**Tips for Directors**

By Christina Hamlett

If you’re a first-time director, it’s important your actors never catch on that you’re quite possibly as nervous as they are during the audition process.

Before the Audition

Make a list of the roles you’re casting.  Next to each name and character description, jot down notes of what “type” you think could best fulfill the requirements.  While it’s natural to envision a certain look in terms of physical appearance, it’s important to remain open to what an actor playing against traditional type can unexpectedly bring to a role.

Decide whether actors will do cold readings from the script (have sufficient copies of the scenes to be read) or deliver memorized monologues of their choosing.  The first approach allows you to picture them in the actual show; the second breaks up the monotony of hearing the same material 83,000 times.  A third option is a [self-tape audition](https://www.pioneerdrama.com/Newsletter/Articles/Virtual_Auditions.asp) submitted for review, with in-person callbacks for those who show the most promise.

Create a sign-in log as well as individual bio sheets for actors to list their personal data, acting experience, contact information, and potential scheduling conflicts.  Bios can also be uploaded digitally and printed out on audition day.  In addition, create a simple check-list to assess each actor’s appearance, acting ability, voice, stage presence, and movement.  (Another helpful tool is Pioneer Drama’s director’s books, available for most titles and including printable forms such as an audition application and, audition notes preloaded with all characters’ names, contact info page, and rehearsal schedule.)  Plan for an assistant to help you keep track of the paperwork and which actor has read for which roles.

Audition Day

If possible, establish a waiting room away from the stage for actors-in-waiting.  Speaking from personal experience, nothing can be more intimidating — especially in singing auditions — than realizing you have to follow someone whose voice is off-the-charts phenomenal.  For me, it was a woman who effortlessly channeled Barbra Streisand.  “Why am I even here?”  I thought.  “I should just slink out the back door and go home before anyone notices...”

In the waiting room, post a list of the available roles as well as the rehearsal and performance schedule.  Observe how the participants interact with one another.  Is everyone punctual and prepared?  This can be an indicator of whether they’ll be reliable once they are cast.

Introduce yourself (if need be) and briefly explain your vision for the production.  Be fun.  Be approachable.  But be in charge.  Ask actors what roles they’d like to read for or collect their audition applications where they have this indicated.  Have your assistant make a list by character so as to make easy pairings when you audition scenes with two or more characters.  Unless you require headshots, take pictures of each actor if you don’t know all of them well already.  It will help you remember them later on.

Once actual auditions begin, observe how well your actors take direction or suggestions.  Make note of whether they can hold the emotion of a scene for a long beat before reverting back to themselves.  If time permits, invite actors to read for different roles other than the ones they originally requested.

Let everyone know when you anticipate making a casting decision, including possible callbacks.  But emphasize that callbacks are not a guarantee of getting cast, nor is not getting a callback an indication one will not be cast.  Let participants know whether they will be hearing by phone, text, or email, or whether the results will be posted on the theatre department bulletin board.

Be sure to thank everyone for showing up!

After the Audition

If you have assistants at your auditions, use them as a sounding board to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the auditioning actors.  A second set of eyes and ears may have picked up something you missed.  Keep a separate file of actors who — if not quite right for the current show you’re casting — could be a smart fit for a future production.

For callback purposes, identify which actors you’d like to match up to assess their chemistry and rapport with one another.  Also, identify actors who could fill the bill as potential understudies.  Ideally, they should already be occupying smaller roles in the show and thus attending all rehearsals.  Should circumstances require them to suddenly step into a lead role, it will be much easier to then find someone for the minor part being vacated.  This is far preferable to having a separate designated understudy who waits in the wings all season for someone to fall ill or literally break a leg.

Make good on your commitment to notify actors of your casting decisions.  Of course, no one likes to be the bearer of bad news, which is why the bulletin board or generic email tends to be favored.  I feel fortunate to have worked with directors who took the time to make personal phone calls.  More often than not, they thanked me for participating and sometimes even offered tips on how my audition techniques could be improved.  Decades later, those are the directors I still respectfully remember and the kind of director I strove to be.