Audition the Actor, Not the Part

By Stephen Peithman

"What you want from an audition is to maximize the amount of information you can glean about and from an actor in the shortest period of time."

We suspect that most directors would agree with director Ted Strickland in this. However, we also know that, for many, auditions are at best a chore and at worst an abiding frustrating.

That's why we were struck by the very different approach Strickland uses, particularly when we watched it in action.

No More Readings

"The usual way of doing things is for people to walk in, fill out forms and read from the script," Strickland points out. "You find out how well they *read,* not how well they act. The problem is that some people just can't read. They learn and speak lines beautifully, but you don't find this out at auditions and so you lose them right off."

Others audition well, but never develop in the part, he adds. Still others are new to the stage and their awkwardness often masks latent talent.

"Auditions should help the director determine an actor's potential—movement, voice, range, and projection. You want to know if they can take direction, relate to other people, and if they can create a character."

To identify these critical skills Strickland puts a new twist on the familiar process of general auditions and callbacks.

Those who attend general auditions are not asked to read from a script or prepare a monolog. Instead, they find themselves doing a series of informal exercises and improvs in an environment that minimizes distractions. Those who make the cut are asked to callbacks, where for the first time they work with the script.

Not only does this system work for the director, but auditioners like it too. In addition, Strickland says it has rejuvenated the company by opening it up to more new talent--and new audiences (more on that in the next issue).

Environment

Strickland focuses first on improving the audition environment.

"Most audition spaces are intimidating," he points out. "People are tense. And anything that signals negatively can affect them."

That's why it's important for there to be a greeter at the door to pay attention to newcomers, he says. At the same time, the director or other staff should make an effort not to single out old-timers either.

"Greet everyone with equal enthusiasm," he says. "Otherwise, you give the impression that yours is a closed group, where new people aren't welcome. Try to create an environment that is welcoming. Remember, you need to get rid of tension before an actor can produce."

Keep the audition space as open and as uncluttered as possible. Minimize clutter and other distractions. Make sure that you can see those waiting as well those who are actually auditioning; you can learn a lot about a person when they're not "on."

For Starters

Strickland starts the audition by relaxing the actors with some free-form exercises that also help him evaluate people without their knowing it. He prefers to work with groups of six to 10 auditioners at a time. They feel safer and thus more relaxed. It's also a more efficient use of time.

We watch as he invites a group to come up and stand with their backs to one wall. He asks each person to walk across the room, then skip back. ("It's a chance to have everyone look ridiculous—and everyone is in same boat," he tells us later.) There's a lot of nervous laughter, and the ice is broken. At the same time, this simple exercise indicates both coordination and inhibition.

Then Strickland tells each person to walk in a particular way:

"Someone has been spreading vicious stories about you. They are on the other side of the room from you—walk over to them."

"You've just been fired from your job and you are walking into your home to confront the person you live with."

"You just received the best news you've ever received and are going to tell a friend."

"You are god's gift to the opposite sex and walk in a way that shows that."

This type of activity shows the interpretive process at work.

"You'll see whether a person is willing to try something," he says. "A person doesn't have to be a trained actor to do this kind of thing well, so it gives you a feeling for their potential. And as for experienced actors, you'll find those who show you a character rather than <be> a character. Try physical things. Have then walk or whatever in a way consistent with a particular character. If you want, you ask them to do several different walks. The differences each time show whether they can act or take direction."

Group Effort

Another reason for auditioning people in groups is that "you can do 10 people in four minutes," Strickland points out. "It also keeps people from sitting too long. When you do readings at auditions, people sit and get fidgety. So a group audition is more efficient and makes people feel more comfortable."

Strickland sometimes uses the familiar "red light, green light" game, but with the players as characters.

"Again, it reduces tension. It's something they probably know, and they actually have fun. Participants develop a relationship through competition. You can see how fast people learn."

We saw what Strickland means as we watch some auditioners play the game. The first time he calls out two "red lights" in a row, the players seem confused. They apparently assumed that a "red light" would be followed by a "green light." They soon begin to concentrate, to listen more carefully.

"Such an exercise identifies those actors who second–guess what the director wants," he says, laughing. "Seriously, though, control is important to an actor, and so is the ability to learn. This exercise focuses on those traits."

Later, he has five people mime a game of dodge ball in slow motion. The game shows each person's ability to react, to play off the others. Since no ball actually exists, each person has to focus on has it at any given moment to keep things moving smoothly. The exercise also shows whether a person can function as part of an ensemble.

Readings with a Difference

So far not a word has been spoken by any of the auditioners. Not all activity is physical, however. Strickland next gives eight people a newspaper page each. He asks them to select any paragraph and read it aloud. Then he asks them to read the randomly-chosen paragraph in various ways—consoling a small child, picking up someone in a bar, firing someone, scolding a child, proposing marriage, telling a ghost story.

"This really shows versatility, voice quality, the ability to take direction, basic technique," he explains. "And no one has the advantage of preparation. A newspaper also avoids the problem of actors hearing the same scene over and over, which affects their own interpretation. Each time is different. You may also find speech patterns that are unusual and could be used in some way to add variety to your production."

Strickland advises that you also observe those who are <not> reading as well. Actors who don't focus, who shut down when they're not speaking, or who engage in conversation, could cause problems if cast.

Improvs With a Twist

Strickland also uses improvisational techniques. In one improv, a wife suspects her husband of having an affair. They confront each other--but speak only in numbers.

He: 7
She: 7?
He: 7
She: (shaking head) 8, 12, 14
He: 14?
She: 14!

"Improv is a great technique," Strickland says, "but actors often try to become playwrights. That's why I have them speak in numbers or letters. It takes the script away from them and forces them to play the situation. You'll see what kind of resources they can draw on, and something about their thought processes. Don't let the improv go on too long: stop them when they get in a rut or don't take the scene to a new level."

Improvs are "a great equalizer," Strickland says. "They gets around the problem you sometimes encounter where some people are doing a cold reading

while others are already familiar with the script."

Auditions should be fair—or at least be perceived as fair," Strickland says. "That's why I like using these exercises. They treat everyone equally. Just as important, they help you separate the wheat from the chaff. In community theater you often get people with no or little ability. If you have them all read, you'll be there all night."

Groundwork and Ground Rules

Strickland spends a day making lists of activities to use in auditions. He doesn't set a particular order of use, but makes that call as he observes the people who have shown up.

It's important to have a number of activities on which to draw, he says, because "the effect is cumulative. That is, the auditioners show themselves through several exercises. You need to observe them carefully as they go through the activities."

Strickland uses the same methods to audition children and adults.

"Children respond well to the use of games and exercises," he says. "It's especially helpful because they often don't have a lot of theater experience. So having them walk like an animal, for instance, appeals to them.

"A lot of adult actors, especially those who are great readers, don't like doing these games and exercises. Some even resent it, but know they have to go through it to get to callbacks. But I learn something about people every time, including actors I've used before. It's really great to get people to do something different."

One inviolable rule for both children and adults: Only those actually auditioning may be present.

"Auditions are closed because onlookers can be distracting. Especially parents. Even if they don't say anything their presence distracts. And I want the person auditioning to be focused."

For musicals, Strickland has half the group sing while the other half learns a dance combination. "Reading may be less important in a musical," he says. "If they can't <sing> the part they can't play the part."

Callbacks

Exercises at general auditions solve the problem of having enough scripts handy, or selecting audition scenes. Then, at callbacks, when you have a smaller group, you can work with them using the script and actual characterizations.

The purpose of the audition exercises is to ensure that callbacks are productive and don't waste time, Strickland says.

"For callbacks, plan so you know precisely what people will read. Take the choice element out. I do not ask people if they want to read for a particular part at callbacks. I tell them, 'You may or may not read the part you want. That's OK. I don't cast that way'" And I mean it. By this point I know what I want, and I have a pretty good idea of what most of the actors can do. It's down to specifics. I don't have to have each person read a specific role to find out what they're capable of. I

<may> have someone read a part to see if they can give me the voice quality I'm looking for, perhaps, but there's no point in reading more than is needed to give the director what he or she wants to know."

Final Thoughts

One of the less obvious benefits of Strickland's audition methods is that it generates new performers for his company.

"At least one–third of any cast of mine is always brand–new. That's because I'm not relying on cold readings any more; I can spot potential without that."

As a result, the perception of the community is that Chattanooga Little Theatre is an open group, an evolving group. Just as important, Strickland points out, new people in the cast means new people in the audience—and at the next audition.

"If you don't get new folks in, you might as well declare yourself a non–paid repertory company.

It's a win-win situation. The company benefits, the director finds casting to be more relaxed and productive, and those who audition enjoy themselves as well.

"People come up and say, 'Even if I don't get a part, I had fun,'" Strickland says.

When was the last time you heard that about *your* company's auditions?

[Copyright: Stephen Peithman & American Association of Community Theatre]