



From the AACT Resource Library

Casting Advice from Fellow Directors

Every production requires the right blend of people to help tell the story. As directors, we're presented with the challenge of finding these individuals and matching them to the parts that will best bring our production to life. So how do we ensure the casting process is successful for both our actors and our show?

Below, you'll read what we heard from community theatre directors around the country. In some cases, the advice was somewhat similar, but from a different angle, so we have included those, as well.

Kindness counts

- Be positive and encouraging throughout the process. Some actors are terrified.
- Be kind. Your community theatre production is not Broadway, so give that a rest. Your job is to nurture, teach, and inspire a love of theatre.
- Remind everyone who auditions how much you appreciated them. Even if they do not get a part, they will feel better and try again.
- Create an inclusive audition environment that feels like a shared experience, rather than a competition.

"Talent" Is important but it isn't everything

- Some good actors audition poorly, while others audition well but never get beyond that point if cast. Look carefully and gauge what is nervousness and what is potential—what is self-assurance and what is a one-trick pony..
- Personality and character over talent: always ask yourself, "Do I want to *work* with this person?"
- Attendance matters. Don't cast someone in an important role who has a difficult work schedule or other obligations that will make them absent a lot. Make sure all who audition know what attendance is expected of them. Cast commitment over talent, if necessary.
- Take a chance on talented, hardworking people, even if you don't initially see how their type can fit the role. If they can sing the part, are dedicated, qualified and reliable give them a shot—especially if that's what you *say* you value. You can cast a taller sibling to be the young one, grandparents don't need to look like their grandchildren, etc. Some of directors' most rewarding experiences have come from giving a role to someone who

other directors had considered less than ideal. Said one director, “I had an actor who had always been cast in a supporting role, but I saw in her the possibility of playing the romantic lead. I was right--she was wonderful.”

Go with your gut

- As a director with a vision for your production, go with your gut. If something or someone feels off, don’t cast them out of friendship, pity or obligation. Cast what your show really needs.
- Trust your instincts. Don’t be afraid to cast against type.
- Create the callback list with your head, the cast list with your gut.
- Craft the play you’d want to be in the audience for. Trust your sensibilities.

Cast the best person for the part

- “Type” can be important and is part of the story-telling, but as the original Artistic Director of the American Conservatory Theatre, William Ball, said, “When faced with a choice between the right type and the right talent, go with the talent.”
- On the other hand—especially in educational or community theatre, where your talent pool is limited—it may be better to cast the right personality. An actor might not be gifted, but if their own personality will illuminate a role, then they will be a success in it.
- Sometimes your show needs that actor and sometimes your actor needs that show. We’re all about making amazing theatre, but we’re also about creating community, learning, and encouraging talent. Sometimes, that means casting someone who isn’t quite right or might take a bit more work.
- Give newcomers a chance at acting. If the spirit of the character comes through, that just may be your person.
- If a sixth grader is better for a role than an eighth grader, don’t let their age hold you back from casting them. And don’t let parents bully you.
- Don’t be afraid to take risks. Again, cast against type if an actor is really best for a role. You will likely be pleasantly surprised.

To call back or not to call back...

- Don’t precast, if at all possible. It’s fine to know before auditions that you have people who *could* play the roles, but it’s even better when someone surprises you with insights into the character that you hadn’t considered.
- Unless auditions present you with a complete cast, hold callbacks. Look for chemistry between scene partners,, and that certain something that pops out and makes you want to see more.
- Also, in callbacks, you’re free to ask the actor to try something different from their first reading—you can be specific, even, like “Pretend your best friend just died, and give us that underlying feeling in your lines.” By doing so, you’ll have a better feel for how the actor takes direction—and how much creative juice then can add to the process.
- Whatever you say you’re going to do after auditions, follow through and do it. It is only Your reputation is at stake. People tend to remember things like that.

- No matter what, someone's feelings are going to get hurt. You can acknowledge that at auditions with the actors. Let them know you're aware of their feelings and casting is not easy, but that it's your responsibility to place actors in the positions where they can learn most and most succeed.
- People are not cast for sorts of reasons that have nothing to do with talent. "I told my auditioners that I had a director once tell me that I was the best person to audition for the part, but that he'd always seen the character as a much shorter person (I'm six-one), and went with that in casting," explains one director. "I think he was wrong, but he *was* the director, after all, and it wasn't personal—I couldn't lop off three inches of my height.

Make it a group decision

- It can be helpful to cast with a casting team you can bounce ideas off of. You're no longer the villain when someone isn't cast.
- Some directors ask each actor at auditions or callbacks for their top three choices of characters they would like to play. It's not always the lead parts you think they'd actually want. It makes things a lot easier when people get one of their top three.

Communicate the cast list

- Always "sleep on it" at least one night before posting the cast list. If you need another day, take it!
- Email the cast list to those who auditioned and BCC their email addresses, and post it on your website, as well. That way, the actors can choose the environment where they can read it and react accordingly.
- Post late a Friday afternoon, if possible. It gives them (and you) time over the weekend to reflect and recover.
- Ask for an indication via email or text from those cast, agreeing that they accept the part they've been offered. Give them a deadline to respond.

If questions arise

When informing an actor they were not cast for a stage production, a director should be respectful, honest, and provide constructive feedback while acknowledging their talent and potential, saying things like:

- "I really appreciated your audition and the energy you brought to the role, but ultimately the creative vision for this production called for a different interpretation."
- "Your skills are strong, and we believe you have a lot to offer. It's just that this particular role just wasn't the best fit for your strengths at this time."
- "We were impressed with your [specific skill, like character development or physicality], and encourage you to keep developing your craft. Please stay in touch and consider auditioning for future projects."

- “You were one of two or three excellent candidates for the role, so it was a difficult choice. I know you’re disappointed, but I want you to know how much you were in consideration.”

Key points to remember:

- *Focus on the creative vision:* Explain how the casting decision was made based on the needs of the production.
- *Offer encouragement:* Recognize the actor's talent and potential, and suggest areas for improvement, if appropriate.
- *Be specific:* If possible, mention specific aspects of your vision of the character, or the show, without being overly critical.
- *Maintain professionalism:* Always be polite and respectful, even if delivering negative news.

What to avoid:

- *Vague or generic comments:* Don't just say "you weren't right for the role" without explanation.
- *Personal critiques:* Avoid commenting on an actor's appearance or personal qualities, unrelated to their performance. For that matter, don't critique their performance, either—it just might lead to a defensive reaction that you'll never overcome.
- *False promises:* Don't give false hope by saying "we might have another role for you" if it's not likely.

Final thoughts:

- You can avoid a lot of problems if you state at the end of each audition session, and at callbacks, that final decisions will be difficult because you have many good choices to work from (even if that's a bit of a fib).
- If possible, share a personal story of your own about not getting a role, or a comment from an actor who you did not get cast in some previous show, but who came away with a much better handle on how prepare for audition. (And, hopefully, was cast in a later production.)
- If you have choices on who to cast, someone will be disappointed. Help actors understand that not being cast is not a *rejection*. It's a bit like shopping for a sweater, and you have to choose between styles and colors. There are many good choices, but you must settle on just one, and so you go with what you think looks best on you and serves your needs.
- Ultimately, it's all about your vision for the production, and how you want to make that happen. That may mean making hard choices, but that goes with the territory. In this case, a territory you as director know better than anyone else.