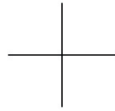




THE SCREEN ACTOR'S AUDITION



THE CRAFT
OF FILM AND
TELEVISION
AUDITIONING IN
ANY MEDIUM

JAY SCULLY



THE SCREEN ACTOR'S AUDITION

The Craft of Film and Television
Auditioning in Any Medium

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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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Introduction

It was 95 degrees with 100 percent humidity in the middle of July in the shittiest un-air-conditioned theater in all of Manhattan, and sweat tributaries were rolling down my face into the heavy wool collar of my overcoat, down my back and straight into the crack in my ass, eventually pooling in my Victorian-era high boots. We were slogging our way through the doldrums of a brutally overwrought second act in a turn-of-the-century melodrama, two hours in with half an hour to go. The crowd of thirty was made up of the usual patrons of Equity-waiver theater at this level, which is to say relatives and really, really good friends. They were shifting miserably in their seats, drained of all patience and desperate for our feeble production to come to an end.

The constant whirr of a personal fan in the second row was the only sound in the theater as I leaned in for the kiss and the Puerto Rican evangelical choir next door kicked off their Saturday night ecstasies—a nightly upstaging with impressive punctuality. Finally, as if performing melodrama to “Gloria en las Alturas” wasn’t enough of a challenge, the *deus ex machina* literally descended on our production when the toilet in the apartment above was flushed twice in succession, raining urine and water down on the two back rows. The crowd streamed out

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of the theater, frantically fleeing the dripping from above, looking like passengers disembarking from a particularly turbulent fourteen-hour flight from Jakarta.

It was at this moment exactly when I realized my acting career had truly bottomed out.

*

New York in the '90s wasn't easy for actors. Only two prime-time shows were being filmed there, and feature films were rarely shot in the city. Theater had taken a beating from a decade of caustic reviewing by the *New York Times*, and you could basically count the number of casting directors on two hands. We did a lot of theater—whatever you could get, wherever it took you, for no money. Your only hope was to somehow get in a production reviewed by the *Times*, because there was very limited access to any of the more prominent auditions for the unrepresented. In between gigs doing Shakespeare in parking lots, we prayed for commercial auditions and served Cosmos and metric tons of Chinese chicken salad to midtown bankers.

That life will grind you straight down if you don't know how to audition, and most of us certainly did not. I had three years of conservatory training under my belt and an MFA degree and I had no idea what I was doing, or how to fix it. Nobody ever taught us anything about auditioning, even in the most professional training programs in the country, so we all just failed upward like everyone else. For most of these schools, auditioning is perpetually a secondary consideration in an actor's training, because most professors can't teach it and actors

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don't think they need to learn it. We sure didn't, and that's why we ended up in basement theaters with plumbing issues.

Now, there are many shows and features filmed every year in almost every major city in the United States, so the importance of auditioning and self-taping has increased exponentially. The window of opportunity is significantly narrower with self-taping, and human interaction far less of a factor, but auditioning in person isn't gone—far from it. The business will always incorporate live auditioning, though to what extent remains to be seen. Self-taping is undoubtedly here to stay, which means learning how to properly audition should be every actor's top priority, now more than ever.

I hope in reading my book you will take from it what I never had when I was acting—a positive, empowering, and effective method of auditioning. The mileage varies with all of us on all acting subjects, but my sincere hope is that I earn your trust in my perspective on auditioning. If you are an actor wondering what you could be doing better or simply one who just needs to know where to start, what I share should help.

This book is designed to help actors learn to love auditioning. In order to do that, you have to believe in your technique and in yourself. Actors need evaluation of their work, good or bad, but that probably won't come from agents, managers, or casting directors. Your best work must come from within. Auditioning must empower you, give you assurance, and make you unequivocally proud of your work, even when it produces nothing but silence.

Finally, you are in a business of heavy hitters, actors who will do anything to get back on set, either because they're passionate about

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their craft or desperately need the job. These are people who live and breathe acting, many of whom have expiring visas, small film and television markets back home, and a looming job in a mill if they can't make it happen here. These actors are your competition, and they are not fucking around one bit when it comes to their work. So, what's your strategy for beating them? I offer this book as a solution.

1

The Appointment

Every working actor knows the feeling of seeing an audition appointment appear in your inbox. Whatever doubts you may be having about your career suddenly vanish in that moment, because you once again have a shot, an opportunity, and more importantly, a purpose.

Every audition begins with either an appointment or invitation to self-tape, usually sent by email, accompanied by the usual project details and a breakdown of the role(s) involved and a script logline describing the plot. Sides (audition scenes) from the script are usually attached for the role, along with detailed instructions for self-taping or auditioning live, and often you may receive a full script.

That's a lot of information, but who wants to read the who's who list when you have those sides waiting there at the bottom of the email? That's what most actors want to see: What's the role, how good is the writing, and how right am I for it?

The excitement of a job prospect is undeniable when a casting invitation arrives, so it's no wonder actors overlook a lot of the details involved in a project to get to the sides. Everyone wants to read the role first to see how they'll approach playing the part, but none of that has any value without looking at the project *as a whole*.

THE APPOINTMENT

Throughout this book, we will be referencing three fictitious sample auditions for film and/or television. As we discuss all of the myriad issues that go into a successful tape, these will serve as working examples that resemble what you are likely to encounter in today's industry. Narrowing our samples down to three has its obvious limitations, but I've tried to pack as much useful insight into our discussion of them as possible.

For practical purposes, our breakdowns are based on paying union work that would be typical for a working professional actor. I hold no bias against unrepresented actors or nonunion work, but my experience in that arena is limited. I have intentionally included the business end of agents and managers in the approach because of their importance to the process.

Sample Breakdowns

Here are the working examples of three fairly typical appointments:

EXAMPLE A

Precinct (Pilot)

Role: Amanda—Twenties, any ethnicity.

The Precinct's newest recruit, Amanda, is actually from Shady Knolls, the gated community in the suburbs. Amanda knew she wanted to be a cop when she watched her brother get brutally beaten (and permanently disabled) in a playground when she was 12. She is earning her peers' respect, though she has a steep learning curve now that she is working in the projects. SERIES REGULAR

THE APPOINTMENT

Pages: Sides

Material: Emailed

Read: Put self on tape

Notes:

Please prepare all scenes.

Please include a slate with name, height, location, and full body shot.

Agent: So and So—X Agency

Project Information

Project: PRECINCT

Type: Pilot

Start Date: Mid-January

Format: 1 hour

Location: Atlanta

Genre: Drama

Union: SAG/AFTRA

Director: XXXXX

Writer: XXXXX

Studio: XXXXX

Network: XXXXX

Casting: Allie

Assoc.: Peter

Prod: Karen, Sydney, Elle, Garrett

Creator: Daniel

Showrunner: Angie

THE APPOINTMENT

Cast:

Adina (Kiera) Cast

Stephan (Kai) Cast

Bree (Lord) Cast

Shane (Meadows) Cast

Phil (Sheehan) Cast

Storyline:

PRECINCT follows the lives of two women from very opposite backgrounds who arrive as rookie cops in the worst precinct in America. Kiera and Amanda must find a way to work together, in spite of their differences and the gulf that divides them.

Regards,

Emily

EXAMPLE B

RETIRED AT 21 (Feature Film)

Project: RETIRED AT 21

Type: Independent Feature Film

Director: XXXXX

Writer: XXXXX

Producers: XXXXX, XXXXX, XXXXX

Casting Director: XXXXX

Casting Associate: XXXXX

Location: Southern California

Starts: September 8th

THE APPOINTMENT

Cast: XXXXX is cast as CARLA

Role: *DAN – Early thirties, Asian American. Dan is the oldest but least mature brother of the Chen family. An avid gamer, Dan makes a living as an insurance adjuster, but he’s not going anywhere career-wise—or socially, for that matter. When his youngest sibling creates an app in college that goes viral, Dan is quick to try to jump on the bandwagon, trying to work his way into their much younger crowd. Not blessed with the brain of his much younger brother, Dan does everything to fit in, but it is both painful and hysterical to see. . . . SUPPORTING*

Pending your interest in the role of “DAN,” the following appointment has been set up for you:

Pre-Read—On Tape with Casting

WHEN: Thu, Jul 16, 2026 10:00 AM PDT

WHERE: X Casting

MATERIAL: Sides attached.

NOTES:

MUST BE LA LOCAL & CURRENTLY BE IN LA

EXAMPLE C

WITNESS PROTECTION DROPOUTS SEASON 6 – 603, “Breaking and Entering”

With casting on tape

*All auditions on tape with casting for producers

THE APPOINTMENT

Who will be in the room (one or more of the following):

Casting Director—XXXXX

Casting Associate—XXXXX

Casting Assistant—XXXXX

Location:

Studio City

*Please enter the building and check in with reception.

**Parking: Street parking is limited near our office. Metered spots are half-hour only, so please adjust for parking.

IF YOUR ACTOR IS NOT AVAILABLE FOR THIS SESSION, please indicate why (passing, taping, etc.). If they are taping, please say where they are based and email self-tapes directly. Tapes are due by 5 p.m. on the day of their appointment.

IF YOUR CLIENT IS OFFER-ONLY, PLEASE SEND DEMO

ROLE: BLAISE (mid-forties). Blaise was not meant for the quiet life that Mesa Valley Ranch offers. She doesn't do Pilates, has no hobbies, and certainly would have no use for a book club unless the booze was good enough. She's the Ranch's newest rowdy witness protection resident, and she has no intention of keeping her mouth shut when she realizes she's surrounded by others in the same program, especially all those single men in track suits and gold chains. GUEST STAR/ POSSIBLE RECURRING. CASTING NOTE: Do not play her as argumentative. Blaise should be brassy and fun.

What Next?

As you can see, appointments come in very different forms, though the basics remain the same. Most will also come with a detailed page or two of information on how their particular office prefers their self-tapes to be filmed and submitted. Obviously, it is the actor's job to be thorough about adhering to these, because nothing will end your consideration for a role faster than a tape that doesn't meet their guidelines.

I've tried to keep it simple by only employing three examples: a series lead on a pilot, a strong supporting role on a feature film, and a basic guest star on episodic television. My hope is that through these samples we'll be able to demonstrate how to employ the concepts in this book with actual auditions in your career. Obviously, the application of these concepts is better understood in a studio setting, but these should help tie theory to practice in an easily understandable way.

There is a *ton* of useful information in these appointment emails that most actors pay no attention to whatsoever. Beyond the script and sides, it's so important to examine appointments in great detail to mine the valuable information in them. We will get into much of this as we go on, but remember one point: Why wouldn't you do everything you can to improve the odds on an audition? The appointment details are your first opportunity at that advantage, as we will see going forward.

The Breakdown

Character breakdowns are issued by the casting office that has been hired for a project. Roles are listed with brief descriptions of character and, to an extent, plot. They are typically written by casting and

THE APPOINTMENT

approved by production in one way or another before dissemination to agents, managers, and the broader ecosystem of actors. Their quality, in terms of providing information actors can use, varies considerably from project to project.

What many actors don't know is that breakdowns are sometimes misleading. Casting is a fast process, but things ramp up when breakdowns go out because they tend to trigger a deluge of attention from those trying to get their clients front and center for consideration. What this means is that they can be written hastily, without much thought for what they will produce in auditions or submissions, for that matter.

What do I mean by breakdowns being misleading? Breakdowns are not usually written by the writer or director, so they tend to be a casting director's (or associate's) interpretation of what the role is. A good breakdown will be written so there is no ambiguity about what production is looking for in the role, accurately using the writer or director's own language about the character but leaving enough to interpretation so a range is seen in auditions.

A bad breakdown will take actors down the wrong path and steer them all into a pattern that is not at all right for the role. Casting will not realize their mistake until the first wave of actors come in, all missing the mark by the same sort of margin. Breakdowns are weird that way, so it pays to think for yourself as an actor, as much as it does to do your homework.

Any time you see casting amend a breakdown with notes on how to approach a role, it is usually indicative of a misleading initial breakdown. Did you happen to notice one in the sample breakdowns?

THE APPOINTMENT

CASTING NOTE: Do not play her as argumentative. Blaise should be brassy and fun.

That's right, the note right at the end of Blaise's character breakdown is an obvious amendment tacked on by the casting director, most likely because too many actors are playing her negatively. Just to illustrate the point further, take a look at another basic character description from our *Precinct* pilot:

BREE—Mid-thirties. Bree is a nurse in an underfunded health clinic on the south side of Chicago. Married ten years to Aaron, who only works part-time at the university, she is growing weary of her life of working long hours and not quite making ends meet. Aaron says he is in line for a promotion to full-time work, but it hasn't happened. Determined for a better life and running out of time to have kids, she decides to confront Aaron and stand up for herself by saying he must fight for the full-time promotion. When it turns out Aaron may not have been entirely truthful Bree takes matters into her own hands. STRONG SUPPORTING.

Seems fairly straightforward. We get her character, her motivation, and in general how right or wrong we are likely to be for the role. She's written as fairly open, casting-wise, so most actors within the correct age range would consider themselves to be right for it. But there's a *huge trap* written directly into the character description that will lead most actors in the wrong direction—that Aaron is the bad guy. Ninety percent of the actors who audition for this role will play it as though Aaron is the enemy. He works part-time while she puts in long hours

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and they are still barely making ends meet. Oh, and he lied about his potential promotion, right?

But what if Aaron was still the man Bree is deeply committed to in her marriage? What if Aaron was still the hero in her eyes? The breakdown and character description will have led every actor to play this scene as a full-on argument with someone you are not invested in at all, but ask yourself: Which is stronger?

Either way, sometimes it's difficult to predict the pattern their breakdown will produce, and they won't often see how it manifests itself until enough tapes roll in. Actors usually go with what the breakdown tells them, assuming that it is casting's way of making it clear what they're looking for, and why wouldn't they? Everyone wants to serve the project to the best of their ability, but breakdowns can be misleading in very minor ways, too.

The point is that most actors take breakdowns literally, in much the same way they take script action literally, when they should be examined with care. Always assume character descriptions to be somewhat subjective and think for yourself when it comes to what works and what does not. Finally, see if you can spot what trends a breakdown is likely to create in others' auditions, and whether it makes sense to go against that. Keep this in mind with our three working examples as we go on.

The Script

In a perfect world, we'd all get the script and sides a full week in advance so a level playing field is established for everyone auditioning.

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That rarely happens, as there are no regulations on when appointments are issued, or even who gets what.

What does happen typically is that you get sides and a breakdown with less time to prepare than they require. Television tends to move so quickly since schedules become condensed, and pilots tend to be the only auditions that issue full scripts. Episodic casting almost never releases a script, only sides, and features are a mixed bag. Adding to the challenge, actors at bigger agencies can often get their hands on scripts others cannot, leading to a very unfair process.

I point this out because even when actors do get the script ahead of time, many don't even bother to read it. And yes, it absolutely shows in their work. I can't speculate on why some actors consider it to be unimportant, but I can tell you that it tends to be obvious to everyone watching your work because they know the script and story inside out. Reading scripts thoroughly is mandatory if you want to be seriously considered, it is that simple.

Let's look at why this is.

For most auditions without a script, actors must do the best they can to make a creative guess about the tone and arc of the story. Since it's the same for all, those auditions are a bit more face value since you can't really blame actors who don't have all of the information. In other words, strategy is much more straightforward with only sides and basic project details available.

When a script is sent with sides, the strategies of approaching material change considerably because there is so much more information story-wise. The smart actor will know just how much of an advantage is to be gained by carefully reading a script. Directors and

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writers know the story they are telling backward and forward and can tell immediately if an actor understands how their role must fit. That comes from reading the script and giving some thought to story strategy. So how does an actor do that?

First off, look at how your character moves plot forward. Knowing your character's role in setting up and moving forward the story is what a careful reading of the script will provide. Are you central to the story or a supporting character? If you're supporting, how two-dimensional is your purpose? Also, what kind of script is it? Multi-cam or single? Feature or short?

In features, the script is all there is, unless it is part of a franchise or a sequel/prequel of sorts. In television, the script is usually a pilot, and may not even contain the scenes used for sides. That can tell you something important if you examine why they were chosen. Are the sides from subsequent episodes in the first season or were they written to give actors more to work with character-wise? If the former, look closely at how the series will play out in terms of arc. It could give you valuable insight on how to approach it. That's strategy.

We'll get into story strategy later, but a script will give you all the information you need on how to prepare your sides. Even if you are short on time, reading the script is the working actor's imperative.

The Sides

The term "sides" dates back to Shakespeare's time, when actors were only given their side of the scene's dialogue. Today, sides can be anything from a single line in a costar role to twenty pages of complex,