

TAKING THE DRAMA OUT OF AUDITIONS

by Jerry Blake and Mindi Penn

Never let parents sit in on auditions or hang outside the door.

The Director has the final say on the casting but should listen to the opinions of the choir director and tech director.

I always have a talk with the students before we begin the process. I explain that there is no such thing as "seniority". The person that is best for the role gets the role. I tell them that "IF" everything is equal in the audition and both actors fit the role, I will give it to the senior or upper classman. But only if both auditions are so good that I can say they are equal. To the persistent ones, I say, "How does being a senior make you the best person for the role? Tell me."

I tell them that they are always auditioning and that if they are rude and not attentive during auditions, then I assume they will be rude and not attentive during rehearsals. Therefore, this can affect how I cast. I want leaders in the leads as well as talent.

I explain to them that there are other things that must be taken into consideration in casting besides singing, acting and dancing like body type, age, who they play opposite, etc. I give examples. You can't have a mother look and sound younger than her daughter - if it is a mature character - she must look and move and sound more mature than the others. I also give the example of our casting for Beauty and the Beast. I had the most incredible singing talent auditioning for Belle. (4 girls) The girl that got the part had the character nailed, the physicality, poise, voice, acting. One of the girls auditioning for the part was so small in stature that when she didn't get Belle, the only options left for casting her were to make her a "silly girl". She was too small for the Wardrobe, and Chip would have been a foot taller than her and Chip's cart was up to her chest. Also, one of the girls that auditioned for Belle had the best singing voice but looked way too old for the part and I cast her as Mrs. Potts (naturally we had to transpose her songs for a higher range). If you explain some of these things to the students, many of them will look at auditions with a new perspective. Some will not but at least you have more support from those who can now see what goes into casting.

I have them write on their forms any conflicts that they will have in making the rehearsals. They have the rehearsal calendar to look over. I let them know that their conflicts will affect how I cast. I can't have a lead that is going to be constantly 15 minutes late to rehearsal because they have to take their little brother home every day or they are a cheerleader and will have to leave early every Thursday.

I have them write on their form any role that they will not accept. I am sad that some students won't accept chorus or small supporting roles but if they tell me up front, I know not to waste my time casting them in smaller roles if they don't get the lead. I have students quit when they don't get what they want. Many of my students are very talented in many areas and have outside activities as well. They decide that they don't want to commit the time for a chorus part. Yes, it's sad but I've adapted. Therefore, I tell them that I won't hold it against them for the next year as long as they are up front with me on the audition form. It has worked out fine. Many regret their decision which is what I hope will happen and though it is too late for the current show, they often mature in attitude for the next one and I reap the benefits.

One year, I videoed the auditions and was prepared to show a parent only their child's audition. (This is what the football coach does.) I didn't have to do that. Of course, never discuss another student's audition. I've had parents bring up what they heard about other students. I let them know right off that we are not there to discuss anyone except their child. I always have a rubric and discuss what their student did well and what they need to work on. I always have another director or principal in on the conference with the parents. Never, I repeat, never have a phone conference, an e-mail or a one on one conference with the parents or students about the results of the auditions. If a parent e-mails or calls, I say that I will be glad to discuss their student's audition and ask when they can come to school to meet with me and (name of other person that will be present). If they show-up after school at your doorway, say you will be glad to discuss it during your conference period or before school and to e-mail you when they can come so you can look at your schedule. You have to be firm about not listening to them at any other time except when you can schedule it with another director or administrator there. If you don't stand firm on this, you will continue to be bullied. They will sap your energy. They will not really listen to what you have to say unless you set-up an official meeting. They are only venting. At least with a scheduled meeting, they have to control themselves.

If it gets to the conference stage, I tell the parents the same things I tell the students about auditioning. I go over what the student needs to work on. I tell them that he/she (usually it is a she) was "beaten out" by the person that got the part. Almost always, all the directors that help with the auditions agree 100% on the choices. So, I tell the parents and students that we all agreed on the casting. They sometimes get it in their heads that one teacher hates their child, blah, blah, blah. I end with the speech about how I can't take away the hurt but I'm counting on the parents to help their child deal with the pain, mature from the experience, enjoy being with the rest of the chorus and help make the production great.

I don't have anyone watch anyone else's audition. I know that is not possible for everyone, but it works for me. Each audition is with me a choral director and/or a stage manager. I also have them list all conflicts and base casting, first and foremost on availability. You might be DeNiro but if you can't be here then I might as well cast DeNiro since he can't be here either. I also put on my form this statement "I agree to accept my role as cast. Turning down a role after the casting is posted may effect future casting." They sign this. I have only had to enforce it once. They also sign committing to their conflicts and the absence policy (3 and you are subject to dismissal.) This has saved me many times!

I am also up front about the fact that ALL of this is about EDUCATION. If you got a role you weren't expecting, then there is probably some very specific lesson I have in mind for you...often...humility. I also make it clear that I give some preference to students who know for sure that this is their chosen career. I know some would disagree with that but, I figure it's my job to offer the best opportunities to those kids. Wouldn't a coach give more play time to a kid who is going to play college ball than one who has no plans to go to college?

Last year I had a sophomore who has her heart set on being a Broadway star. I cast her as Sharpay her freshman year and she thought she had it made. I found that she was so hung up on looking "pretty" onstage that I wanted her to play the ugliest character I could offer her so I cast her as Nell/Luce in Comedy of Errors. She pouted and cried her way through the whole thing. I gave her an amazing fat suit, a chicken leg to eat onstage every night and blocking/business that was show-stoppingly funny. She practically refused to have a great time. I had other girls begging me to fire her just so they could wear the fat suit and steal the show. She still didn't get it. I finally sat her down and asked her if she was going to turn down Elphaba one day just because she was green? Unfortunately, I think it went right over her head. She decided I hated her and went to our arts magnet school this year where she is currently

getting smaller roles that she got from me partly because her reputation preceded her partly because it showed when she got there.

I have also called kids in for individual casting conferences rather than posting a list so that I can "sell" any casting to the touchy ones myself. I explain exactly why they are cast in their role and what I expect them to learn. If they have issues, I get them worked out BEFORE they go gossip with friends about it. That way they are prepared to sort of "save face" when they don't get the role everyone expects them to have. They are able to say, "Mrs. Penn and I are going to be working on my physical characterization with this role."