

## Setting Up an Audition

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One of the production protocols you will be creating will be the setting up of an audition to look at and consider actors for your projects. SAG actors, professionals working in the industry are available to you. You must, however, honor their willingness to provide their talents for free, by being respectful of their time and process. Your first encounter will be in an audition situation. Organizing this effectively will minimize the impact of production and enable you to get the best out of them.

### The Set-up

1. Solicit SAG actors through the various free casting sites on line. LACasting.com; NowCasting.com and BreakdownExpress.com . Also consider actors from the USC acting pool. Don't cast non-professionals. You want the best for your work and real actors give you something amazing that will elevate the work. And you will look like a genius director because of it. Be very specific in your breakdowns, character descriptions and conversations, defining your very specific needs .Set out the dates and times for in-class workshop and outside rehearsal and shooting. Make sure the actor can clear these times before you go any further. You don't want to cast someone only to lose them because their schedule doesn't accommodate yours. Be clear and repeat yourself. Are they sure they can show up on your dates? Once you have had some response to your inquiry, set up the casting call in a space you have organized to hold the auditions.
2. Make a list of the actors coming in and assign each one a time. Give them very specific information and directions telling them clearly where the audition is to be held, the exact date and time. Answer any questions they may have. Ask them to bring in a picture and resume that they can leave with you. A picture will be a good physical reminder of the actor. The resume will give you a good indication of their experience and possibly their talent. Look to see if you recognize any of their work or any of the names of the people they have trained with or worked for. These credits can give you information about the caliber of performer they are. Many may be prodigiously talented but be new to the profession and not have many credits. Understand this as well. Give yourself 15 minutes per actor. With open calls and non-assignment for times, you will rudely be asking actors to drive to your audition and then sit around, sometimes for hours. Not good.
3. Endeavor to get the sides to the actor beforehand. The sides should be the scene you would like them to read for you. Giving actors sufficient time to prepare for the audition

is really important to them and you as well. You want them to come in and show you their best. Actors do a unique amount of preparation for the work, figuring out context/character/intention/ obstacles and the events of the scene and situation. This cannot possibly be made evident in a “cold” reading. As you must do your preparation for shooting, every actor must do the same. If you have been unable to get them the sides before hand...suggest they come in at least 15 minutes before their scheduled audition to get the sides and then prepare for their audition.

4. You need an assistant to facilitate the audition. This person should set out a sign-in sheet for the arriving actors. While you will have already assigned times for the actors, he and you should also take into account their arrival times. You want to get the best from your actors. This rarely happens if an actor has to sit around for more than an hour. And it is very disrespectful as well. Your casting assistant will check for arrivals and figure out the order of actors going into the audition room. He/you should make sure there is a comfortable space for them to wait and also some private space...even a hallway...where they can spend time in preparation.. Provide some water if possible. And know where the bathrooms are.

5. The audition room. The assistant should escort each auditioning actor into the room where he will meet the director, producer, writer and anyone else who will participate in the decision-making. Those three people should sit behind a table. The room should be set up to have a chair somewhat opposite the table at a distance of 10 feet or so for the actor to use if he wants to be seated. A camera should be set up pointing at the auditioning actor at the end of the table. Another of your team will be needed to man the camera and frame and pan with the actor should he move during his reading. A good rule of thumb is to see a wide shot of the actor before he begins and then zoom in to a MS or MCU for the actual audition.. Next to the camera, a chair should be set up to accommodate your “ reader” ... another of your key personnel. The reader will read the lines of the other character(s) in the scene to “feed” the auditioning actor. This will allow the director et al. to get the best angle to watch the audition.

6. When the actor comes into the room, greet them warmly and thank them for coming in. They may have just spent 40 minutes on a freeway to get down to see you, so be respectful of that. Ask them for their photo and resume and take a quick glance at this to see if there is anything salient for you to consider.

7. The actor will have seen the breakdown, read the scene and stage directions and come in with some preparation. Some actors will ask, “What are you looking for?” A scene and character can be played many different ways, and an actor is there to get the job so it’s a normal question to look for guidance. I answer the question with...”I’d really like to see what you brought in. We can chat after that.” I always dodge the question for two reasons...first, I am really interested in seeing what the actor has brought in as their preparation. They might have a completely different concept or “take” on the character that you have never even imagined. And it might be 100 times better than anything you have ever thought of. Of course you can take the credit later, but use the audition for other reasons than just to find the actor. Listen to how the material sounds. Does it make

sense to the way you are planning to tell the story. Are you perhaps wrong-headed in your approach? Think of the audition as a gift to yourself. It's a fantastic learning opportunity for both writer and director to hear the material and evaluate it in a different light. The second reason I try to dodge the question of what I am looking for, is not to panic the actor. Say they had come in with something genuinely interesting to show you. And before you have heard anything, you give them a note that is a 180 degrees from how they have conceived it. They will try to make your adjustment after they have panicked and thrown out everything they brought in. You will never see their ideas. And you might never get to hear yours.

8. Once you have let the actor go through the scene, they will look to you for comment/insight/ or adjustment. Try to get out of your own way and your locked interpretation and really see if the actor's work is alive, specific, unique and engaging. Writers sometimes have the hardest time getting out of their own way when it comes to casting. They have imagined their characters with great specificity as they sat at their computers writing the material. But any character born of a writer's musings will NEVER be fully found in the flesh-and-blood of any living breathing performer. The more you search for that performer with increasing rigor, the more you are likely to be disappointed. And the more rigorous you become, the more your creative team will climb walls with frustration. An actor will always be different than on the page, but if they are well-chosen they will actually be better. Good casting comes when there is some essence of the actor that also lives in the essence of the character. Try to get beyond expected line readings and see who the character is in the hands of the actor. Do the hairs on the back of your neck stand up? Don't just judge the external or physical. You might have imagined a role played only by a sexy blonde. Of course their physicality is important to a role and we all like to look at and inhale beautiful people. But are they capable of something else unique and engaging? When you see or cast someone beautiful (male or female), that will engage an audience immediately and excitedly. But if the actor doesn't have another internal life and connection to the material, an audience will very quickly look beyond the physical and get bored.

9. I always encourage any director to comment on the work of the actor he has just witnessed. For a couple of reasons. First you want to acknowledge and compliment your actors. Keep your private thoughts exactly that. Private. If the actor doesn't get it, then thank them profusely. You may, if you have time, give a simple note or adjustment and ask the actor to do it again. I sometimes do this simply out of politeness, even if I have no desire to see any more of their work.

10. If the actor does generate some excited response from you, give them a note and ask for an adjustment. Most directors don't have a clue about how to talk to actors in ways that are genuinely meaningful to an actor's process. You need to learn something about how an actor prepares. Here are some rules:

a) Don't give them a note which is an adjective EVER. Don't tell them you want to see them be more angry, or more aroused, or more embarrassed. Every one has ideas about

what a specific adjective means, and you are asking the actor to give you a result rather than making an adjustment in their character.

b) Give them facts. Direct information, which can be real or imagined, can powerfully shape a performance. Tell them... "You've just been in a fenderbender and this is the first time you are seeing your brother in 5 years." Specific details and events will then be refracted by the actor (successfully or not) into the performance.

c) Give them images. "In this scene I want you to see yourself trying to climb a mountain. "Or bowing before a ruler". Or confronting a parent for the first time.

d). Discuss their objective. What do they want in this scene. And use VERBS to define this objective. An actor wants to.... Seduce her. Attack him. Warn him. Worship her. All strong VERBS that are powerful and active.

e) Discuss what obstacles exist to their achieving their objective. "He never listens to you" "She is thinking about her old boyfriend" "He wants to be with your best friend"

f). Discuss how the character pursues the objective in the light of the resistance. Also using VERBS. Charm her. Bribe him. Praise her. Criticize him.

g). Look and listen. But STOP TALKING. Most inexperienced directors talk and talk and talk hoping that in some scattershot way, eventually he will say something that an actor will be able to use. Know what you want but don't talk endlessly.

11. I encourage you to give a note to all auditioning actors you take a liking to for a couple of reasons. First you want to see if they can take adjustments and keep the character fresh and alive. They may nail it the first time they read it but be unable to adjust or nuance the work. Without nuance and life, the performance will ossify by the time you get it on film. Also, by giving them notes and adjustments, you get to see if they can understand and make manifest the adjustments you give them in their performance. Also you want to look for actors who understand you. A director has to find a successful way of communicating with his actors. If every note you give an actor makes things worse, then he is not an actor for you.

12. Listen and enjoy the second reading. If you have a monitor that you can watch them on for part of the reading, check that out as well. But your best guide to evaluate them should come as you watch their work in realtime. Make notes for yourself in response to the performance.

13. Thank them for coming in. After the actor leaves the room (and only after the door is closed), I encourage you to have a discussion with the others behind the table with you. You will disagree on many things but there will be interesting consensus too. Don't get into a long discussion with your colleagues here. But a quick sentence or two here will be useful. You may also have the idea that they might not be right for the part they read, but

they might be great for another role. Think about these things as you watch and listen as well. Throw another scene at them to look at. But catch them quickly before they leave. And give them some time to prep the new character.

14. Consider different ways to go in casting...age/gender/race/ essence....if a role is a little more familiar, think about a surprising or at least more interesting way to go in selection. Be open to that

15. STAY on SCHEDULE...Even if you fall madly in love with an actor, keep the session going. Certainly pull a little more out of your object of desire while they are in the room. But you can always have a callback if you like on another day. Remember you need to keep moving and considering and not let the talent stack up horribly outside. If you do stack up. move more efficiently through your list. You are always going to be fighting the clock. Do it now.

16. Review the auditions at the end of the schedule. Discuss and consider. Take the collective temperature If you like, take home the tape with the recorded auditions. Review it and consider. Are there any slam dunks? Are there any fatal misses and do you need to generate more auditions? I basically use my notes but what I have discovered for me is that I actually only really vividly remember a couple of actors from the process and my choices will ultimately be made from that group as being the most memorable.