



# THREE STEPS OF PRODUCTION

**W**hen you go to a theater to watch a play, you're seeing the final result of months of preparation on the part of everyone involved: actors, director, stage manager, technical crew, and publicists, among other participants. This preparatory work and the actual performances make up the production process, which happens in three distinct steps or stages: preproduction, rehearsal, and performance.

## Preproduction

If your school or local community theater is producing a play, and you want to be one of the actors, the first step is being cast. Typically, a casting notice will appear on your school or your town's website announcing a time and place when auditions will be held. Notices might also go up on information boards around the school or in places around town where people are likely to see them. They might also appear in the local school newsletter or town newspaper.

Professional actors (actors who pursue acting as a career) may hire a talent agent—or artist's

Reading aloud from a script without any preparation is called a cold reading.

manager—whose job is to find work for the actors he or she represents. If an agent spots a role in an upcoming theatrical production that seems right for one of his or her actors, the agent will submit that actor's **headshot** and résumé to the play's casting director. The casting director, in turn, will invite potential candidates to an audition.

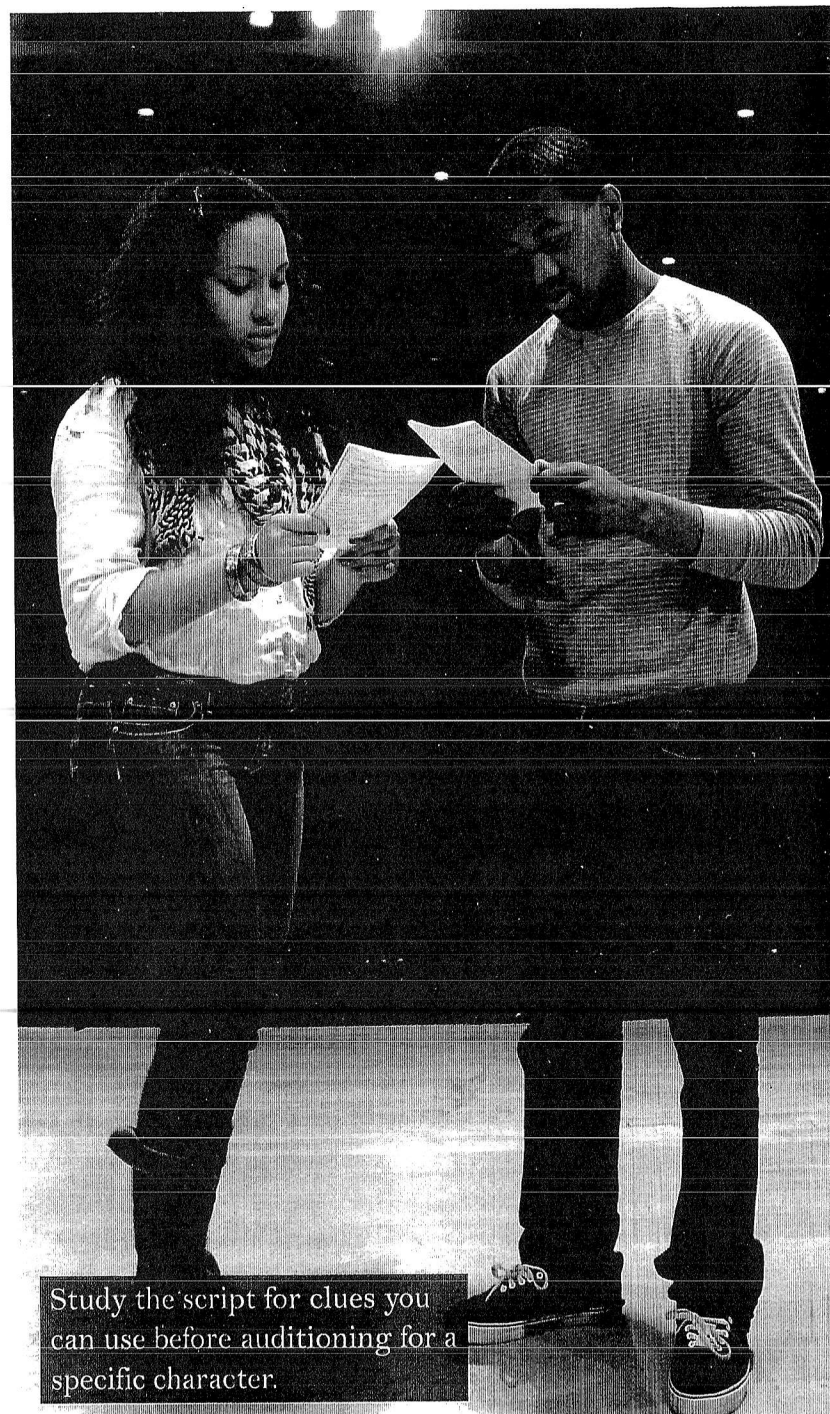
## Auditions

The beginning or student actor, like the professional, still has to pass an audition. Auditions can be stressful experiences, especially if the student isn't prepared. One of the best ways of preparing is to be sure you know what the play is about. Read it thoroughly beforehand.

It isn't always possible to know in advance what part you will be asked to audition for. However, it can't hurt to determine beforehand which role or roles you most closely identify with. That way, if the casting director asks you to read for one of those parts, you're already ahead of the game.

Setting aside time to do some relaxation and warm-up exercises before the audition will boost your energy level and get you ready to give the audition your best shot. Slow, deep breathing is an effective way to relax and focus, and warming up can be as simple as doing a five-minute workout or a short run. If you know tai chi or other martial arts forms, performing a few moves can also reduce stress and any anxiety you might feel about the upcoming audition.

There are different types of auditions depending on the type of play being produced, the artistic



Study the script for clues you can use before auditioning for a specific character.

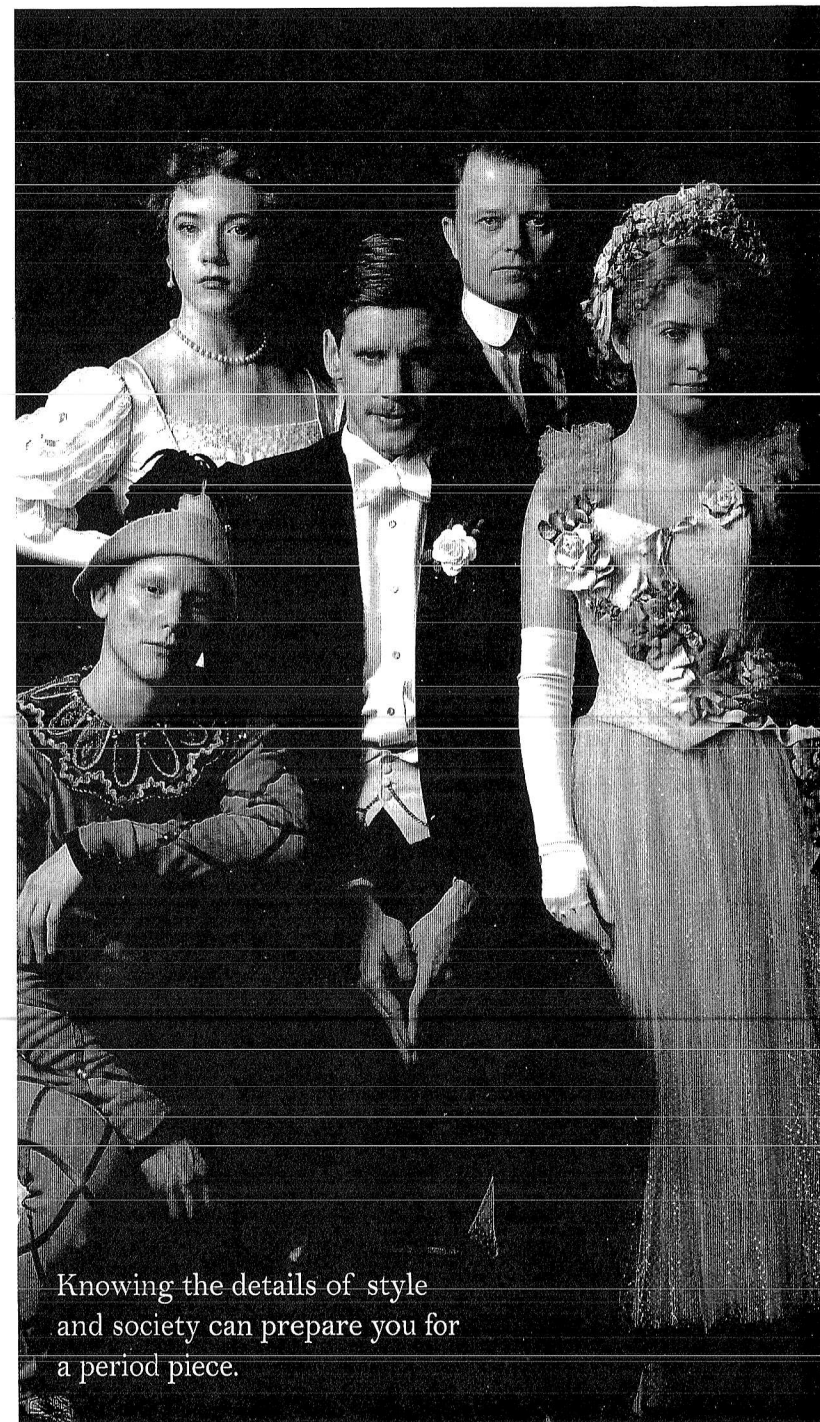


preferences of the director, the type of setting in which it will be performed, and the audience for which it is intended. For a musical like *West Side Story*, the director will be looking for performers who can act, dance, and sing, and may utilize a choreographer and music coach to manage parts of the audition. For non-musical dramas and comedies, you will most likely be asked to read all or part of a character's **monologue** or to read a scene with other actors. Prepare your own monologue, one that shows your strengths, in case you are asked to perform one. It should last about one minute. The director wants to see how well you understand what your character is doing in the scene and how clearly you communicate your character's thoughts and feelings.

## Creating a Backstory

The actor who succeeds in getting cast in a play can start working on his or her part even before rehearsals begin. The work will depend on the nature of the role and the type of play. In the beginning of my own acting career, I was cast as Sir Anthony Absolute in a British comedy called *The Rivals*. Like his name implies, Sir Anthony sees life in absolute terms. Things are right or wrong, black or white. There are no shades of gray. He has already decided whom his son will marry, and if the young man refuses, Sir Anthony will cut him out of his will.

The setting of the play is London in the late 1700s. The characters are mostly members of the British upper class. Once I knew I would be playing the part of Sir Anthony Absolute, I started reading



Knowing the details of style and society can prepare you for a period piece.

about life in eighteenth-century London and how people with power and wealth like Sir Anthony would have dressed and behaved. From my reading, I learned that upper-class men wore expensive shoes with high, red heels to show the world they would never stoop to working with their hands. So I went to a thrift shop and bought an old pair of men's shoes with unusually high heels, which I painted bright red. I wore the shoes during the run of the show, along with a wig and other costume pieces appropriate for eighteenth-century gentlemen.

In my research, I also learned about the English **Restoration**—the historical period in which the play was written—and the styles of speaking, moving, and acting in Restoration-era comedies like *The Rivals*.

Jean Schiffman, an arts journalist, wrote a column for the online blog *Backstage* in which she noted the influence of fashion during the eighteenth century on the way actors moved onstage: "It goes without saying that a bustle, a corset, and an elaborate headdress necessitate different movement than do your everyday jeans and flip-flops. For men it's the same thing: High-heeled shoes, tight trousers, decorative swords dangling from your waist, and heavy wigs dictate part of your physicality."

The way people move, Schiffman observes, is an expression of the times in which they live and their place in society. The same true is for the way they speak. Language in Restoration comedies poses a serious challenge to modern actors, who have to "deliver this language elegantly, playfully."

Once I was familiar with the historical period and the main features of Restoration theater, I was

ready to take another step in my preproduction work: developing my character—Sir Anthony Absolute. I wanted to build a foundation for what he says and does during the time span of the play. The script says very little about Sir Anthony's life before the action of the play begins. So, using the knowledge I had gained from my reading and a bit of imagination, I invented what today might be called my character's "**backstory**"—how he spent his childhood and early adulthood, what his marriage was like, how he became such an influential member of society, etc.

## Finding Things in Common

Another important part of preproduction work for an aspiring actor is making **substitutions**. To make the character as real as possible for both actor and audience, actors can substitute actual material from their own lives for the events and circumstances their character confronts. What he or she experiences during the play and what you have personally lived through may be very different. So what do you do in order to connect with this stranger you're eventually going to portray onstage before an audience?

The answer is to look for any similarities between your life and that of your character. If you search for a literal, one-to-one correspondence, you're going to be disappointed unless your life and your character's perfectly match, which rarely happens. So you need to look below the surface of your particular life experiences for something that is probably true for a lot of people, including the character you're playing.



Suppose you've been cast in a community theater production of the musical *West Side Story*, and you're playing the part of Tony, a former member of the Jets, one of the two gangs in the musical. Tony meets Maria at a dance, and the two fall in love. The problem is that Maria is the sister of Bernardo, the leader of the rival gang—the Sharks. In real life, you've never been part of a gang, you don't live in New York City (the setting of the musical), and your girlfriend is not from a rival gang.



In your hunt for substitutions, you might explore what it was like to join one of your school's athletic teams or to have close ties with a small group of friends at school or in the neighborhood. You could use the feelings you associate with these experiences

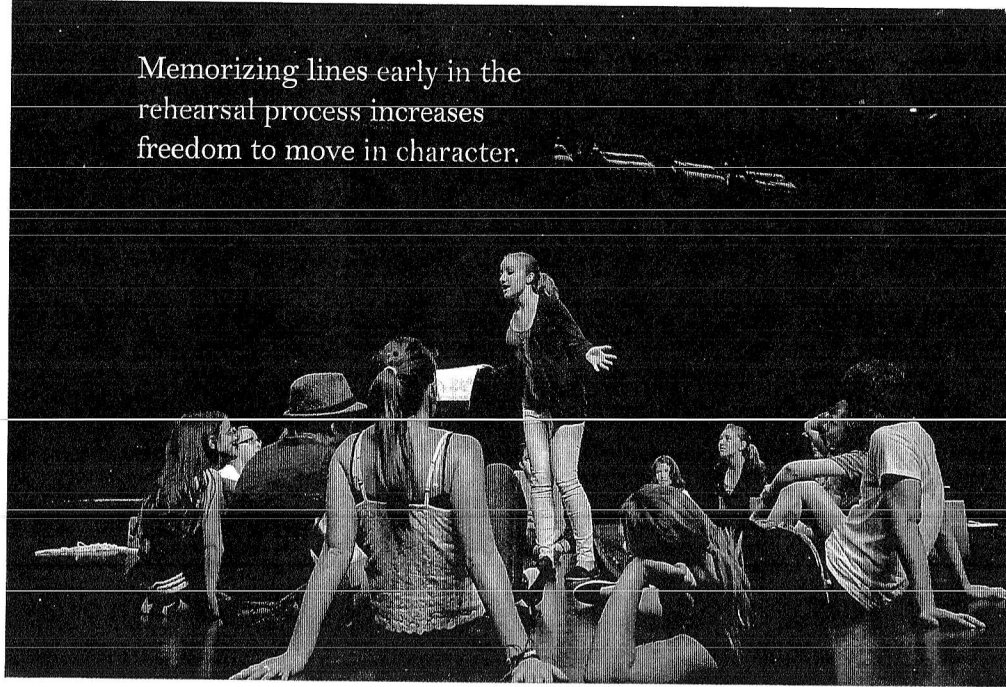
to make your onstage membership in a street gang start to feel real for you. You don't have to live in New York City to know something about what it's like to live in a large metropolis. Even if you live in a quiet suburb or a small town, there are plenty of movies and TV shows that depict life in New York and other big cities. (Even lousy movies and shows are useful resources if the setting or the situation mirrors elements in the play.) You could watch some of them to get a sense of what it would be like to grow up in a tough neighborhood and to join a gang for protection as well as camaraderie.

As for the romance that develops between Tony and Maria in *West Side Story*, you might focus on how risky, even dangerous, their relationship is. Tony is white; Maria is Puerto Rican. According to the mindset of their respective friends and families, they should never have gotten romantically involved or even become friends.

But no matter how different Tony and Maria's ethnic backgrounds are, they are dealing with a common, universal problem: prejudice against someone who is perceived by others as different and therefore unacceptable. This is where the actor's work of making substitutions can help him connect emotionally with the difficulties Tony and Maria are facing. Have you ever had to overcome prejudice in your life or stood up for something you believed in, even at the risk of alienating your friends? For that matter, have you ever become friends with someone from a background entirely different from your own?

These are the sorts of questions that enable actors to get below the literal meaning of their

Memorizing lines early in the rehearsal process increases freedom to move in character.



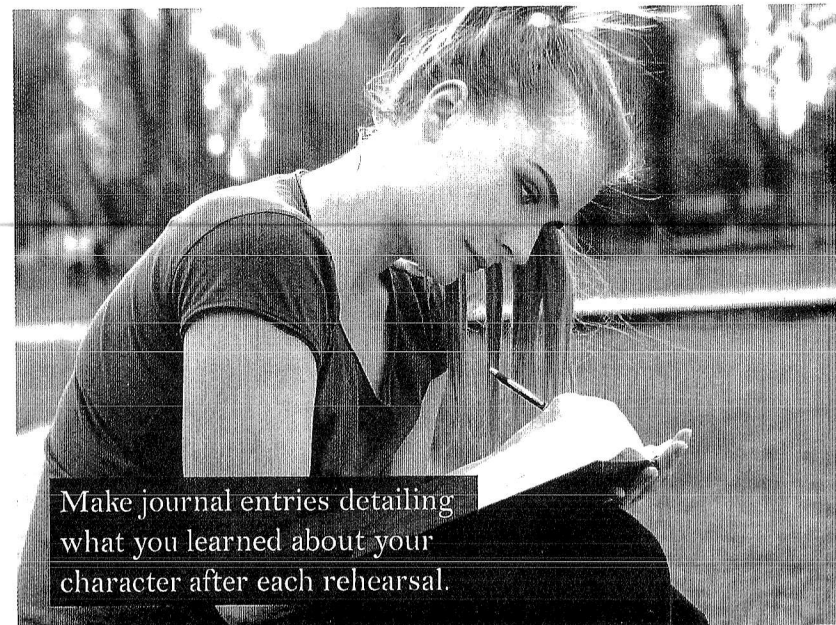
character's experience and find emotional truths that will serve them in the play. Keep in mind that the background research and character development that begin during preproduction are building the foundation of what comes later in the process—rehearsals and performances.

## Rehearsals

During the initial rehearsal, actors will likely read through the entire play with minimal feedback from the director. What happens during this first rehearsal is a bit like going out on a first date with someone. You might have already formed a pretty good idea about the person you're taking out, but once you're in each other's company, who knows what you'll discover. Your date might possess hidden virtues or

annoying habits you never dreamed about. Or maybe the way that person treats other people makes you wonder why in the world you're so interested in them.

As actors read their lines aloud with fellow actors, they need to pay close attention to their immediate reactions to what their character does and says and how that character interacts with the others. These reactions are like the first impressions we receive when we meet someone new. It may turn out later they are completely "off the mark," and so we need to revise our understanding of someone. On the other hand, our first impressions may prove to be very keen insights into someone's personality. The same holds true for actors reading their parts for the first time. The experience will give them sudden glimpses into their characters' private, inner worlds; hints about what makes them do what they do in the play (motivations) and what keeps them from getting what they want (**obstacles**).



Make journal entries detailing what you learned about your character after each rehearsal.

Some actors find it useful to keep track of the images, ideas, insights, and feelings that occur to them during a read-through with the entire cast. They might make notes in the margins of the script, or underline or highlight key lines or passages.

Another option for actors is to keep a paper or electronic journal in which to record their thoughts about the play and the character. This record keeping is not required, but it does serve as a useful tool in the rehearsal process.

The information that comes from this first encounter with the role makes up another set of building blocks the actor can use in shaping a character. However, if an actor goes into the rehearsal process with strong, preconceived ideas about the character, he is likely to cut short his own creative process and never succeed in creating something original and believable.

## Keeping a Journal

The job of an actor is to make a character come across as an individual with their own way of looking, speaking, moving, gesturing, and just being. Ideally, this individuality should enliven not only the big moments in the play when emotions are running high, but the details as well. This includes even the smallest of details, such as how a character enters and exits a room, or drinks a glass of water. Here's where a journal will come in handy. It doesn't matter if the journal is a spiral notebook, a loose-leaf binder, or a file on your computer. What does matter is having a place where you can store your thoughts and observations

about the play and the character you're playing. In the journal, you can continue the work you began when you were doing your background research. However, now you're adding more specific details about your character—not just inventing a biography—beginning with physical facts: Is he old or young, tall or short, muscular or overweight? How does he dress? Does he walk with a swagger in his step, or does he take small, tentative steps as if he were afraid of his own shadow?

From these basic facts, you can delve more deeply into what sort of person you're playing. Your imagination, observations of the people around you, and clues provided in the script are all you need to take this next step in developing your character. In your journal, you might list your character's favorite foods and hobbies. Does the person live alone or as part of a large family? What does this person like to do when alone? Does he or she have a lot of friends, or is the character more of a loner? How are setbacks and disappointments handled? Does the person get angry and curse, or is he or she likely to stay calm?

Of course, you won't necessarily find answers to such questions in the script. They are only intended to get you thinking more deeply about your character. As you continue your exploration, you will need to make choices about the kind of person your character is. These choices are what will make the character stand out as a one-of-a-kind individual. The backstory you may have created during the preproduction stage will contribute to your character development; as you get more involved in the rehearsals, you might have to revise this story by adding details or changing first impressions as your understanding increases.



Give yourself time to wonder about your character's inner life instead of only focusing on personal history or the outer details of their life, like taste in music or clothing. What are their hopes and dreams? What do they want to become? Are they happy with the choices they have made in life? What if they won \$1 million? How would they spend the money? If they were a type of building, a movie star, or an automobile, which one would they be?

Animals are a great source of ideas for actors in the process of creating a character. The way animals move, the sounds they make, their behavior, and how they express their emotions can inspire actors to incorporate some of these qualities into their characters. Other people are another great source of ideas. You might spot someone on the street who strikes you as similar to how you imagine your character. Get out your journal and jot down some details about that person's appearance and way of moving. Better yet, add a simple sketch to your notes to make the person that much easier to recall.

## Your Character's Journey

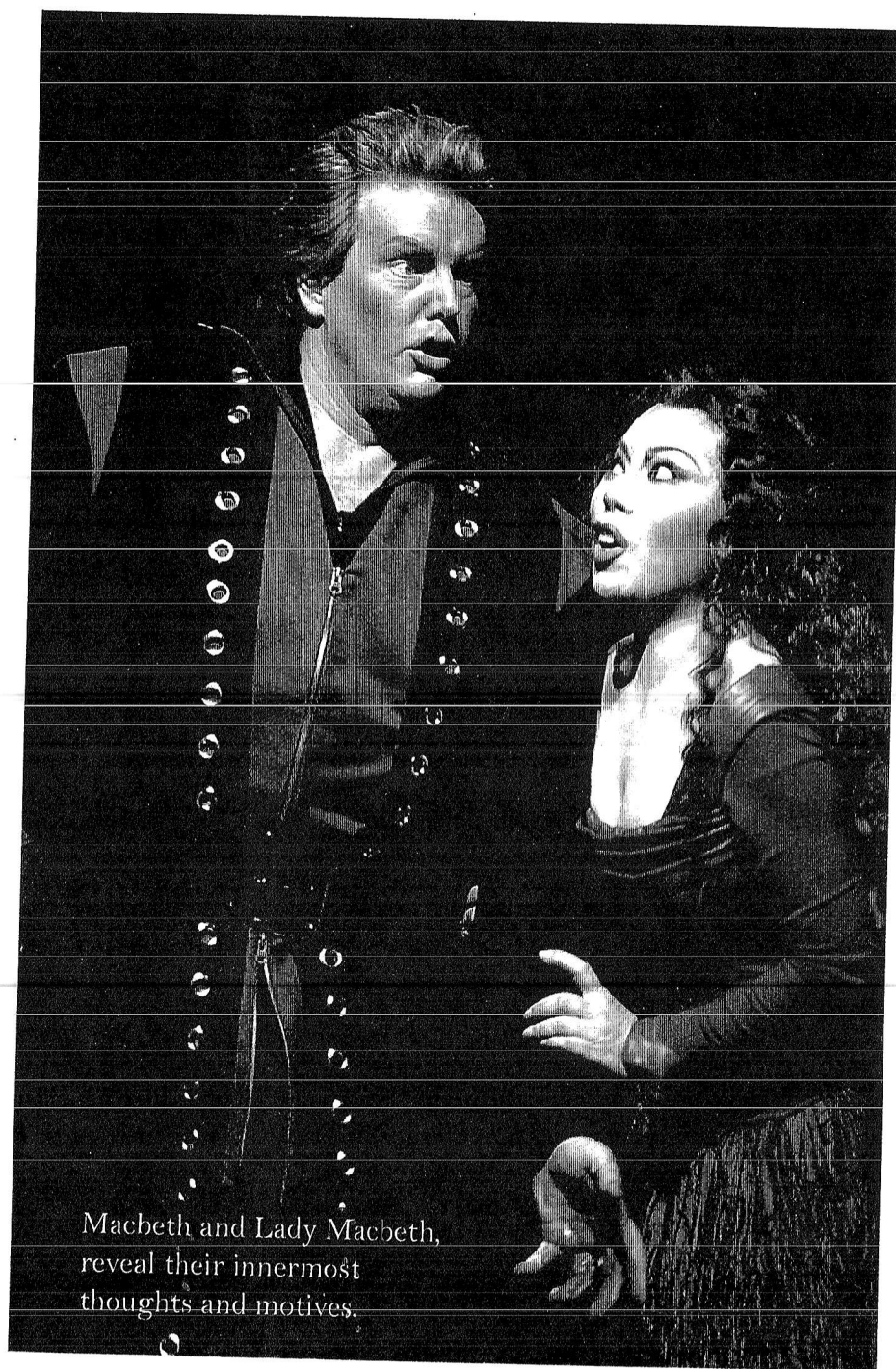
So rehearsals are under way in earnest. The director is beginning to work on individual scenes. Each scene has its own rhythm, its own shape, and its own role to play in the overall direction of the play. As the actor works on her scenes in rehearsal, she'll develop a keener sense of her character's path from the beginning to the end of the play. Another name for this path is "arc." Each part of a play—the different acts and the scenes within each act—has its own arc,

or trajectory. The same is true for the life of each character. A character's arc is the changes he or she undergoes in the course of the play. This is certainly the case for the main characters and may also be true for the minor characters. If you are playing one of the major characters, you need to determine what these changes are, and what or who is driving them.

In William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* (also called *The Scottish Play*), a Scottish noblewoman—Lady Macbeth—plots with her husband to murder King Duncan. The king has come to visit them in their castle. Lady Macbeth wants her husband to become the new king and is positive this is also what he wants. In the beginning of the play, she is determined to see to it that Duncan never leaves the castle alive. Her scheming makes her seem ruthless, but in fact she has a strong conscience, which she attempts to keep under wraps. Macbeth, her husband, commits the murder. But his wife's remorse and sense of guilt finally get the better of her. By the end of the play, she is so tormented by guilt that she kills herself. Lady Macbeth has gone from being an ambitious woman in pursuit of power to a guilt-ridden, suicidal figure. That is one way to think about the arc of her journey.

## Exploring Your Character's Needs and Objectives

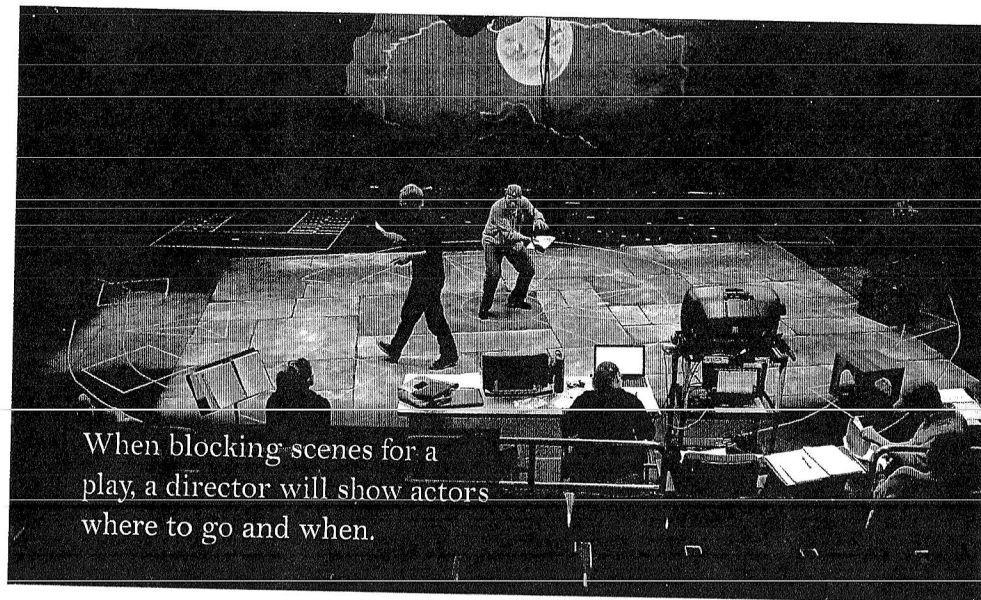
Rehearsals are when actors get to explore their characters, and this involves a certain amount of experimenting. Rarely do actors begin the rehearsal process with a complete understanding of the



Macheth and Lady Macheth,  
reveal their innermost  
thoughts and motives.

part they're playing. During rehearsals, they get to try out their ideas and discover which ones are workable and which ones need to be discarded. They also get to refine and deepen their understanding of their character by playing different **objectives**, or intentions. A character's objective is what he or she wants to achieve in a particular scene. The playwright doesn't necessarily spell out his characters' objectives, though in some plays, the objectives are fairly straightforward. They're not hidden in the script, waiting for the actors to discover them. Two actresses playing Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play will likely come up with their own interpretations of the character and her objectives, and these differences will show up in how they perform the part.

We all have objectives that affect what we do and the choices we make. The same is true in theater. Actors have to identify their characters' objectives. During rehearsals, they can try out different ones to see which ones have the greatest amount of energy behind them. Some objectives fall flat. They don't fully engage the actor. He might decide that in scene A his character (who is sixteen years old) wants to prove to his parents that he can take care of himself and is old enough to quit school. But during rehearsal, the actor discovers that when he delivers his lines, they come out sounding flat and lifeless. They lack the energy of a strongly desired objective. So he experiments with different objectives until he finds one that really "clicks" and makes the scene come to life. For this to happen, an objective has to connect with something inside the actor. He has to "feel it."



When blocking scenes for a play, a director will show actors where to go and when.

After all, no matter what the role, an actor's main resource is himself—his life experiences, his feelings, thoughts, and memories, but translated into the life of his character. Getting back to our actor playing a sixteen-year-old who wants to leave school, a more successful objective, one that connects with the emotional core of the scene and of the character, might be to “make my parents see the unique individual I am and to stop treating me like a kid.”

Behind every objective, there's a need. The goals we pursue in life stem from our needs, which include the need for approval and acceptance, for love and companionship, for physical well-being and a meaningful life. We may not always be aware of these needs in our lives, but when rehearsing a role in a play, it helps to get in touch with our character's needs. In the language of the theater, to “play an objective” is to let these needs energize the actor's actions and the way he or she relates to the other characters. Needs are like fuel. Getting in

touch with them is like switching on a source of power.

Once again, your journal will come in handy as you experiment with different objectives and begin to identify your character's needs. Which objectives really pulled you into the scene? Which ones just didn't work? The journal is where you can keep track of what happened during rehearsals (and also during performances). It's a record of your character's development “from the page to the stage.” And it's where you can write down your thoughts and reflections not only about your character but about the play and what it means to you, and about your relationships with the other characters.

## Charting a Plan of Action

At some point during rehearsals, the director will begin **blocking** the scenes. Until this point, he or she will typically allow the actors to move freely in the performing space as they deliver their lines. When you watch a play, the characters are moving according to a plan that has been worked out carefully during rehearsals. Creating this plan is what it means to block a play, scene by scene. (These plans are a bit like the running plays used in football to move the ball down the field. In theater, the purpose of blocking is to move the action of the play in a well-orchestrated pattern.)

The actors are expected to take careful notes, so they can follow the blocking during subsequent rehearsals and later, during performances. Marking up the script with blocking notes is how many actors handle this phase of the work. Their notes might indicate, for instance, when to cross from stage



right to stage left, or when to cross from upstage to downstage, or how long to stand by the table at center stage before making an exit.

Stage movement is always for a specific purpose. Ideally, it both serves the scene and supports an actor's motivation—the reason why they do what they do. Think about your own movements during a typical day. When you get home from school, you drop your book bag on the floor by the door and head for the kitchen. What's to eat? You open one of the cupboards and take down a favorite snack food. Then you find a plate, sit down at the table, and put the food on the plate. There's a pile of mail on the table. Better have a look. Who knows, there might be a letter of acceptance from one of the colleges you applied to. So you sort through the mail while gobbling your snack.

The movements you've just made are routine; you don't need to think too much about them. You do them unconsciously. But onstage, you have to be aware of how you move and why—your motivation for moving the way you do. When you sorted through the mail, you did it for a specific reason—to find the letter you've been waiting for. Similarly, when the director tells you to move from upstage left to downstage right, you need to know why. What does that cross have to do with what your character wants in this scene?

Blocking also takes into account sound and lighting cues, which actors must be aware of throughout the performance. Movement, sound, and lighting are parts of one theatrical reality. A well-blocked play will make sure actors are where they're supposed to be when specific sound and lighting

effects happen. And the actors, of course, need to be sure they know the blocking so well that they don't need to think about it during the performance.

## Learning Your Lines

When do actors do the grunt work of learning their lines? That depends on the actor and in some cases on the director. Some directors want actors to memorize their part early in the rehearsal period. Being “**off book**” gives actors more freedom of movement and more opportunities to get into the meaning—or **subtext**—behind the lines without having to keep picking up the script or calling for help with the lines. Having the lines memorized also allows actors to focus more fully on their characters' interactions with other players. But in general, the process of learning the lines happens gradually as a natural part of learning more about the character, the play, and the overall production. Building a character, besides taking time, is based on several interrelated elements: the script, your understanding and interpretation of the character you're playing, your relationship with the other characters, your response to all that happens in the play, and the guidance you receive from the director.

For now, let's focus on the script. In addition to keeping a journal as part of the learning process during rehearsals, actors will also mark up their scripts with notes about the blocking, instructions from the director, and notes to themselves about their character's objectives, motivations, gestures, speech patterns, etc. A highlighter and a supply of pencils are the perfect tools for this kind of note taking. The

Tech rehearsals require patience from everybody as all parts of a production are coordinated.



first thing I do when I begin working on a script is to highlight all of my lines and any stage directions provided by the playwright. In the course of rehearsals, I'll write in pencil in the margins my notes about the character and instructions from the director. I use a pencil since my interpretation of the character is sure to change as I learn more about him.

I find that it's easier to learn my lines when I have a strong grasp of the plot and of my character's objectives and motivations—in other words, his goals and the reasons he's pursuing them. Some actors learn their lines before blocking begins. Not me. Once I experience moving as my character, I begin to feel the words in the muscles of my body, and this physical connection speeds up the process of memorization. Of course, there comes a time in every actor's life when he or she has to start learning the lines by heart. One way to do this is to record every scene you're in on a tape recorder. This means recording your lines and the lines

of all the characters who are also in the scene.

Now, start working on one scene at a time. Play it back several times, listening very carefully to the dialogue while picturing what happens as vividly as you can. When you feel ready, try saying your lines out loud as you listen to the playback. If you forget some of them, just go back to the script and reread the lines you've forgotten. Then press rewind and try saying them without the script. Repeat this process for each scene.

Another method for memorizing your lines is to go through the script, one scene at a time, but without the use of a tape recorder. Read a line or two out loud several times. Then cover the page and try saying them from memory. Forget something? No problem. Uncover the page, read the lines you've forgotten several more times, and try again to say them from memory. Go through the entire scene this way until you feel ready to move on to the next scene.

But wait a minute! We're forgetting something: you also have to know your **cue** lines. These are the lines spoken by another character just before it's your turn to speak. So memorize both your lines and your cue lines. A great way to do this is to rehearse with a partner. She can deliver the cue lines as many times as you need for you to learn when it's your turn at-bat.

## Showtime!

Rehearsals have been going along smoothly. The actors are finally off book. The blocking is complete. The characters are coming to life, becoming three-dimensional creations. Each scene has its own mood,

texture, and atmosphere. The set designers have done a fantastic job. So have the costumers. All the props are in place. The play as a whole is acquiring a definite shape with rising and falling action, and a clear, strong climax. Showtime is just around the corner. But before the excitement of opening night, some finishing touches still need doing—tech and dress rehearsals.

Tech rehearsals are when the sound and lighting crews rehearse their cues with (and without) the actors. In this “cue-to-cue” rehearsal, the people who manage the lighting and sound need to make sure the effects happen when they’re supposed to happen and the equipment functions without any glitches. For example, actor A and actor B are on stage. When actor A says, “Why didn’t you tell me you wrecked my car?” the lighting person brings up a warm red light. The actor’s line is the cue line for the lighting person. Instead of playing out the entire scene, the actors move on to the next lighting cue until all the cues have been rehearsed.

The sound designer, who has created the music and/or sound effects for the play, also needs to run cues with the actors. Sound cues can be done together with lighting cues or separately, depending on their complexity and the preferences of the director.

Once the technical aspects of the show are in place and any glitches in the equipment have been eliminated, it’s time for the dress rehearsal. For the dress rehearsal, the actors perform the entire play in costume and makeup, and the technical crew executes all the lighting and sound cues. In a successful dress rehearsal, all the parts will mesh, and the play will be ready to present to an audience. In some productions,

a theater may also offer one or more **preview** performances before the play officially opens. Previews allow the director and crew to fix any problems that arose during the dress rehearsals or to make last-minute changes.

After the previews comes opening night—the night the cast and production crew have been preparing for. By now, the publicity has gone out to the press and social media. All the people involved in the play have spread the news about the opening among their own networks of friends and family. At the theater, the lights are on and the doors are open. The audience is beginning to arrive. Some people have already reserved their tickets; others will buy them at the box office inside the theater.

Volunteers hand out programs. Ushers lead eager audience members to their seats. Perhaps the reviewers also arrive. Backstage, the actors are going over their lines one last time, checking their makeup, making any final adjustments to their costumes, warming up their bodies and voices, and checking their props to be certain they’re all there and accessible.

Meanwhile, the stage manager is overseeing the pre-performance preparation. Using a headset or intercom, the stage manager is in touch with the staff in the front of the house. He wants to make sure the lobby is clear and the theater’s front doors are closed. The answer comes back: yes. Now he gives the technical crew a warning cue. They have one minute to get everything ready. The minute passes. The stage manager cues the cast and the crew to stand by. Seconds to go. The stage manager calls “**places.**” The actors move to their assigned spots to start the play.



House lights dim. The audience quiets. Stage lights come up. The stage manager gives one more cue: go! The magic begins with the opening scene

During the performance, actors who are not on stage can relax in the “green room,” a waiting area or lounge for the performers and members of the production staff. Although there are a number of possible explanations for the term “green room,” some historians think the term comes from a time when such rooms were painted green.

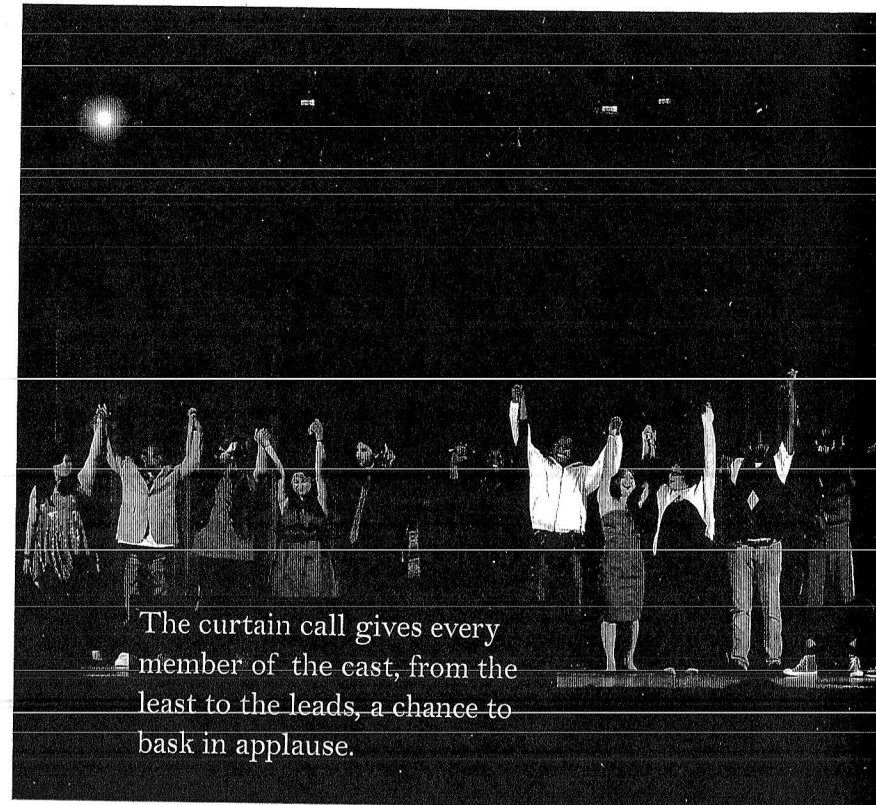
Actors might also head to the dressing room to change costumes, fix their makeup, or go over their lines with another actor or on their own. A verbal cue from the stage manager or a lighting cue in the green room will signal actors that a new scene is beginning and they need to get ready to go on stage.

## Curtain Call

When the show is over, the actors return to the stage for what is called a **curtain call**, to take a bow and receive the applause of the audience. Typically, the supporting players return first, followed by the **principals** in the order of their relative importance. The leading actors are the last to appear.

The actors may have to bow several times if an enthusiastic audience keeps clapping in response to their performance. When they finish their bowing, the actors will gesture toward the technical staff to acknowledge their support and to cue the audience to clap for them as well.

On opening night, after the performance, bouquets of flowers, flung from appreciative members of the



The curtain call gives every member of the cast, from the least to the leads, a chance to bask in applause.

audience, are apt to be strewn on the stage—a sure sign that the show has been well received. Once the audience has left the theater, stagehands can begin putting away props and cleaning up the house, or auditorium, and the stage. Backstage, the actors will be busy removing their makeup and changing out of their costumes and into their street clothes.

In keeping with an old tradition, the last person to leave the theater switches on the “ghost light,” a single bulb upstage center, meant to keep away unfriendly spirits and to make sure that when cast and crew return, they won’t have to cross a dark stage.