

THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF AUDITIONS AND SCREENTESTS

© by Annie Murtagh-Monks

Annie Murtagh-Monks originally trained and worked as an actor graduating from NIDA and completing post-grad study at RADA. Since a career change however, she has been a casting director in Perth over the past 12 years, and has been involved in the casting of most screen drama shot in WA in that time including: "Rabbit Proof Fence", "Japanese Story", "The Shark Net" and "Parallax". Annie has also lectured 'Acting for Camera' at WAAPA for 8 years, been acting coach on 14 TV or film projects and founded - PAC Screen Workshops (advanced courses for actors, directors & writers). She is currently writing a book on the 'Craft of Screen Acting in Australia'.

Whether you are a newcomer to the industry or a seasoned professional, here are some simple hints to assist you when attending auditions, screentests or castings. (An audition is where you try out for a role but you are not filmed or videoed, a screentest is where you are filmed. Screentests are sometimes called 'castings' though this term has come from the advertising industry and relates primarily to TV commercials (TVC's).

How do I get an audition or screentest? Usually a casting director (who works on behalf of a production company, director or advertising agency) will either a) request to audition you or b) will notify your agent of the project to be cast and your agent will suggest you for the role and make an audition time. Freelance actors are also able to get auditions or screentests but they have to do more leg-work to become known to the casting directors in their city and/or hear about auditions coming up. These casting directors/consultants are listed in the phone book and you can call to ask for a "Go See" appointment where you meet and give them your photo and CV for them to keep on file. (*Australian industry standard for photos is: Actors: One 8 x 10 black and white professionally taken photo. Models / extras: colour photo(s) professionally taken, models usually have a portfolio of photos to show.*) Theatre companies can't usually afford to use a casting director so the artistic director or the director of a particular play will liaise with an agent. Some theatre companies hold general auditions once a year where the actor performs their own prepared monologues.

Once you have a screentest: Prepare, prepare, prepare. You can never over prepare for an audition or screentest. If you know the dialogue inside out, have researched the character and thought about what clothes or props will help you look the part you can avoid the dreaded 'S.S.' – self sabotage. Give yourself the opportunity to do your best audition possible. Always know your lines, inside out and back to front. It will reflect badly on your professionalism if you don't. N.B. If you are given a script 'on the spot' you would not be expected to commit it to memory, but remember the first question to ask your agent once you hear you have a screentest or audition is: "When can I have a copy of the scene(s) to learn?" (*The second could be 'What kind of wine do you drink?', it never hurts to show your agent appreciation.*)

Once you have the scene(s), what kinds of preparation can you do?

- For a feature film, ask if you can get hold of a copy of the complete film script to read. Your agent will usually be provided with one or more copies which you can go in and read. More common now is for you to be emailed a copy. Also ask if there are any director's notes.
- For a TV series or telemovie – ask if there is a series 'bible', (*the name for the document that outlines what the series will be about and includes character breakdowns, etc*).
- For a role in an ongoing TV serial (e.g., Neighbours, Home & Away) ask if there is a character breakdown for your character. There may not be one if the role is only a guest role in one episode. In this case you should be able to obtain a copy of the script for that episode.

- For a TV commercial (TVC): Ask for the script(s) of the commercials and if there are any directors notes/ casting brief. Make sure you know what wardrobe they are expecting you to wear for the casting, eg, if it is for a *Philadelphia Angel* TVC they may want you to wear a white flowing dress to the casting.
- For a theatre audition: borrow a copy of the script from a library if it's readily available or ask to read a copy from the theatre company via your agent.

It is very useful to familiarise yourself with the project you are auditioning for. If it's a feature film, try to find out what other productions the director has directed, if any, and make an effort to view them before your audition. Any director will be impressed if you are familiar with her or his work. If it's for a TV show that is on air, make sure you watch some episodes before the audition so you're familiar with the style of the acting in it.

Script Analysis:

Ask yourself questions about the script and the character you are to portray. For example:

Who? What is my character's socio /economic background? Where did she or he grow up, go to school? What does he/she want most in life, in the film, in the scene? What might stop them getting it?

What? What is really happening in each of the scenes? Sum it up in one sentence so you are clear e.g., My character wants to borrow money from her boyfriend, but discovers he's broke.

When? When is the film or TV series set? If it isn't contemporary you will ideally need to research the period it is set in. The internet is invaluable here. Libraries, video stores, etc can all assist.

Where? Familiarise yourself with the location: city or town where the project is set. If you are auditioning for a role in a futuristic sci fi film like 'The Matrix' your character will walk, talk and think slightly differently than if you are auditioning for a role in "McLeod's Daughters". Think about the way your character might walk around, harness a horse, hold a gun, etc.

Relationships: What is your character's relationship to other characters in the scene? What history do they share? Be detailed, not vague. If you don't have this information, make intelligent choices. Also be careful not to just play an attitude throughout the scene but allow the relationships help define who your character is and what you expect from another character in the scene. The essence of drama as we all know from high school is 'conflict'. That conflict can come from the other character in a scene and what they want or your character's internal thoughts or struggle.

Find the Journey: The most skilled screen actors I've worked with always look for a journey within a scene. That is, they try to have their character start the scene in one frame of mind and end up in another. This allows you to reveal to an audience a little about what it might be like to be someone in this character's situation. To do this you need to look for the moment in the scene when your character has to change their approach. (*This is called a moment of 'action change', but refers to the psychological action not physical necessarily.*) Human beings are at their most vulnerable and revealing when they are faced with some form of crisis or there are choices to be considered. These are golden moments to use in a screentest where the camera can really 'get into your head' and see your character's thoughts.

Don't always go for the obvious: Remember that the director and casting director will probably be seeing more than just you for the role so make sure you bring your own freshness of interpretation to a scene. Bring the scene to life and infuse it with your own intelligence and understanding of the character.

I believe **THE SECRET OF SCREEN ACTING IS TO THINK THE THOUGHTS THAT YOUR CHARACTER WOULD BE THINKING**. This way you block out the actor's worrying, nervous thoughts, e.g, whether your nose will look too big on camera, whether you'll forget your lines, etc.

and you can focus totally on bringing to life the reality of the scene and living it moment by moment.

Where has your character come from? Remember to be clear about what has just happened for your character, where they have come from when they enter the scene and where they are going to at the end. Also be aware of the character's surroundings in the scene. If it's supposed to be in a restaurant, make sure you keep that in mind even though you are performing it in a casting studio.

Keeping it fresh. If the casting director or director ask you to do the scene several times be assured they are asking because they are interested in you for this or another role. Keep your performance fresh by 'living' the scene moment by moment and really listening to the reader or other actor who is playing opposite you. Don't try to repeat what you did last night in front of your bedroom mirror. Stay 'in the moment'. Allow the 'stretched rubber-band'-like tension to keep your focus and attention from wavering through several takes. Allow the scene to vary slightly each time.

THE DAY OF THE AUDITION OR SCREENTEST

View this as an opportunity today to do what you enjoy and focus on doing your most accomplished audition ever just for the practical joy of it. Don't get hung up on whether you'll get the part. A director can smell 'desperation' and it doesn't make them feel comfortable either. Everyone knows that auditions and screentests are unnatural and uncomfortable and a necessary evil. So try to be as relaxed and 'real' as you possibly can be. Be well rested and arrive a little early for your audition (avoid self sabotage remember). Dress appropriate to the role – it doesn't hurt to help those who are making decisions see how suitable you would look for the part. *Important: Avoid clothing that's all black, all white (unless asked for specifically) and fine stripes.* Even though you dress for the part, don't come 'in character' to the audition. That can tend to verge on the creepy and put a director off. Save the performance for when you are asked to act the scene. (Even though your agent will probably have forwarded your photo and CV to the casting director before the audition it doesn't hurt to take a spare with you in case the director asks for another.)

- **Stay focussed and positive** - Help yourself to do this in the waiting area by bringing a book with you or IPod/ MD to listen to so you don't become distracted or self-doubting. It can undermine your confidence if, while chatting to other actors you hear about who got the role you went for last week, especially if it was one of them.
- **Tell yourself:** – "*Someone thinks I am right for this part, otherwise I wouldn't be here.*" Even if the character breakdown describes a character short and blonde and you are 6ft 2 and dark haired trust that those you are auditioning for may have either a) changed their thinking on the character or b) want to see you audition with this scene but may be considering you for another role. Either way, never miss your chance to impress them with your skill. "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right."
- **There is only one you** – what will set you apart from every other actor they have seen and are considering for the role is YOU. Trust that your unique quality and special skills will be what gets you a part in the end.
- **Your sense of humour** - Don't leave home without it. Sometimes the tension of the situation can cause you to have an 'irony deficiency'. Relax – it isn't brain surgery and no-one is going to die as a result of your audition. Try to relate to your auditioners as people. They won't feel comfortable if you are gushing or sycophantic. Be yourself and don't lie if they ask you about skills that you possess, eg., If they ask can you ride a horse? and you can't, say "No, but I'm happy to learn." rather than deceive them and then arrive on set and delay filming.

- **The first run through:** Many directors nowadays are keen to see what choices you have made in interpreting the character before they offer you direction. This is where you can really draw on the homework you've done. This first run through is often filmed too.
- **LISTEN** – as obvious advice as this seems many actors develop temporary deafness due to the stress of a screentest. You will glean vital information from the director or casting director about the way they want you to interpret the role or the scene, if you listen.
- **Don't stop the performance until you hear 'Cut':** Often wonderful non-verbal moments happen at the end of a take and so a director may delay calling 'cut'. Stay in the moment, don't freeze, but keep it going. Even throw in an ad-libbed line if it feels appropriate.
- **There is no right way of doing it.** Get over trying to get it 'right'. There is no 'right way' when it comes to compelling screen drama and memorable auditions. It's your audition. Live the scene and be truthful to the moment. Remember also that the director and casting director are not your disapproving parent, or the headmaster you had conflict with at school. Don't carry baggage like this with you into a screentest. Those auditioning you aren't questioning your existence or right to act, don't view them as such. If you make a mistake or forget a line, forge on and don't worry about it. It won't bother the director, believe me. Avoid looking straight into the camera unless you are asked to. In TVC castings it is more common to look 'down the barrel' /straight into the camera lens. If you're unsure ask where they would like you to look. Have fun and enjoy it!

WHAT IS A DIRECTOR LOOKING FOR IN AN AUDITION?

In my experience there are three main things that a director or casting director looks for when screentesting or auditioning actors. They are:

1. **Photogenicity:** What is the quality this particular actor brings to the screen and will it enhance this role and complement the other actors we are considering for the other roles? I sometimes call this the actor's photogenicity and it is intrinsic to that actor.
2. **Adaptability:** How adaptable is the actor in being able to listen to direction and vary their performance? If an actor, in the tension of a screentest, is able to make interesting choices and incorporate different direction it's likely they will be able to do this when on set when time is running out and the light is fading for example.
3. **Likeability:** If an actor appears during a screentest to be a 'neurotic mess' constantly needing re-assurance or unable to relax it's likely they'll be a challenge for a director to have to work with day in, day out 12 hours a day, for up to 3 months on a feature film set or for months or years on a TV series. Directors and crew are human too. This is another reason why it's wise to relax and show your sense of humour when chatting with the director or casting director. When casting children (*juveniles are classified as anyone under 16*) how easy the parents are to get along with is often a factor in the casting decisions for this same reason. 'Stage parents' can cause real headaches. Sometimes you may be asked a general 'get to-know-you type question' at an audition just to see what kind of person you are. Remember don't agonise over these, just say the first thing that comes into your head, as you would at a party if someone asked you this. (*In some TVC casting sessions they may ask you to tell a joke. It's worth having one up your sleeve in case you ever need it.*)

AFTER THE SCREENTEST – MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL. As soon as the audition or screentest is over the golden rule is FORGET ABOUT IT. Walk away confident that you did your best. Don't 'beat yourself up' if you think you didn't and don't agonise about whether you'll get the job. More often than not casting these days is 'by committee' and so never ask the director at the time of the audition if you have the role. This will only embarrass them and they won't know yet anyway. Forget about it as soon as you leave the building and that way, if you get offered the part it's a pleasant surprise and if you don't, you won't turn yourself into an emotional mess. Be glad that you're one of the lucky ones getting to audition for roles. Keep

your screen skills up by regularly getting in front of a camera. No-one is comfortable in front of a camera if they haven't been filmed in the past six months. You can volunteer for student short films or Tropfest films or get together with colleagues to video each other. Alternatively, enrol in screen acting classes to keep improving your skills in this area.

P.S. A note about terminology: the term "talent" used to be only used by advertising agencies when referring to actors, models or extras auditioned or hired for a TVC shoot. It's a term that has crept in elsewhere in the industry but most trained actors dislike being referred to as 'talent'. It's the equivalent to calling a director 'genius'. Also the American term "casting agent" has crept into usage, however it is inaccurate in describing a casting consultant or casting director in Australia as an agent takes commission from an actor or model's fee and the only person who does that is your actor's agent or modelling agent. Casting directors are paid a consulting fee by the production company.

A warning: Use your common sense when attending screentests. No reputable director would ask you to remove your clothing in a screentest without notifying your agent beforehand. If this is to happen you have every right to take a friend along with you to the screentest. Don't do anything you feel uncomfortable about doing. Also don't be duped by 'shonky' operators offering you jobs on short notice acting in "B" grade films overseas and wanting you to make decisions quickly (a recent scam). If you are freelance and ever unsure about someone's integrity phone Actors Equity/MEAA and seek their advice.