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period _____



The cast list goes up, and the drama begins.

A word to student actors

How to cope when the director is a friend—
and you still don't get the part

BY MATT COSPER

YOU'VE READ the play, and it has swept you off your feet. You've fallen in love. The play itself is a masterpiece, but one particular character has jumped off the page and into your heart. It is the role you were *born* to play—and what luck! This is a student-led production, one of the few times each year when your drama teacher hands over the controls, and the director happens to be your best friend.

"I can hear the bells..."

Still, like any good thespian, you do your homework. You read the

play again and again. You choose the best possible audition material and work tirelessly to master it. You make strong choices about character, objective, tactics, and obstacles. Your other friends and family declare that if they have to listen to your monologue one more time they might snap. You are *going* to get this part, and your performance will be a triumph, eternally echoing in your high school's theatrical hall of fame.

But no.

You didn't get the part. You are not playing Juliet. You are playing "Nurse's Assistant," which is clearly not in Shakespeare's script and was just added so you'd have something to do and so that your best friend, make that your former best friend, can somehow live with the crushing guilt that must have come down when the cast list went up.

First comes shock: Surely there has been a mistake.

Then comes sadness: What a failure I am! I die!

And then comes anger—Frenemy, I bite my thumb at thee!—followed by a whisper campaign against the director (she couldn't stage a selfie, much less Shakespeare) and the student who got your role (what hot mess through yonder window breaks?).

Actors go through these painful stages of casting grief, of course, regardless of who's doing the choosing. Even if the director's a respected adult or a total stranger, disappointment over one's assigned role can poison months of work on a play, turning what should be a joyful time of learning, exploration, and theatrical magic into an after-school nightmare. And all because of what?

Reality.

In theatre as in life, we don't always get the role we want, and this happens for any number of reasons. Specific roles in specific productions have specific requirements: a certain look, vocal range, or energy that the actor must bring. As much as you love a character and relate to his or her journey through the play, if you can't pull off the basic neces-

sities of the role, then you ought not to be cast. Also, plays are about more than single characters—their stories orbit the relationships and conflicts of a whole constellation of characters. These characters need to have chemistry and cohesion. Your director isn't putting together a list of roles; she is putting together a cast. In other words, it isn't just about you, my friend. It's about the play. (Your student-director BFF, by the way, is learning this same hard lesson on the other side of the table, and will suffer the horrific consequences of every bad call, if that's any consolation.)

"I am always the person who casts shows. As the adult I need to be the one people are upset with after auditions. It is unfair to ask a student to handle that responsibility. It helps deal with the inevitable hurt feelings and snarky attitudes when the kids know that the choices were entirely out of the hands of the students."

—Shira Schwartz, theatre educator,
Chandler (Arizona) Unified School District

The good news is that you are not in control of *any* of the above. That might sound horrifying, but stick with me: you can't control it, so you can let go of it. Be at peace, young actor, for nothing can change these essential truths. You are either right for this part, in this cast, in this production, or you are not. You have no control. Exhale.

But there are things you *do* have control over. You decide how much you're going to prepare for your audition. You decide how fully you will commit to the character choices you've made, the level of professionalism you'll bring to the casting

and rehearsal process, the degree to which you will support the vision and creative growth of your fellow artists—especially your director, who wouldn't have cast you at all if she didn't truly need you on board, 100 percent. You decide how much you will give of yourself to this play, to this production, to this audience. These decisions, more than any casting assignment, will determine the kind of an actor you're going to be.

Most importantly, perhaps, you control how you will move forward when you've been disappointed. Notice I didn't say "if" you've been disappointed; I said "when." Disappointment comes to us all, and we'd better be prepared.

Still, it's never easy to get over, especially when our offstage relationships rival the drama of those in the script. When we are auditioning for our friends, rejection can feel all the more personal (and this is as true for seasoned professionals, I can tell you, as it is for high school students). You have to find some kind of perspective that will allow you to maintain the friendship, or even to strengthen it, through this challenge. One way to begin is to acknowledge the difficulty inherent in your friend the director's position. After all, you know and love this person and are confident that she doesn't want to cause you pain—and if you aren't confident that your friend the director doesn't want to cause you pain, she isn't your friend. But that's a topic for another article: "Toxic relationships in the theatre," or, "My twenties."

So, Nurse's Assistant: will you practice grace and good will and use this chance to grow a little? If you are lucky enough to be in the show at all, will you prove yourself an artist and attack with gusto the role you've been given? No matter what we do, as actors and as people, disappointment happens, and how you deal with it now will set the tone for your entire career.

This is your journey, and your decision to make. Break a leg. ▼