

THE ART OF GETTING THE PART

by Richard Evans CDG

Auditions have always been a fascinating subject to people who do not perform and the process was a somewhat secret one, shrouded in mystery until being brought into the public domain by such reality TV shows as *Over The Rainbow*, *Britain's Got Talent* and *The X Factor*. However, if you have performed as an amateur, you will already have had experience of this intriguing process within your societies and will doubtless have your own different feelings about having to audition.

Performing with dramatic or operatic societies is a great way of doing what you enjoy and showing your talents while having a professional life outside. However, at some point or other, after having given a great performance on the stage, you will probably have dreamed or thought about performing for a living. Many actors, both famous and jobbing, have come from the amateur route, but it is a huge and risky step to take and often the cons far outweigh the pros. You may have heard that performing is the industry with the highest unemployment rate in the UK, with over 80% of Equity members unemployed at any one time, meaning that competition is stiff to get the audition, never mind the job – a daunting prospect to say the least. You will also have heard or read about the megabucks paid to stars in movies and on television. While this may be true in some instances, the average actor earns comparatively little, with the Equity minimum wage being under £400 per week, if indeed the job is paid at all. This can come as a shock to people who have come from other industries where they have earned substantially more – I once offered a newly turned professional a fee that most actors would have deemed a nice weekly wage, only to be told that I was insulting him and he was used to earning more than that in a day. Another case was the bored executive who gave up her high-powered job and six-figure salary to train at drama school for a year, costing her over £10,000, then to earn only £3,200 from working all year as an actor. On the other side of the coin, however, there was the man who took early retirement to train as an actor, following in his daughter's footsteps, and, having paid off his mortgage and with the security of a pension to fall back on, he can afford to earn relatively little money and really enjoys his new career. Another man I met about a year ago took up acting after his well-established business had gone under due to the recession, leaving himself and his workforce unemployed. As he was considered too old to find employment elsewhere in his own field, he literally had nothing to lose, and is now much happier in life and making his mark as a performer. The good news is that there is no time limit and it's never too late to start acting, as actors portray all sorts of characters both young and old. Indeed it might be advantageous to start later in life, as you may be keener to take work in genres or places that your contemporaries will have done many years ago and would not consider repeating.

Whether or not you're considering turning professional, or are happy to stay as an amateur, competition is still fierce – especially if you're aiming for larger or leading roles within your own society or to branch out to one of the bigger ones, with many more members and an established hierarchy – so raising your game and giving the best audition you can at the time is essential to maximise your success and reach your goal.

So what's the difference between an audition for a professional production and an amateur one? The honest answer is probably not much and the principles are roughly the same, especially if the director and other members of the creative team are, or have been

professionals, as they will doubtless be all the more exacting when it comes to casting. After all, as with any production, the ticket buying public expects and has the right to see the best available talent on the stage.

The first thing to do is to decide what you want, and by this I mean looking at the productions that are being planned by your desired societies, deciding which ones are right for you and your talents and researching the roles you could feasibly play, if you don't already know the shows or plays in question. This should be quite simple, as very few new pieces are staged by societies, so your first port of call should be the internet, using Google to find out more about the piece, breakdowns and descriptions of the characters and which actors have played the roles in past productions. If you are not yet online, French's Guide to Selecting Plays is helpful, though only contains the gender breakdown of plays rather than specific roles and ages, and is available by mail order from French's Theatre bookshop in London. Your local reference library might have a copy that you can browse through, as may your local dramatic society or theatre. Also think seriously about whether you can commit to the dates – I remember an eminent West End musical director being in high dudgeon when his leading man announced that he was unable to make the technical rehearsal, as he had to pick his mother-in-law up from the airport. The MD swore never to work with amateurs again!

Knowledge is power, so the more research you can do when applying for audition and prior to the day itself, the more confident and better prepared you will be. This will give you the advantage and thus a greater chance of getting the part. Before your audition, ensure that you read the script or listen to a cast recording, more than once if possible, to familiarise yourself with the plot, in case the director asks you questions. If you are auditioning for a new or bigger society, do your research on the company for which you are auditioning and also on the director and other creatives involved. Again, you can do this using Google or by asking around existing members of that society and if you can get to see a production before auditioning, and chat to those involved in the bar afterwards, all the better.

Once you have your audition date, you should start thinking about what you need to prepare – if you are ill prepared, you may as well not bother going, as there will be plenty of people who want the part and will have done their homework. The Society may have told you what's required when offering you the audition, so if you are asked to read a specific part of the script or sing a certain song from the show, start learning sooner rather than later, as you will look and feel better if you are word perfect and not reading off the page or score. If, however, you are asked to prepare your own choice of material, originality is the key. Avoid doing anything that is taken from the play or show itself, as many people will take this route and repetition can soon get boring – especially if the team are hearing the same speech or song many times throughout the day. Instead, think of other shows, or characters, that are similar and work on these. Someone offering a piece the director has not heard that day, or even at all, will make them sit up and listen, rather than think 'Oh, not this AGAIN!' and switch off. A mistake often made by actors, both professional and amateur, is to believe that acting means playing something you're not. This is not the case, and good actors play what they are, or feasibly could be, so remember to choose material that is suitable for your current age and casting type, as nobody wants to see an 18-year-old Mother Courage, or a 60-year-old Hamlet. The only possible exception is when it is done for humorous effect – Dame Judi Dench's rendition of 'I Am 16, Going On 17', from *The Sound of Music*, was priceless, though I'm sure she'd never do it at an audition.

On the day of the audition there's one very important thing to do... and that's to turn up. Now you may think I'm being really obvious here, but it's amazing how many people just fail to arrive with no excuse or explanation either before or after the event. If, on reflection, you don't want the audition or the part, or your circumstances change, please have the courtesy to cancel your appointment as early as possible to enable your time slot to be reallocated to someone else. Punctuality is also hugely important and arriving early is never a bad thing, as they may be running early or you may be handed extra script or other material to look at, so be prepared. When you're waiting to go into the room, think positive thoughts about yourself, believe that you are a competent performer and you'd be perfect in the part. If you're nervous, take a deep breath in through your mouth, hold it for a few seconds and then let it go sharply with a hahhh. Repeat this a few times and it should help your muscles to feel freer. Going into the room smiling will also help you look and feel more confident and create a positive first impression.

When you're in the audition room, listen carefully to any instructions and direction and take a moment to think of your response. Ask questions about the show and anything you don't understand, which will show you've thought things through. Do whatever you have been asked to do wholeheartedly and respond appropriately to any direction that you are given. Be positive about everything, do the best you can at the time and don't ever give up as you never know what they'll be looking for. Lastly, remember that while someone will get the part, several others won't, so if at first you don't succeed, keep trying and believing, learning from your experiences and thinking what you need to work on and would do differently next time, and your turn will come.

While auditioning can be a nerve-racking experience, like all performing the most important thing is to enjoy what you're doing – if you don't, the panel or audience won't either – so go for it and who knows where your hobby might lead!

Richard Evans CDG

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For more information about the book, Richard and his work, as well as a wealth of tips, advice and resources on auditioning and performing, go to www.auditionsthecompleteguide.com