

From: Acting Songs

By David Brunetti

AUDITIONS

I'LL DEAL NOW WITH AUDITIONING for the musical theater. First and foremost, I can tell you from having been involved as either the musical director or accompanist at hundreds of auditions, that by and large the performers who make the biggest impact, the ones who rivet the attention of the listeners and get callbacks and jobs are the ones who can act. They are the ones who come into the room, deal professionally with the auditors and with the accompanist, and then immerse themselves in an imaginary world in which they make real emotional contact with an imaginary partner and use the song to accomplish an objective. All the external finesse and polish in the world isn't worth a nickel if you're not truly living, here and now, within the world of your song. God knows there have been performers who've had musical theater careers without being able to act organically. Sometimes the precision and audacity of their indicating gets them hired; sometimes having an extraordinarily beautiful or powerful voice gets them hired. But those people are the exceptions, and I guarantee you they'd go even further if they found a way to make true emotional connections to their material.

Auditioning is a craft unto itself. There are performers who do a great job once they're in rehearsals and performances but who get hung up when it comes to auditioning. The tension of having to make a fast, strong, positive impression in the pressurized situation of an audition can help some people

to score but can be daunting to others.

An audition is essentially a job interview. It's helpful to put your energy into the things you have control over and not into the things that are out of your control. You can't do anything about who will be judging you, their attitude or response to you, the size and shape of the room, the proficiency of the pianist. You can take charge of your preparation for the audition, your own attitude and your behavior in the room. The auditors will be looking at you from two directions: how good is your work and are you someone they'd want to work with? Their judgement of you starts the moment you enter: Is he/she confident, well-prepared and put together, easy to get along with, flexible, open to suggestions and directions, an adult, gracious and courteous? Even though you may feel like you're walking into a battle, the auditors want you to do well. They're looking for allies, performers who will help bring their project to life. You want them to want to work with you. Be warm and courteous but not overly friendly or chatty. In general don't ask questions of the auditors, such as "What would you like me to sing?" You make that decision before you enter the room. Sometimes there are exceptions; if you know a song from the show you're auditioning for you can say "I have a song from the show. Would you like to hear that or would you prefer something else?" But in general keep any demands of the auditors to an absolute minimum; they have many people to deal with and the last thing they're looking for are needy, high-maintenance performers. Also, don't apologize for anything before you begin. If you have a cold or had a late night, keep it to yourself.

Be as well-prepared as you possibly can, so that those

few minutes in the audition room will be everything they can be. I don't think it's a good idea to learn new songs for each audition. Have a carefully chosen repertoire of songs that show you off in different ways and that you know very well. I can tell you from experience that most performers who repeatedly get hired for principle roles in the New York musical theater have just a few songs—often only three or four—that they use at every audition. They find a couple of pieces of material that are perfectly suited to them, that allow them to reveal in two or three minutes some essential parts of themselves, emotionally and vocally. The song may be a big splashy vocal showpiece that displays sass and irreverence; it may be a warm, courageous anthem, or even a self-deprecating lament. I've seen leading Broadway players go into audition after audition leading off with "their" song, even if it's not stylistically right on the money for the particular show they're going in for. Be on the lookout for that kind of material for yourself—songs that when

The people I remember from auditions are the ones who came in with confidence, without being cocky; they had prepared a very straight-forward song that showed them off to advantage. And you know what? They showed joy in the audition. I would say that's a big thing for me, for almost anything. I like to see someone for whom I feel singing is an exhilarating experience, and who can communicate that kind of relaxed quality at an audition: "This is me, this is how I sound. If I'm right, great. If I'm not, fine." If someone is comfortable with him or herself, and is relaxed, you can tell, and that is the most appealing thing to me.

*Ted Sperling, Conductor/
Director/Orchestrator*

you hear them or sing them make you say, “That’s me! That was written for me!” Be able to answer this question without missing a beat: If you had an audition today and had to sing your best up-tempo and ballad, the ones that best show you off, what two songs would they be? At the same time I do recommend that you develop a full repertoire of audition material so that you can give the auditors things that they need to hear stylistically. Ideally every song you choose to make a part of your audition repertoire will be a home run, a song that you love and that shows you off in a big way.

I also think it’s a good idea to have a mix of well-known standards and less familiar songs in your kit. There really are no hard and fast rules about this. I know people who get jobs singing totally obscure, sometimes eccentric material, and I know a woman who’s gotten into numerous Broadway shows singing “Summertime,” which most people will tell you to never use because of its over-familiarity. Often at auditions a performer will make a good impression with his or her first piece, which may well be a song not frequently heard. Then the director will ask to hear a war-horse such as “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning” or “I Got Rhythm” because there are certain things they can tell immediately from material they know inside and out. As I said, put together a repertoire that includes both familiar and unfamiliar songs. As always, the bottom line is how well you’re able to work expressively with an inner life.

I learned an important lesson some years ago when I was the accompanist for a whole week’s worth of auditions for several major summer stock theaters. During that week one song that I heard over and over was “Fifty Percent,” a power-

ful ballad originally sung by Dorothy Loudon in “Ballroom.” By the third day I had decided that none of my people should use that song for a while because it was losing its impact by being heard so often. Then at the end of the week another woman came in and led off with “Fifty Percent,” but her performance of it was a revelation—vocally a knockout, but more importantly full of emotion and humor and urgency, performed absolutely as if she were making it up as she went along. It was as if we had never heard the song before and she got a well-deserved callback. Certainly I would be wary of leading off with a song that’s done to death, but if you bring something personal, unique and powerful to it, by all means use it.

In New York there are voice teachers and vocal coaches. The difference between them is that the teacher’s job is to help you produce the sound in a healthy, effective way while a coach’s job is to help you find songs, teach you the music if you’re not a trained musician, set up your music professionally so that other pianists can play it, and hopefully assist you in the acting of the songs. With the help of a knowledgeable vocal coach build yourself a collection of wonderful audition songs. I have found that the most efficient way to proceed with this is to lay out a chart on a legal pad that includes all the various categories of songs for which you might be asked. It might look like this: (I’ll list some examples of standard songs for each category. Note that some songs can do duty in more than one category.)

Broadway Up-Tempo

Miracle of Miracles (man)
 Luck Be a Lady (man)
 I Could Have Danced
 All Night (woman-legit)*
 Johnny One-Note (woman-belt)

**Contemporary/Pop
Up-Tempo****

My Life (by Billy Joel)
 A Little Help From
 My Friends (by the Beatles)

**30s/40s Standard
Up-Tempo**

Lady Is a Tramp
 They All Laughed

Character/Comedy

Miracle of Miracles
 Adelaide's Lament
 I Cain't Say No

50s Rock and Roll

Rockin' Robin
 Rock Around the Clock

Broadway Ballad

Younger Than Springtime (man)
 If Ever I Would Leave You (man)
 Till There Was You (woman-legit)
 What I Did For Love (woman-belt)

**Contemporary/Pop
Ballad**

Bridge Over Troubled Water
 All In Love Is Fair
 (by Stevie Wonder)

**30s/40s Standard
Ballad**

Night and Day
 My Funny Valentine

Sondheim***

The Miller's Son
 Finishing the Hat
 Nothing's Gonna Harm You

Country

Crazy
 Tennessee Waltz

In the interest of seeing as many singers as possible, sometimes the people running an audition won't allow you to sing your full songs, and so you'll need to be ready with portions of songs (usually "16 bars," sometimes, alas, only "8 bars"). For a chorus call, the general rule is "high and loud."

It's possible and important to incorporate all of your acting technique even when you're only singing a short section of a song. Prepare and rehearse your shorter segments as though they were complete entities unto themselves.

Regarding the keys in which you sing: again, no hard and fast rules. If you're auditioning for a production of "My Fair Lady" in a summer stock theater, they'll probably need to hear you sing from the score in the original keys. But in general, sing your audition material in the keys that are best for you personally, the keys that serve both your singing and acting requirements. Fiddle around with a pianist or coach until you figure out what keys are best for you. Don't be afraid to change the keys from where they're published. In most cases, those published keys were either the keys found to have worked best for the original performers, or they're the ones found to be the easiest for the publishers to work with on the printed page. Warning: You'll sabotage yourself if you ask an accompanist at an audition to transpose at sight. Have the music written out fully in your key. (You can find people who do this at rea-

When I'm casting something, the biggest turn-on for me is when a performer comes and first, goes to work—is not concerned about the result of the audition, and I can feel that right away. It's a turn-off to me. "How'm I doing? Do you like me?" Hate that.

*Rob Marshall,
Director/Choreographer*

* Some Women have the ability to sing in soprano range (referred to as "legit") and to sing in chest voice ("belt") and they'll want to delineate "Broadway Up-Tempo/Ballad Legit" and "Broadway Up-Tempo/Ballad Belt."

** I suggest looking in the world of commercial pop and rock for these songs. You'll find a lot of very theatrical songs there. The Broadway repertoire for this category is not vast and tends to be over-used.

*** This guy's work is so exceptional that he rates his own slot.

I tell people to find songs that reveal who they are. Also, first of all, it saves you time—you don't have to then learn a new piece for every audition, which I see a lot of people feeling the need to do, and it's daunting. They're in a panic, and they go in, they don't know it as well, they haven't experienced auditioning with it enough, because I think that counts for a lot. I think you have to go to a million auditions, and you should do basically a small repertoire at all of them until you refine it and feel expert at it; songs that sound like you, that express your outlook a little bit.

*Ted Sperling, Conductor/
Director/Orchestrator*

music copied and keep copies of your audition songs somewhere safe at home, in case you lose the originals.

One other crucial consideration when choosing songs for your audition book is the difficulty factor of the piano parts. Unless you're bringing your own pianist to the audition you must make sure that the songs you're using aren't too hard for the pianist to sight-read. It can really break your heart to find a song that's great for you, only to then realize that you can't include it in your book due to the difficulty of the piano part,

sonable cost on computer programs.) Sometimes you can get away with having the proper chord symbols written in red above the untransposed music, but even that is risky. Have your music professionally prepared: in the right key, cut to the proper length, copied on hard paper (card stock) and taped together, or in a binder—be careful of plastic covers, which can reflect light and make it hard for the pianist to see the music. Never plop down a big book of published music on the piano; it's likely to not stay open and fall into the accompanist's lap. Have the

but you're asking for a train wreck if you don't take that into consideration. The best thing to do is to ask your coach or another pianist for their advice.

Spend the time and money to have professional, up-to-date pictures and resumé's. Have an idea of roles you think you're right for. Keep a written list of them in your audition binder. Know what basic type you are (leading man/lady, juvenile/ingénue, character actor, or some combination of these). Think of established performers to whom you're similar. It's good to know these things for yourself and to have them at the ready should you be asked to describe yourself.

You may be asked to come back for a dance audition or to read from a script. You can develop the ability to pick up choreography quickly and to do well with a cold reading by attending classes or working with coaches.

Dress appropriately. Usually it's best to wear something stylish and attractive, as if you were going to a special party. If the show has a particular style or feel, you can suggest that in your clothing. Don't wear a costume, but you can try to show something of the essence of the show. If it's "Les Misérables" or "Fiddler on the Roof" you can dress a little bit "peasanty," if it's rock and roll, a little funky, etc. Look great, whatever you choose to wear. Remember, an audition is a form of a job interview.

Practice your songs in front of other people before

I hope to see someone who has an idea about what the songs are about, other than just singing the notes and making a decent sound—someone who'll have an interpretive idea about the song that's interesting and truthful and personal. That's for starters.

Stephen Holden, Critic

you take them into auditions. Take a class where you can sing in front of a group on a regular basis, or organize a group yourself, hire a pianist and get together each week to sing for each other. Singing alone or in front of your teacher or coach is one thing, but once you're in that room auditioning with other people watching you'll experience a whole new set of nerves. Put yourself in situations where you're being watched by other people before you get to the audition so that those nerves can come up and be dealt with. My suggestion is to allow the nerves, since trying to banish them only makes them worse. It's possible to be nervous and yet still be connected and alive when you sing. Concentrate on your imaginary circumstances, your preparation. Remember, the song is about your imaginary partner, not you.

Be careful how you use your time immediately preceding entering the audition room. What you do while you're waiting to go in will greatly affect what happens in your audition. Don't sit out there chatting with people. You can tell your friends "Excuse me, I need to be quiet and concentrate before I go in." Close your eyes and meditate a little by following your breath, or listen through headphones to a guided meditation tape. Engage yourself in positive, supportive self-talk or affirmations: "I deserve to have a great time in this audition—it's safe for me to have a great time—I choose to have a great time; I'm allowed to feel all of my emotions as I go through this audition, etc." Another technique that can be very helpful in launching your audition is to have the preparation for your song either written out or spoken on tape ("It's Friday afternoon and my boyfriend Jim just got home from a horrible experience at an audition..."), and then to either read

or listen to it while you're waiting to go in.

Once you enter the room go about your business efficiently. You can give a friendly greeting from across the room to the auditors. There may be one person watching or a whole panel of producers, directors, etc. You can ask about that before you go in so that you're not thrown when you see them. Walk directly to the pianist and give him or her a few basic instructions. Here's the way I suggest you do that: Tell him or her the name of the song if it's not clearly written on the music. I've had the experience of being given a song to play with no title on it, and then four bars into it I realize it's a song I know and could have played better from the start

had I known what song it was. Then give what I call the **Road map**—that is, where does it start and end, are there any cuts in the music or any repeats? Point out any surprises, like key changes or radical tempo changes so that the pianist can be prepared. Next give the **Tempo**. Unless the song is sung entirely "ad lib," or without a tempo, the pianist will need you to give a clear, steady beat. Usually I find it best to quietly sing a line of the song while gently tapping the beat on

Sometimes I think people get too worked up trying to find the perfect song for this show, for this character. That can be a mistake, and they go in a direction that's not right for the character. Sometimes they don't represent themselves so well with that; they don't show who they are, and I think sometimes that's an important thing to get from somebody in an audition. I sort of feel like it's good to know what the raw materials are with somebody when you meet them in an audition.

*Ted Sperling, Conductor/
Director/Orchestrator*

your own thigh. Don't snap in the pianist's face—they hate that. This whole process of giving directions to the pianist is important and should be practiced before the audition. Often people will throw their music in front of the accompanist, not say anything and then walk out to do their audition. That's a mistake for a couple of reasons. First of all it's rude and it alienates the pianist, which is a really bad idea—he or she is about to be your support system and performance partner, so make an ally of him or her. Second of all you'll not get the kind of playing you'll need if you don't clue them in about the road map and tempo. Be forewarned: accompanists can be rude and cantankerous themselves, and occasionally one may just wave you away as you begin to give them instructions, perhaps telling you they know the song. You really have no choice in that situation but to let it go and go ahead with the audition. If it's any comfort, know that they're treating all the other singers just as badly. One way to avoid all potential problems with the accompanist is to bring your own person with you. Some singers will only go in to auditions with their own pianist. The auditors will be impressed that you went to the trouble of hiring someone, and you won't have to be concerned with the in-house pianist's ability or attitude. Of course it can get expensive to do it that way, but for an audition that's important to you it may be worth it.

After you've given the pianist the road map and tempo, you can ask him or her to wait until you give them a nod before beginning to play. Then you walk to the middle of the room and take a moment to conjure up your imaginary world and your opening beat. A moment of silence will help the energy in the room to settle and make everyone focus on you;

it will increase anticipation and produce a sense that something important is about to happen. Manipulate the energy in the room in this way. Take a few seconds to enter another dimension, to create a relationship with your imaginary partner, then give the pianist a nod and be fully, emotionally alive in your imaginary world. If you're at a chorus audition, everything happens at warp speed, and there can be no "Please wait for me to nod." They'll most likely be playing your introduction as soon as you walk away from the piano. You'll get to sing 16 bars in most cases, and you'll have to move quickly through the process since they'll want to see as many people as they can.

If anything goes haywire during your audition—if the pianist plays at the wrong tempo, if you forget the lyrics, etc.—handle it calmly and with a sense of humor. If you don't make a big deal out of it neither will the auditors. Just regroup and start over or pick up from a convenient spot in the song.

After your audition try not to spend a lot of time second-guessing, trying to figure out what they thought of you. You'll never figure it out. Try to stay out of their heads and go instead to your own heart, get in touch with your own feelings. Support and comfort yourself, and if things went wrong, think about how you can improve your next audition. Having a career is a long road. Don't let a rock on the trail stop you from traveling forward.

When you get callbacks, sing the same material and wear the same clothes unless otherwise instructed. In this way they'll be able to remember you right away. It's a good idea to make notes in your appointment book about what you wear and sing.

I'm moved by someone getting up there and communicating the truth, their truth, without asking to be loved in return in a certain way. Look at Mabel Mercer. A lot of people think Mabel Mercer was affected, but you listen to the best of her, and there's an archness there, but underneath that archness is such an incredible human connection. And that woman could hardly sing at all.

Stephen Holden, Critic

Audition as often as you can, even for things you may not even be excited about. The more you do it the more relaxed you're likely to be about it. In addition, you never really know what you're auditioning for—one audition could lead to a part in an entirely different show. Even if you're not right for the show you're going in for, someone in the room might think of you for another project now

or in the future. Bottom line: Always do your best. Make each audition an event and work with high stakes within your imaginary world. You can think of each audition as a performance you get to give. It can be fun, even with the nerves. Be alive in the room, alive in your work. Find the joy of performing. They'll love you if you're glad to be there. Walk in as if you're a winner—not arrogant but confident and upbeat.

And finally, find ways to stay alive creatively between auditions and jobs. Take classes and workshops, listen to recordings of singers and shows, sing for your friends, put together your own cabaret act. Be an artist in an ongoing way. Remember, the "product" you're selling is your ability to reveal yourself, to live truly and deeply in your performing.