

Auditions and Casting

(from *Directing Essentials for Community Theatre*)

Finding Your Actors

Community theatres come in all sizes, from semi-professionals working out of large houses, to a handful of diehard volunteers renting space in an after-hours café. Some have a full production staff, costumers, understudies, large marketing budgets...the works. Others manage by collecting donations and using organic reach on Facebook and guerilla marketing around town. Most fall into a mid-sized range, with a decent membership and a couple of dozen volunteers who make the magic happen. This chapter is all about helping directors at small and medium-sized community theatres find the best local talent for their shows, season after season.

Auditions are an exciting event for a director. They are the first time you get to step into the rehearsal hall with actors. This is when you are able to gain a real-life, visual and auditory sense of who will embody the story you've been studying, researching and dreaming about for months. These are the people who will help shape the show, give life to your vision, and share that vision with an audience. But the hours spent behind the table are not just your opportunity to find the perfect fit for each character. They are also when you will make the decisions that will dictate who you'll be spending all of your creative time with in the weeks to come. Auditions are one of the most important things you will do to prepare for creating your show.

A community theatre actor has a slightly different take on auditions, as they can be highly stressful. Yes, they are usually excited to see if they can land their favourite role in the play. But nothing strikes fear into the hearts of actors like auditioning. So, if you want to see the best of them (and you most certainly do), you have to make auditions a little less about you and your dreams and a little more about them and theirs. You do this by being prepared—know the play backwards and forwards, know what you want and who you need for a cast, know what kind of ensemble you're putting together, etc.—and by being professional, confident, kind and appreciative with the actors who will volunteer their time, energy, ideas and experience. Preparation and professionalism are the key to lowering the stress level in the audition hall.

Therefore, preparation is where we will start exploring the audition process. There are four fundamental qualities that ultimately matter in a cast member.

1. Being there (scheduling)
2. Suiting the role (type)
3. Doing the job (playing action, taking direction, being seen and heard, etc.)
4. Getting along (can you work with them? Could the rest of the cast?)

If your actor can't be there for rehearsals, isn't the right type for the role, doesn't have the skills to do the job, or isn't a team player, then it may not matter what other attributes they bring to the table. We'll discuss this in greater detail later in this chapter. For now, keeping these four things firmly in mind will help you make smart choices during the audition process.

Early Decisions

First, try not to jump the gun in your excitement. Doing your preparation on the play always comes before casting; don't call up your actor friends just yet, even if you know that Murray and Diane would be perfect for the male and female leads. Take a breath, put the phone down, and make sure you're ready. Once you have done a thorough analysis (See Chapter Two: Directorial Analysis) and know the play backwards and forwards, met with your production and design team, and (for some directors) maybe done some pre-blocking, you can now turn your attention to finding the right cast. The next step involves making a few important decisions before you schedule your auditions.

There are four types of acting auditions.

- Prepared monologues
- Cold Readings
- Prepared or rehearsed readings
- Callbacks

You need to decide if you'll be using monologues, cold readings or prepared readings for your auditions, as there are pros and cons to doing each. Many directors use monologues; they are probably still the preferred method of auditioning in the professional world. Some directors—like myself—prefer to use cold readings, but it depends on the production. Prepared readings are more time consuming and can come with pitfalls for directors, so they may not be useful for most community theatre auditions. Also, I know that some directors like to use more unconventional approaches to auditions; I know I have done so in the past when creating devised theatre. But I would caution you: make sure that whatever you're choosing to do shows off the actors' acting skills. You can come up with very interesting ways of auditioning actors, but while your chosen cast may prove themselves to be physically flexible, or march in perfect formation, or tell a great joke or story, if they don't possess acting skills, your show is doomed. Monologues and cold readings are time-tested ways of auditioning actors, and I would strongly urge you to use them.

Review your answers from your directorial analysis and your notes from the production design meetings. In particular, focus on the world of the play, the style of the play, the characters in the play, the structure of the play, and the action of the play. A modern, mad-cap farce with direct audience address will require different physicality, vocal quality, pace, etc. than a fourth wall, historical comedy of manners. An intimate love story or a four-hander probably contains lots of two-person scenes,

while a concept-based, presentational play with a chorus or double casting may have lots of solo speeches require strong individual performances. Such aspects of the play suggest which approach to your auditions would work best.

Another factor to consider would be how you like to work in an audition. Do you prefer to get your hands in the clay and give lots of redirects and side coaching in a rehearsal-type setting? Or do you like to see individual actors at their best in performance mode, with little to no interaction with you? Your level of directing experience may also provide clues as to what kind of audition would be appropriate, as monologues don't have to require any redirects or side coaching, but cold readings most certainly do. How comfortable you are with interacting with the actors' auditions is an important question to ask yourself.

Note: it's okay to start with monologues and not give redirects if you're a new director. However, you should get into using redirects as soon as you can, as they will tell you much about how an actor will work with you in rehearsals.

Once you've examined the type of play you have and what kind of cast you'll need, drill down on the characters and relationships specifically. Consult the Character Roles and Functions form you filled out to help remind you.

- Are you looking for a certain kind of chemistry between specific characters?
- Do you need a certain age or 'look' for some characters?
- Do you need specific character types (e.g. the hero, ingenue, mad scientist, etc.)?
- Does your cast need to do accents?
- Does race, colour, or gender factor into your casting?
- Is there a character with a markedly high or low-pitched voice?
- Do you imagine characters as fast or slow moving?
- Does the play need physical theatre actors?
- Do you need someone who can play an instrument, do cartwheels, juggle, etc.?
- Do you need a quick learner, a brilliant improviser, an analytical thinker, or someone more playful?
- Are there any characters who have the lion's share of the lines?

These are just some of the questions you could ask yourself about the cast you are looking for; hopefully they will inspire more. I would recommend that you write your answers down on the Casting Worksheet, and fill in the details for the play and each character; this will be a helpful document to refer to at your auditions. It's easy to get sidetracked while you're watching all the monologues and/or scenes, so make sure you have this form, along with the Scene Breakdown and Audition Notes Sheet, in front of you at the table so you can keep your requirements clearly in mind.

Now that you have a good grasp on the play, characters and relationships, it's time to decide what method of auditioning will serve you best. Below, you'll find an

overview of each type, followed by a more detailed breakdown of monologues and cold readings.

Prepared Monologues

These are short (generally 1-2 minutes long) solo pieces that are prepared and polished for performance by the actor. They are usually taken from published plays and screenplays, but over the years, a plethora of stand-alone monologue books have sprung up. Actors will even bring in pieces they have written themselves. And while the gold standard would be monologues from published plays, where the actor can read the entire play and do a proper script analysis to inform their monologue, that is not often the case with community theatre actors.

A reasonable approach for a community theatre group with a newer director would be to use monologues for first auditions and cold readings for callbacks. Prepared monologues can take a lot of the pressure off of new directors who aren't quite sure how to handle auditions. There are downsides, of course, but sometimes letting the actors do most of the heavy lifting can help a new director learn the ropes. After a few shows, directors can try cold readings where they can use redirects and do side coaching. They will see for themselves how much better their casting can be the more they do this.

If you choose monologues, make decisions on what you're looking for in a monologue, and be clear about them on the audition notice. Your choices should fit the play and not be a torture test for your actors. Ask yourself some questions.

- How long should the monologue be?
- Do you want modern or classical?
- Do you want comic or dramatic?
- Do you need separate auditions for song or dance?
- Do you want to see physical comedy?
- Is there some other specific request?

You really shouldn't need them to perform more than one monologue for community theatre. If the show is highly dramatic, ask for a dramatic piece. If the show is a farce, ask for comedy. If it's something in between, I'd leave it up to the actor. Having said all that, every actor *should* have two contrasting monologues memorized, worked, and ready to go for audition season, just in case a director rejects their first attempt for some reason. Yes, it happens. Sometimes, for instance, actors will come with a monologue they've written themselves. Unless they are also a talented playwright, this is generally a bad idea, and you should ask them if they have another piece. It's not a deal breaker, however. If they don't have another choice, let them continue with what they have. Other reasons to reject a monologue have to do mostly with an ill-fitting style, inappropriate age range, lack of a character arc of some kind, or working against type. But in the end, you need to see

what they can do, and one monologue is quite sufficient for an audition, so let them do whatever they have prepared.

Ask for a monologue no more than a minute and a half long. Most directors will know within thirty seconds if the actor is a candidate for that particular show. It does take a minute for them to actualize their character's journey, though, and that is a very useful thing to watch. But anything beyond ninety seconds tends to be redundant. Few things are more tiring than listening to hours of three-minute monologues, and since you want to be kind to your volunteer actors, you probably won't stop them two minutes in, even if you've seen all you need to see. So, let them know your preferred monologue size. That should keep most actors in check.

Cold Readings

These use short scenes called *sides*, often from the play you are about to direct. Professionally, actors are given their sides when they come to the audition and have 15-30 minutes to look them over and make decisions about their character, relationship, given circumstances, objective and a couple of tactics to play. Community theatres may hand these out a day or two before auditions. Each actor receiving a side prepares individually, not with a scene partner. Actors should not attempt to memorize their lines; they should simply familiarize themselves with the scene and make some strong choices to play at the audition. The director pairs up actors he wants to see work together. Sometimes actors will receive their sides the night before audition; in this case they could learn their lines but you should still caution them to focus on the moment and their scene partner and keep their scripts in hand during the audition. Perfect lines are not what you'll be looking for.

I like to do cold readings for most plays, because what I want to see is how well actors can play together. I want to see action. I want to see the truth of the moment on stage between two people. I want to see chemistry. I want to see listening and reacting. Most of all, I want to see the actor fighting to overcome their scene partner's objections for his or her objective. I simply find cold readings to be more instructive and useful when assessing an actor's abilities and instincts in the moment. They also give you control over what material your auditionees use; a lot of actors don't choose a monologue that shows off what you need to see. You can give them the opportunity to have the truthful, honest moments that you're looking for by choosing solid material for them.

Select two-person sides, 1-2 minutes long (half a page to a page), without a lot of stage business. Make sure the scene has clear action and at least two tactics for each character, as well as roughly the same number of lines for each actor. Be careful not to choose scenes that are too intense, such as scenes with actors kissing, taking clothes off, or committing murder. If you need to see if an actor can be seductive or threatening or handle emotional vulnerability well, you can select sides that will give them the chance to show you that, but I wouldn't choose the most intimate scene, or the most tragic scene in the play. Don't put community theatre actors in an

uncomfortable position during an audition; they aren't typically trained for that. If you need a comedian, choose a scene with some comedy. If you need to see conflict, choose a scene with some confrontation. Just don't choose the funniest moment or biggest fight in the play. All you need is a small sample of what they can do.

You can call pairs of actors in separately for ten or fifteen minutes, or call the actors in groups and set aside a certain amount of time for each group (e.g. six actors for forty-five minutes). You can also call groups in for the same time slot, work one pair at a time, and ask pairs not being worked with to sit outside the hall until called. The advantage to group calls is that you can change actors out easily. If Alice is reading with Ben but you want to see Ben with Julie, you can do that if Julie and Ben are both in the same group. I also think there is less pressure and a slightly more relaxed feeling when working with groups, but your mileage may vary.

Cold readings should focus heavily on redirects and side coaching. It takes some time to get the hang of giving notes during an audition, so pre-plan by jotting ideas that you want to explore down on paper. The more you do auditions, the easier redirects and side coaching will be. You'll soon find that cold readings are a very useful tool when it comes to seeing who has some acting chops and who isn't quite there yet. Also, you can see first-hand what your actors will be like to work with in rehearsal, which is a huge benefit.

Prepared readings

These are like cold readings, but they have been 'warmed up' with work and rehearsal beforehand. Typically, two actors are given the same side and asked to prepare it together in advance of rehearsal. Prepared readings sound like the best of both worlds between prepared monologues and cold readings, but they come with pitfalls. They can be a lot more work for the actors, and I'm not convinced that work pays off in the end. Experienced directors can take what the actors have come up with (which sometimes is not very good, frankly) and work it into a scene with solid potential fairly quickly. But working the scene up for performance is not the reason for an audition, and it's easy for directors to fall into this trap. Inexperienced directors are usually left baffled about what to do with the actors' initial offering and don't know how to redirect it. Both these scenarios are common, and to require the actors to do all that work beforehand is a big ask with mixed benefits, in my opinion.

Having said that, if you choose this route for auditions, watch each pair run their scene and take note of what choices were made. Pre-plan your redirects and stay focused on how the actors work with them. Try testing the limits of the scene and see what they can handle. Switch the actors' roles and see how they adjust; it will tell you a lot about who was listening and how well they can adapt. Remember: you're not doing the scene for an audience, so try playing a bit messy here and there and see if they can clean it up. If you are not an experienced and skilled director, I would steer away from prepared readings.

Callbacks

Sometimes callbacks make sense, and sometimes they don't. If you've had a good turnout and are torn between actors, or you really want to give someone another shot at a specific role, go ahead and hold callbacks. I would suggest that you resist the urge to hold callbacks just to give a whole bunch of people a second chance, however. Save them for serious dilemmas and hard choices. If you can cast from the first round of auditions alone, do so. You don't owe anyone a do-over. Your auditions should have given you an idea of who has the skills and who doesn't (yet). There's no need to waste everyone's time by calling back those who don't.

If you do have callbacks, and you used monologues for the auditions, use cold readings for callbacks. If you want to see them in semi-performance mode, give the actors their sides a few days before, but tell them not to worry about being off book. They can memorize their lines, but you don't want them calling for lines during the callback. They should have their scripts on stage with them. If you want to work in more of a rehearsal mode, give them sides twenty minutes before.

If you already know who is going to play Alice, and you want to see her with different Roberts, bring Alice into the cold reading, as well. (The other actors do not need to know that you've already cast Alice in your head.) Spend some time with redirects and see if the actors will offer you strong choices. Are they shy with those choices? Or do they show strong commitment? How are their instincts? Are they really listening and reacting, or are they doing 'lock and load' lines? What about presence and chemistry? If Alice is very strong on stage, you may need an equally strong Robert. Are the two supposed to be lovers? If so, hopefully the actors have some chemistry, too. How do they look on stage together? Do they have similar acting skills? Callbacks are all about seeing who can do the job with whom; you want choices when casting decisions need to be made later on.

Realistically, when it comes to the first round of auditions, the two real choices are monologues and cold readings. To help you decide between the two, here are some questions to consider.

- Do you prefer to see performances, with little redirecting and side coaching?
- Do you want to see what actors might be like in performance?
- Do you need to see individual performances?
- Are there many monologues in the play?
- Does the show have clear lead and supporting roles?
- Can you schedule most rehearsals without the entire company?

If so, you may want to consider using monologues for your auditions. Or:

- Do you prefer to work in a rehearsal setting with redirects and side coaching?
- Do you want to see what actors will be like in rehearsal?
- Do you want to see actors playing with other actors?

- Do you need to see leads or supporting characters act together?
- Are there many two-person scenes in the play?
- Do you want to compare different actors doing the same text?
- Do you have characters coming out from a chorus to take on lead or supporting roles?
- Is the play highly presentational or have a distinct style?
- Will scheduling require full cast calls much of the time?

If so, you may want to consider cold readings.

Note: the above questions are simply ideas and suggestions that lend themselves to one method or the other for newer directors. If you are a more experienced director, you can work with your preferred type of auditions with almost any show.

Once the choice has been made, break out copies of your Character Roles and Functions, Scene Breakdown, and Casting Worksheet. Make sure you've filled these all out and make any changes that arose from studying the audition choices.

Getting Organized

As preparation is the key to putting together the right cast for your show, directors need specific tools for that purpose. The documents found in the Appendices are there to help you analyze the characters and relationships, keep track of who is in which scene with whom, take notes effectively during auditions, and remember who each actor is and what role they may be best suited for. Your Scene Breakdown, Character Roles and Functions, Casting Worksheet and Audition Notes are the tools you'll need, so be sure to have them with you on the day.

Schedule at least two days of auditions, making sure to provide choices for the time of day. For instance, you could schedule a Friday night from 6:00 – 10:00 pm and Saturday afternoon from 12:00 – 5:00 pm. Schedule callbacks, too, in case you need them. In a pinch, you can do auditions in one day, but I wouldn't recommend it. You'll be too tired, and you'll lose all those who are busy on that day. Offer actors some choices and keep the days close together so you'll have better recall of the actors. Make sure you schedule breaks for yourself and your team. You will need them.

Make sure you know who is taking care of things like audition notices, contacting actors for callbacks and posting casting lists. Different theatres have different procedures, and volunteers can be scarce at times, so don't let these things fall through the cracks. If it's your stage manager, assistant director or producer looking after these things, have a meeting about the details. Be very clear on what kind of audition you've chosen and what you want your actors to prepare, if anything. Make sure the dates, times, and the location are agreed upon and the space is available. Prepare short play and character descriptions for the audition notice, and make sure you get to proof the draft. A good audition notice includes:

- Name of the play, playwright, community theatre and director.
- A brief description of the play.
- The type of audition and what should be prepared (cold reading from the play, two-minute comic monologue, 16 bars of a country song, etc.)
- The dates and times of the auditions and callbacks (callbacks “by invitation”).
- The dates and times of the rehearsal period (if you don’t have the exact times yet, “Monday and Wednesday evenings and Saturday afternoons” is okay for now).
- The dates of dress rehearsal, preview and performances.
- Brief character descriptions.
- Link to audition form.
- Contact info for questions (often the Producer).
- A statement indicating whether or not actors will volunteer or be paid.

Acting slots should be scheduled appropriately for the method of auditioning you have chosen. I like to schedule about 10 minutes for each actor doing a monologue or 15 minutes for each pair doing a cold reading. This gives me just enough time to have a quick chat about their resumes, run the monologue or scene, do some redirects and talk briefly about the play. My stage manager keeps me on task and I have a watch or clock in front of me so I don’t go over time. If I’m not sure about an actor when time elapses, I can always revisit their work at callbacks.

If you don’t have help and it’s mostly on you, don’t panic. You can do this, and nine times out of ten, someone will be found to help out. At the very least, the theatre’s producer should be around, so have a meeting as early on as you can. Being organized and focused will save you, so make yourself a checklist based on your meeting. If the theatre is completely short-handed, you may be asked to do some of the following: create the audition notice, have it proofed and approved by the producer, and make sure someone is posting it on the theatre’s website. Have some printed for circulation around town. Email it to the membership (and ask for help somewhere in your email) and theatre notice boards in your area, post it to theatre schools and where acting classes are held, and send it to anyone on your actor-friend list. If the theatre has a standard audition form for actors on their website, ensure you get a copy of each as they come in. Make a master list of time slots for each day, and as the actors sign up, put their names on the form. Remember to make changes if they cancel or change their appointment. Print out any sides you’ll need, as well as some copies of the play. You can also call or email the actors the day before to confirm their time slots. The more organized you are, the more confident (and happier) you will be.

Generating Interest

If you want a good turnout and strong actors at your audition, there are some things you should do in the weeks before.

- Talk your show up! Get the excitement going early on.
- Is this a new show? A new translation? Did it win any awards? Sell it.
- Be sure to beat the bushes as the time approaches, and make your show sound so appealing that actors will not want to miss the chance to work with you.
- Don't forget social media. You can post on your platforms, the theatre's, any community boards or local theatre association pages.
- Cover your city with notices, flyers or posters.
- Attend some shows around town. Audiences are always made of theatre artists, so start schmoozing the after-show crowds.
- Have copies of the script made and provide them to those who want to read the play before they try out (to be returned at auditions). Get actors passing them around.
- Talk to other directors. Community theatres often share the same pool of actors, and maybe someone amazing didn't quite make the cut for another show but would be perfect for yours. Invite that actor to your auditions.
- Let it be known that you will not be pre-casting actors who do not come to audition. Simply put, if people are cast who don't show up, that message will get out and actors won't bother auditioning for you after a while. If you intend to cast someone you have worked with before, tell them to come and audition. This is community theatre, not off Broadway; it's supposed to be for the community.

Audition Day

You're as prepared as possible, you've got people excited, actors are scheduled, all your forms are filled out and at hand, and any sides needed have been printed out. Audition day is finally here!

Make sure the room has been set up well. You should have a long table with chairs for yourself and any assistants or observers (e.g. stage manager, assistant director, casting director, producer, etc). Make sure the table is well lit, there is water and disposable cups (for actors, too), and Kleenex, pencils, erasers, pencil sharpeners and a stapler are nearby. There should also be a few copies of the play, along with any sides you may be using.

In a rehearsal hall, your table should be at least ten feet away from the area the actors will be performing in. Twelve feet is better. You do not want to feel like they are performing in your lap, and you should get a sense of how someone in the house will see and hear them during a performance. If they are up on a raised stage, you may need to back up further, depending on how high the stage and how far the first row is from the apron. In a theatre with a raised stage, I might sit in the first row, or five or ten rows back: far enough away to not strain your neck and close enough to really see what the actor is doing. Some directors like the actors to stand in spotlights; they say it gives them a chance to see the actor in a performance-like

setting, and they can see if the actor can find their light. Others want to keep the room more friendly and relaxed at an audition. Some actors say they prefer working in spotlights because they can't see you at your table. Others report that auditioning with regular work lights helps them feel less stress. It's a choice you'll have to make. I'm in the latter camp, with a more open, relaxed room where we're all fellow artists. I want to get to know the actors, one on one, on as much of an equal footing as possible during an audition. This would be especially important when everyone is a volunteer.

As actors arrive, be sure someone outside the audition room greets them warmly, takes their resumes and headshots (unless they've been submitted online) and gives them direction on what happens next (is there a warm up room? Should they sit and wait somewhere? Are you giving them sides and instructions? What if they need a washroom break?). Your stage manager or assistant should get the first stack of actors' paperwork in to you as soon as possible so you can review them. Or you can also have the actor come into the audition room with their paperwork, if you prefer. In that case, you can go over it before or after their monologue.

If you'll be doing cold readings, have the greeter hand out their sides if they hadn't received them earlier, and tell them to go off and work them, individually. Hopefully they have read the play, but it's often a good idea with community theatre actors to prepare a sheet with some key take-aways from the play, in addition to the sides. Helpful information would include:

- a quick overview of the story for context,
- a brief description of the characters and relationship,
- which character they will be reading for, and
- something about the situation those characters find themselves in from the side you've given them

Explain to the actors that they should not try to memorize the lines; they should become familiar with them. Given the information you have provided, they should work on:

- what their objective is,
- what their obstacle is, and
- how they will fight for their objective.

They need to make choices, right or wrong, and commit to those choices. They should get a minimum of twenty minutes to prepare, so helping them with these notes will give them enough time to roughly work the scene. Remember, you want the actors to succeed in their audition; otherwise, you won't really know what they could be capable of.

Note: actors should be doing this work individually, and not with a scene partner. It does not matter if the choices they make match the choices their scene partner makes. They need to work on their own.

Paperwork

Professionals use resumes and headshots, but generally, community theatres should not expect this from their members. If actors don't bring resumes, you should have an audition form to fill out. Your community theatre probably has one that they use, or you might need to create your own. It should include:

- name, contact info,
- age range, hair and eye colour, height,
- prior shows, training or experience,
- any physical limitations,
- role(s) they would like to play,
- special skills and interests,
- scheduling conflicts (separate sheet!), and
- take a picture if they don't have a recent headshot.

They should fill out their schedules on an Actor Availability Sheet, like the one in the Appendices, indicating when they are available and special dates they are not available for the entire rehearsal, tech, and run of the show. If they aren't sure of certain dates, ask them to mark those days as "possible" or "TBA". This form is one of the most important pieces of paper when casting, so have it ready to go.

Auditions

Once your actors are in the room, your first job is to make them feel welcome and calm their nerves. Most community theatre actors are not trained to be professionals, and they need a little extra care and consideration. If you can take some of the pressure off and make them comfortable, they will likely perform better. If they're old hats at auditioning, thank them for coming and ask what they know about the play. If they're relatively new or seem really nervous, thank them for coming and remind them that the audition is not personal; it's just a matter of who you think is best suited to the particular roles. They should look at auditions as a chance to practice and have some fun. Keep it brief, though; you should strike a balance between supportive and professional.

Next, if you're doing cold readings, give them three or four sentences about the play, the characters, and the scene you've given them (they may not have read the play). Resist the (very strong) urge to go on and on about the play. Keep it simple and brief. "This is a modern play about facing the past and letting it go. Katie just got divorced after 35 years of marriage, and she's looking to make big changes in her life. In this scene, she's just moved across the country and her daughter suddenly shows up on her doorstep."

If you're doing monologues, say hello, thank them for coming, chit chat for a minute, and then ask "What are you doing for us today?" They should tell you the name of the play or monologue, who wrote it, and the character's name. Sometimes they will tell you a bit about the circumstances, especially if it's a little-known play or it comes

from a stand-alone monologue. Other times they won't have a clue about the monologue, haven't read the play it's from, and don't know who wrote it. At that point, it is what it is; you can say "Whenever you're ready," and they will begin. Note: I would not give any details about the play they're auditioning for until after they perform. Let them stay in the headspace of their monologue and their character for now; you can and should talk about the play afterwards.

Here are the main things to look for in their performances (monologues or cold readings):

- Is the actor physically present and available (not acting upstage, trying to hide, anchoring too much, afraid to look at their scene partner), etc.?
- Can the actor be heard and understood? Remember, they've been practicing in their living room. Can they make the transition to a hall or a theatre?
- Are they shuffling, pacing, crossing their arms, or frozen to the same spot? Unless it fits the scene or monologue, their body language is screaming nerves and inexperience. You'll have to decide if you want to take that on during rehearsals. See the "Mixing It Up" section.
- Is the actor making sense of the material?
- Can you tell who they're talking to? Does the actor know?
- Can you tell why they are speaking? Does the actor know?
- Is the actor playing action (vs. attitude or emotion)?
- Does the actor have good instincts (how and when they move, how they phrase things, use props, take pauses, etc.)?
- Is the actor committed to his or her choices?
- Is the actor playing different tactics (vs. playing on one note)?
- Can you see twenty seconds of an honest, truthful human moment somewhere?
- Have they shown you a moment of listening, reflecting, or deciding?
- Have they shown you some emotional range?
- Is the actor handling redirects well?

My take on the above list: I can teach an actor a lot of essential acting techniques during a rehearsal process, but if they can't show me twenty seconds of actual honesty, they may not have the instinct for acting, or the willingness to do the work and be vulnerable on stage. What do I mean by instincts and vulnerability?

Actors need to be able to put themselves into imaginary situations and feel what it's like to be there. When they do, those with good instincts are able to be in the imaginary moment and respond as real life human beings in real life situations would. The lines they speak sound natural, coming from a place of wanting something from their partner and doing their best to get it. They naturally will listen when their partner speaks, and judge whether or not what they're hearing will help them or hinder them. They move around the stage as a real person in that

relationship and situation would move. In essence, instinctive actors have an innate ability to play make believe, and to create moments that ring true almost effortlessly.

Actors also must be willing to be vulnerable to their own humanity. They have to understand what makes people feel things by connecting with how and why *they* feel things. If they can allow themselves to touch those places of hopelessness, betrayal, jealousy, joy or love, then they can use those feelings to help drive their character's actions and express their emotions on stage. But even if it is the character's pain, the actor is the one who has to channel it, and that is not easy to do in front of strangers in a made-up situation. It requires the willingness to be vulnerable to the emotions we all have inside ourselves; these are a big part of what makes us all human.

This is not to suggest that actors with instinct and the willingness to be vulnerable don't need training and practice. They most certainly do. Learning good acting technique and practicing the essentials is how all actors find where their strengths and weaknesses lie, how to improve their performance, and how to confidently replicate the techniques time and time again. When you combine instinct and willingness with technique and dedicated work, you'll get what we call "talent".

Note: If you are unfamiliar with the acting terms I've used here, or are confused as to why you don't want actors *playing* emotion but you do want them to *express* emotion on stage, this book is full of explanations on playing action, using tactics, working with verbs and subtext, etc. that will guide you. For a quick reference, see Theatre Terminology in the Appendices.

During the audition, a number of actor missteps can happen, especially with novice actors doing monologues. Here are some examples, along with how to handle them.

- Actors will sometimes look directly at you, as if you were their scene partner. This makes directors uncomfortable and interferes with note taking and assessing the performance. Feel free to stop them right away and gently ask them to pick a spot on the far wall, just above your head, and put their scene partner there.
- Actors will flub or forget a line and ask to start over again. Brush it off and make them feel better by telling them that it happens to all actors (which is true). Do you want them to start over? If it's very early in the monologue, you could let them. If they were almost halfway in or more, were reasonably 'in' the monologue for most of it, and more wouldn't really help either of you, tell them you've seen what you need to see, and thank them. By the way, in the professional world, actors should never ask to restart; they should get back on track quickly and save the monologue as seamlessly as possible. This is how it's done in performance, so this is how it's done in the audition hall. Community theatre actors have a little more leeway, however.

- Occasionally, an actor will melt down right in front of you. They may forget all their lines, break a prop, have a costume failure, or even get emotionally lost in their character's moment. They may be so nervous that they tremble the whole way through and can't seem to breathe. They may turn white as a sheet and look like they could pass out. You have to be there for them. You really do. Remember, these are volunteers, mostly without any formal training, and they are doing one of the most nerve-wracking things a human being can do. Make sure they're physically okay, calm them down, and soothe their fears. Have them sit down, get them some water, and talk them off the ledge if they're really panicking. Tell them that if they would like to come and try again the next day, they would be welcome. Tell them how they have courage for coming out, and thank them. Hopefully they will come back and try again.
- Actors can become angry if they sense they didn't live up to their own standards, or they see rejection in your face, or a dozen other reasons. It happens rarely, but it does happen. Be prepared to listen, but if they are belligerent or aggressive, ask them to leave, peacefully and with respect. I have never seen a physical confrontation in an audition, but I'm prepared for one. This is one reason why directors should never do auditions alone; always have someone with you on the day. If security is available at your theatre, make sure it's scheduled to be there during auditions. But honestly, this will probably never happen to you, so be prepared, not scared.

After their monologue, you can talk a bit about the play. Keep it brief. Ask them if they have read it. Then let them know if you're doing callbacks, if everyone will be contacted (successful or not), and when and where a cast list will be posted. Thank them, sincerely, for their time and effort, and end on a good note.

Here is how to work with pairs for a cold reading:

- Pair up two actors that you think would work well together. Have them read the scene up on their feet. The actors will quickly find out what their scene partner is doing/has worked on, and if it will jibe with their own choices. I usually say "Okay, good. Let's try it again," so they can adjust to their partners, and let them read through it once more without any direction from you.
- During the second reading, keep an eye out for hints of honest moments. See if you can get a sense of who is driving the scene, who is actually listening, and if either of them is floundering about, unsure.
- Now that the actors have a familiar base to work from, do a third reading with redirects. You can prepare some redirects ahead of time or you can redirect in the moment. If you're new at this, prepared choices can help a lot. Always use verbs to ask for something you want them to play ("Can you mother him", or "Try threatening her there") or situations that will inform

their own choices (“You think he’s about to leave you”, or “You just got fired”).

- Don’t be afraid to interrupt the scene with side coaching, too. You do not need to run the whole thing for each new note you give, and the actors don’t need to stop the scene to take a new note. Just have them stay in the scene, take on the note, and keep going.
- If you have time for a fourth reading, try pushing the scene around a bit, to see how flexible and adaptive the actors are. Give a couple of redirects that would not be appropriate, don’t make much sense, or take the scene a bit too far in a direction, so you can see what the actors will do with them (still keeping the same lines, of course). For example, if it’s a scene with romantic partners, tell one actor to fire the other, or if it’s a scene between co-workers, tell one actor to baby the other. If the scene has one character asking questions, turn it into a full-blown interrogation. Get your actors blackmailing, patronizing, worshipping and disciplining, regardless of the text, and see how they handle the redirects.
- You can also use a fourth reading to swap out an actor if you’re working with groups and the actor you want to swap in has already had their audition with their original partner. For instance, if you want to have Jackie from pair #1 work with Alex from pair #3, and you’re currently working with pair #3, this would be the time to call Alex back. Just be sure to watch the clock. You don’t want to get too far behind, so once time is up, move on to the next pair.

Work with each pair for ten or twelve minutes, then move on to another pair. If you’ve brought in a group, save a few minutes in your total time for switching actors. You can choose to have the whole group (pairs #1-3) in the hall for the entire audition, or you could call them in pair by pair and keep the rest of the group waiting outside. Note: if you’re keeping the whole group in the hall, realize that the last pair will have an advantage over the first pair you called up because they will have seen you work the scene over and over with previous groups. Also, you will need to come up with more redirects so you’re not giving the same notes over and over again. If you keep pairs waiting outside the hall, realize that you will be giving these pairs more time to work on their sides, but they will not be able to see their competition like the in-hall pairs would.

If you’re doing cold readings with individual actors and a reader (someone from your production team), then have the same reader read with all the actors in the same way: fairly neutrally. This does not mean they should be flat and monotone; they should give just enough meaning to make sense of the scene. The reader’s job is not to perform, but to give the actor someone to work with. The reader should say the lines in roughly the same way with every actor so the director can make comparisons.

Once you've worked with your pairs, spend a couple of minutes explaining if you're doing callbacks, if everyone will be contacted (successful or not), and when and where the cast list will be posted. Thank them, sincerely, for their time and effort, and end on a good note.

Note: When I was doing my master's degree in directing, I had the good fortune of having a class with the legendary Canadian-American actor and director, Martha Henry. She told us that, when auditioning actors for a play, she sent every single auditionee a handwritten thank you note afterwards. She was a class act (no pun intended) and this is a fine example of courtesy, respect and gratitude in the theatre.

Taking Notes

While they're performing, keep your eyes on the actor as much as you can. If you have to jot down a note or two, that's okay, but you really should be mostly watching. Don't get distracted, don't talk to anyone, and don't keep your head down. Respect their time and preparation enough to pay attention. For note taking, I would recommend using checklists like the ones in the "Audition Notes" form to make things fast and easy, or you can devise a notation system that works for you. Once you've been auditioning for a while, you may be able to jot down notes between auditions, without taking your attention away from each actor. But the most important thing is to capture information in the moment or within a minute or two afterwards. You will not remember them all when you're sitting at home staring at a blank cast list.

Choosing Your Cast

In the end, casting is a string of simple choices that tell you which actors are best for the role and the production. Gather together the audition forms, pictures or headshots, your audition notes, your character/scene breakdown and the notes you made on each character in the play, and have a good think. Before you start making choices, I will remind you of the four basic requirements that matter:

1. Being there (scheduling)
2. Suiting the role (type)
3. Doing the job (playing action, taking direction, being seen and heard, etc.)
4. Getting along (can you work with them? Could the rest of the cast?)

Okay, now you can get started. If you had a lot of people audition and do callbacks, and/or you're new to directing at this theatre, below is a good way to handle casting. (With smaller turnouts, it's much easier, and you will probably remember most of the actors.)

1. At this point in the process, don't concern yourself with who you actually know or have worked with before; it's not a factor yet.
2. Go through the resumes and headshots from the callbacks and see if you can remember who is who and what they did for their audition. I usually

remember the stronger actors; they get planted in my short-term memory because I envisioned them on stage in the production in some way.

3. Make a pile of the ones you remember and another pile of the ones you don't or barely remember.
4. Grab your notes and find the ones who impressed you, were the right type, took redirects well, showed great instincts or had solid skills. Put those ones in another pile called "Yes", and do the same with the "I barely remember them" pile.
4. This will leave you with one pile of "Yes" actors who you, on the audition day, thought had a good chance of being cast. They have potential, so let's drill down on these actors.
5. Go through your notes more carefully. Choose a couple of actors with the best notes for each role. You're looking for notes that tell you they can do the job, with coaching from you.

Positive notes that indicate they have some skills and experience are:

- The basics: good vocal production, physicality, and stage presence.
- Homework: knew who they were talking to and why they were speaking.
- Acting chops: played action, kept stakes high, used tactics, no schmacting, etc.
- Character work: made choices consistent with their character, understood relationships involved.
- Showed range: played emotional range truthfully, handled drama and comedy well.
- Truthfulness: offered moments of genuine, honest, human experience.
- Redirects: took them on quickly and worked with them to the best of their ability.

These are all indicators of a solid community theatre actor. A few holes here and there should not automatically disqualify them; you can teach some of these things easily in rehearsal. If they know how to play action, showed you some range, and offered twenty seconds of honesty, they should probably go on your short list.

Other important positive indicators to consider:

- Type: could fit a specific role in the play
- Personality: pleasant, friendly and co-operative.
- Connection: had good chemistry with other potential cast members.
- Instincts: knew when to pause, stop, confront, listen, turn away, etc.

All of these aspects aren't strictly necessary. If the actor 'looks' the part but has few skills or experience, you may spend your time beating your head against a wall instead of creating your show. A charming personality is lovely, but having an actor who is a loner but doesn't cause any trouble and has mad acting skills could be perfect for your cast. Chemistry is a tough one to overcome if the two actors are supposed to be romantic, but a lack of good instincts can be overcome with lots of

rehearsal. The more you direct, the quicker you will find out which of these are deal breakers for you and which aren't.

And then there's the most important element of all: is the actor available for the required rehearsals and performance? This single factor will make or break a casting choice. If the actor can't fit rehearsals into their schedule, that's a deal breaker. This is where your Scene Breakdown comes in handy, as you need to be able to schedule that actor with all their scene partners.

If the actor can make most of the rehearsals but is going on vacation during the tech rehearsals, that's also a non-starter (for me, anyway). If an actor has some holes in the schedule, and you think you can work around them, that might be okay. But be careful. I've seen directors who, desperate to cast a specific actor, have sacrificed other cast members, missed badly needed rehearsal time, and compromised the quality of the production as a result. No actor is worth ruining your show and your reputation. Don't set yourself up for hours of pulling out your hair, knowing full well that the play isn't ready when it opens. You should cast someone who is actually available when you need them, even if it means not casting the 'perfect' actor for the role. When casting, keep your Actor Availability and Scene Breakdown charts right beside you, so you're sure to get the people who can actually be there at the right time.

Mixing It Up

We've all heard the old adage that casting is 80% of the work. I would say that number is exaggerated. I know that strong directing can overcome many deficiencies in casting, and casting for community theatre has to be much more flexible than for professional theatre. In fact, I would argue that if the director knows her stuff, a few so-called 'weak spots' in the cast can be an opportunity for the actors involved, the production as a whole, and the future of the local community theatre scene.

Generally, you'll want to save the newbies for smaller roles, whenever possible, and put your veterans together for the principals. But this isn't a hard and fast rule, and there are times when you want to cast the right novice actor for a larger role. It means you'll be using more of your valuable rehearsal time teaching while you direct, but sometimes the extra effort is well worth it. On the whole, I love working with casts of various skill levels; you just need to know how to do it so that the cast and the production will benefit.

Working with a cast of varied experience gives veterans the opportunity to become mentors among the cast, sharing their knowledge and experience with novices and offering little tips and tricks that the director will not have time to give. This not only helps those with less experience, it invariably raises the veterans' own bar and reminds them to sharpen their performance skills. There are divas out there who will take showing off to a whole other level, but as long as you can keep the egos in

check and make sure that no one is actually stepping into your shoes, your veterans will help the novices along while you're busy with other things. Casting an experienced actor who you know and trust can be a big help if you have several beginners in your ensemble.

Novice actors are usually eager to learn the ropes, willing to listen, and are very teachable. Maybe it's because I taught acting in colleges and universities, but I love working with newbies. Seeing the look on their faces and the light in their eyes as they soak up the tips and techniques is very rewarding. Your audience will love them, too, as their energy and enthusiasm can be contagious. It's fun for directors to watch as these budding actors learn and grow over the years, working with different people and taking on bigger and bigger roles along the way. If you like to teach, and you know your stuff, I would encourage you to take a few risks here and there with a novice actor who has great instincts. Sure, start them off in a small or chorus role, but if they can do the job, think about casting them in a larger, supporting role as they learn. You'll be helping to train the next generation of actors.

As for the divas in your cast, when you find yourself teaching basic acting skills to the novices (which is part of the job), your more seasoned cast members may be reminded of things they had forgotten, or become lazy about. They may recognize some of their own bad habits, and generally will bring their 'A' game in order to show off how good they are. In other words, you can use your need to teach newer actors as a way to correct your veterans without bruising any egos. (And don't be surprised if one of your veterans quietly admits that no one had ever told him about playing verbs before. I hear that surprisingly often.)

A mixed cast can also bring 'new blood' to what can sometimes be a stagnant pool of the same actors returning for every show. If your community theatre membership is on the small side, bringing new actors into the fold is essential to the survival of the group. But larger theatre groups will benefit from recruiting new actors, too, as we all need exposure to new ideas and energy (doubly true for artists). Patrons love their favourite actors, but new performers will add excitement and interest, which can energize and rejuvenate the entire company.

Having said all of that, casting is certainly important, and a strong cast can be the difference between a good show and a great one. You don't want to keep casting your friends over and over again because they're so much fun to work with (echo chambers are not good for any art form, generally), but you do want the best-suited actors for each project. Below are some more things you'll want to consider when casting.

Trusting Your Instincts

Unless you are very new to directing or new to the area, and you might want to talk it over with your stage manager or producer, casting should be up to you. You don't need consensus, and you don't need to hold a meeting. You need to trust yourself

and your instincts. You need to hold to your vision of the play (provided you've done your homework on it), and you need to know that you are the only one who can make the best decisions for this production. It is your show. Own it. If you know the play, have done the work, and can see the path to get to opening night, then it's time to trust yourself. If your gut tells you that Diane is a better choice than Beth, then cast Diane. If you have serious doubts about Frank because you know he is a little on the unreliable side and the role is huge, it doesn't matter if everyone tells you Frank is "brilliant". What matters are your instincts, observation, knowledge and experience. If you think you need help or advice, by all means, seek it out; mentors are a very important part of learning your craft. But always remember that this is your show, and you have the final word on casting.

The "What If" Question

What happens if an actor gets sick or injured or has a family crisis? How do you cast around that?

The short answer is: you can't. Stuff happens, to even the most dedicated actor. Sure, you can get around a day or two here or there during rehearsals, and actors are famous for showing up with a stomach ache and throwing up in a bucket backstage between scenes during the run. But what if it's more serious and—gulp!—permanent?

The long answer is: preparation. Cast actors who have lots of time so they are ready to go by opening night. Make sure you're not casting an actor who has an upcoming surgery or serious health problem that will conflict with the schedule. Get an understudy or shadow for the big roles, if you can, in case someone becomes ill. Have assistant stage managers learn the basics and be prepared to jump in for a smaller role. If all else fails and a principal calls you, deathly ill the morning before a show, get someone in for the day to run lines and blocking with stage management, and have them on stage with a script for performance. Make an announcement, and go on with the show.

Yes, it happens, and yes, audiences will understand and forgive you. They are behind you, trust me. I was in a big, professional show years ago—huge cast, songs, a live band, even live animals on stage—and one of the leads was stung by a wasp two hours before curtain. She was highly allergic to wasp venom. With such late notice and no understudy or standby available, they had to cancel the show and either refund the money or give up empty seats to future shows. Even the pros have problems with unforeseen circumstances, and sometimes their budgets don't allow for understudies. Still, audiences understand because it's live theatre. You can't predict every scenario; all you can do is be as prepared as possible.



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Best,

Barbra