

ESCAPE FROM AUDITION HELL

by David Pogue

The audition process is a cruel, heartless system that can make you feel exhausted and miserable. It's even worse if you're the only one auditioning.

Nobody has devised a better system for letting directors and producers envision each applicant, one by one, in the roles to be filled. The only thing wrong with the system is that it relies on human beings -- on actors trying desperately to embody the director's vision of the part (with no way of knowing what that is), add on the imagination and patience of the casting committee, who has sat there, probably for days, attempting to remain impartial, friendly, and awake.

As a professional musical director, I've watched more than one director ignore the perfect-for-the-role actress, as he unpacks a bag full of delivered Chinese food. Far more often, though, I've seen performers and roles fail to come together because of poor audition technique. Here are a few observations:

1. The pianist is your friend. The pianist can make or break you; treat that pianist accordingly. Be friendly and appreciative. BRIEFLY discuss your music. Indicate the tempo you prefer during a quiet, pre-performance meeting; one good way is to softly sing the first line to the pianist. Come prepared with readable, easy-to-use music whose pages have been taped together. You wouldn't believe the crumbling, disordered music pianists are handed -- sometimes the music doesn't include a piano part at all.
2. Don't dress the part -- but hint at it. If you audition for FIDDLER ON THE ROOF wearing Russian peasant rags, you'll be laughed out of the room. Yet wearing clothes and hair that suggest the part can help. If you're auditioning for an executive in HOW TO SUCCEED IN BUSINESS..., a three-piece suit might be overdoing it. But a shirt and tie would psychologically suggest the part to the audition committee. Theoretically, they should be able to imagine that; but in the real world, the less left to the imagination the better.
3. Eye contact -- Some directors love it; they believe that you are audience tuned, and your direct appeal satisfies their egos. Others find it annoying and distracting. The safest bet is to make occasional eye contact, but generally direct your presentation just over their heads.
4. Wierd is good, talent is better. You are aware that the audition committee have seen hundreds of people. You can tell by the bored expressions, the perfunctory "thank you." You wish you had been the first or last to audition, since people at either end tend to be remembered better. You decided to make an impression, no matter what it takes. You can't believe how far some have taken this. Once, an actor came up to the audition committee's table, took a long swig from the choreographer's Pepsi, and said, "Thanks. Man, was I thirsty." Another spent his audition muttering to himself. I even saw one young woman audition completely naked, in hopes of making an impression. (She did. She just didn't get the part.) Strangeness can make you memorable -- but only if there's talent to back it up. You don't want them just to remember you; you want them to remember how good you were.
5. Bottom line: It isn't just talent. It's also type. If you didn't get the part, don't be hard on yourself. You may be terrific. Trouble is, casting people don't just want talent; they want talent in the right package (e.g., hair color, height, age, body weight, vocal quality). It's not uncommon for somebody with the right body type to get the part over somebody with more talent.

CURTAINS...See how easy it is? Just be talented, wear the right thing, treat the pianist nicely, make an impression, use the right amount of eye contact, and, above all, be sure you match the director's unspoken mental image of the ideal performer's height, weight, hair color, age, and voice. The part will be yours.