rendering, the

color rendering, and a photo of the finished set or costume on stage under light. All these support materials help the interviewer get an idea of your creative process.

The kinds of materials you will include depend on the work you do. See “What’s in your portfolio?” on page 44 for some notes on portfolio content.

It’s important to keep the material you include current. Do not think of your portfolio as a scrapbook of what you have done or where you have worked. It has to be a constantly evolving document in order to continue to have value. Update your portfolio regularly and move dated material to the back (or move it out entirely) as you replace it with newer, better material. Include coursework and “paper projects” where applicable. Realized work is best, but sometimes

you can use a class project to show aspects of your talent and skills that you haven’t had a chance to put to work on a real show yet. This can be especially important if your school’s production season is short, or if your school only does big musicals. Choose project work that serves as a counterpoint to your realized work.

Also, include related work toward the back of your portfolio. This section might include writing samples, cost estimates, budget tracking, or other materials from your work. These kinds of items are not as appealing (or as much fun to talk about) as photos and drawings from productions, but they are an important part of the process for many specialties, including theatre management, stage management, and technical direction.

You should also consider including non-theatre work in your portfolio, especially if it shows some aspect of your artistic expression that is different from the rest of the material you include. Sketches, drawings, painting, photography, collage, etc. are all interesting to show and talk about.

What’s in your portfolio?

HERE ARE SOME NOTES and tips on portfolio content for design and production specialties.

Stage management. Show just one book, not three or four, if they are all essentially the same. Don’t show a rewritten, clean copy. Use the actual book you called the show from.

Scenic design. Always include a scale human figure in sketches and models.

Costume design. Make sure you take pictures under stage light, not of the performers wearing the costumes in the back hallway.

Lighting design. Keep copies of your plots and paperwork handy, but don’t feature them. Feature the production photos that show your designs at work.

Sound design. Edit down a playlist with short clips of sound effects and music. Ten minutes of crickets isn’t any more useful than ten seconds. (You’ll need to bring your own audio player for this, and an extension cord wouldn’t hurt.) Don’t show pictures of the sound

equipment, but do show a picture of the production. Have an equipment list handy in the back of your portfolio.

Technical direction. Make sure you include budgets, calendars, and technical drawings in addition to construction shots.

Theatre management. Be sure to include all the promotional material you generate, including press releases, posters, and especially the production program. Get a good shot of the show.

Carpentry. Get good process shots against a neutral background, so we don’t see the messy shop behind your beautiful woodwork.

Stitching. Same as for carpentry. Get good process shots, preferably with a person wearing the clothes.

Props. Shoot your props work on neutral backgrounds, and include the research on props you built or found.

Scenic painting. Make sure you have pictures under stage light, not work lights, and include a copy of the scenic designer’s paint elevations.

Packaging and formatting

Once you know what the materials will be, you can start thinking about the physical dimensions of the portfolio.

You may be tempted to buy a fancy leather presentation case for your portfolio, but when you’re starting out this is probably not the best choice. For one thing, they’re very expensive. A portfolio case also limits how you can present your materials and puts your work “under glass” behind those acetate sheets. We advise mounting photos, drawings, documents, and other flat materials on matte board. The size can range from 11x14” to 20x24” (or even larger, up to 24x36”), depending on the content and the formatting choices you make. The boards can be organized into an inexpensive paperboard art portfolio wallet, available at any art supply store.

For smaller materials, such as a stage manager’s promptbook pages, a black three-ring binder with matte sheet protectors will work fine.

If you have some large life drawings that you want to include, you will need a case big enough to fit them in, or another way to display them. You may find you need an additional box for three-dimensional objects, or a tube for large rolled drawings and drafting. Let the size and quantity of the work you are including dictate the style and type of portfolio you use.

Create a format or layout scheme for each page and stay consistent with that format throughout the portfolio. Be sure to orient your work all in the same page layout direction (portrait or landscape). That way you and the interviewer won't have to keep rotating the boards to look at them.

The final major element in formatting is labeling. This is a critical part of the process of creating and presenting a portfolio. Everything in your portfolio should be labeled. The label should include the title of the show (and the playwright's name), your position or responsibilities on the production or project, when and where it was produced, and when appropriate, the techniques or materials you used in the work that is shown. You should avoid letting the label get too big and wordy, however. Be concise and brief. For example, the date can be just the month and year. If it's a class project, note that, and use the name of the class, not the number.

The easiest way to make a label is to typeset the text in a word processing program, print it, and trim it out to size. (Handwriting or lettering is also an option but only if your hand is very neat.) Labels should be consistent in font and size throughout the portfolio. They

should be in a clear font big enough to be read from three feet away. This is the approximate distance from the interviewer's eye (when standing) to the table on which the portfolio rests.

The digital portfolio

You may be creating a digital version of your portfolio for submission with online applications, and it is tempting to do away with all of the photographs, drawings, paperwork, and bulky presentation cases and take your portfolio to the interview on a laptop. Computer presentations like PowerPoint can be great. Remember, though, that software crashes, battery failures, and other technological calamities tend to happen at the most inopportune times. If you decide to go digital, our advice is to take along a paper version as a backup.

The other major pitfall of digital presentations is that the technology itself can often distract you and the interviewer from the work you are showing. It is difficult to pay attention to what you have to say and at the same time keep up with a scrolling display of images and text.

Digital portfolios find their best application for some things that don't show well on paper. If you are a sound designer or in theatre management, you might find interesting ways of using a computer for audio playback or to illustrate your familiarity with specific software. The real trick of any sort of digital portfolio is to practice interviewing with it and to find ways to integrate it seamlessly into your interview. It's too easy for a presentation on a laptop to

end up like giving someone a TV to watch: mesmerizing but, ultimately, a solitary activity. The presentation is supposed to be about you, not your computer.

If you are considering both paper and electronic versions of your portfolio, invest some time in thinking about how you might tie them together. Pay attention to the similarities between the two versions in layout, font choice, and other aspects of the graphic presentation. You should identify ways for digital versions of your portfolio materials (whether website, PowerPoint presentation, or some other application) to be easily recognizable as yours by creating visual and navigation ties between the two formats.

The interview

When Shelton interviews prospective students, "I'm looking for that *je ne sais quoi*," he says, "in what you show me and how you show it. If you are animated and excited about this thing you built, that says something. We're looking for a kind of passion, and that can come across in a many different ways."

Shelton's advice to students headed into an interview: "It's the advice that no seventeen-year-old will listen to. Just relax and be yourself. Because that's who I'm hiring, that's who I'm admitting into this program. I need to know who you are, and if you're wound up and tight and you're not being who you are then I can't see if you're the right guy for us and more importantly, if we're the right guys for you." ▼

