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A shot to the ego.....

HANDLING REJECTION

by Maureen Pratt

CONGRATULATIONS. You got the part! You're floating on air as you race down the school hallway to pick up your script. You're smiling, laughing, and telling everyone the great news. Once the script is in your hands you carry it with you until it's scuffed and frayed and you know your lines backwards, forwards, and upside down. During rehearsals, your mind races ahead to opening night. On opening night, you plan for a career in theater, more shows, success, and awards. Your friends and family are impressed, almost as happy as you. And, at the cast party, you couldn't be happier.

After the show closes, you audition again and look forward to the next part. On the day the cast is posted, you walk confidently over to the callboard. You look at the cast list. Once. Twice.

Three times. You blink. You gulp back disbelief. You didn't make it.

Instead of gliding away on a cloud of joy your feet drag like cement blocks. You avoid looking at your friends as you leave school. At home, you grab a bag of potato chips and lock the door to your room. There, you make up excuses for not getting cast, and you tell yourself again and again that you really didn't want a part in the first place. And you decide never to audition again. You and theater are through. These two scenarios sound extreme. For actors, they are not. If you're involved in any way with the theater, you'll be riding a seemingly never-ending roller coaster of emotions. Some days, you will be on top of the world, loved and praised by all. Other days, you will want to avoid even speaking with the mail carrier. You'll think that no one likes you and that you'll never work again.

Dealing with acceptance--getting a coveted part, landing a job designing sets or lights, or having your play chosen for production--is easy. We all know how to celebrate. Being accepted is what drew most of us into the theater in the first place; someone chose us, someone applauded, and we responded by having the time of our lives.

The other part of the picture is less pleasant, but it's just as much a part of a life in the theater. Being rejected for a part or a job in a production is a big disappointment at best. At worst it can shake your confidence to the point of making you question your commitment to theater.

If you want to do theater, you must be ready to be accepted and rejected, and let neither instance completely and decisively govern your overall involvement. If you get a part or a job, work as if it was the one and only time you will ever work. If you do not get the part or job, lick your wounds, learn the lesson, and move on. There is something to learn from every rejection, a kind of silver lining to an otherwise painful experience.

Each instance of hearing "no" helps you build a career that is more realistic, satisfying, and healthy. Each time you are rejected, you gain more insight into what a producer or director looks

for, what kind of competition you are up against, and how you can improve or change what you are doing so that the next time might be different.

If you look at rejection constructively, you will discover that it is not the cruel slap in the face that it might seem to be. It could be that you simply don't fit with the objectives of the production or the theater company. Maybe you aren't tall enough, short enough, old or young enough. If you're a playwright, maybe your work's cast size was too big or there were too many men or women in it, or the production was too elaborate for the theatre's budget and space. Whatever your area, remember that no one is rejecting you because he or she purposely wants to hurt you. Everyone wants what's best for the production, and sometimes you're it and sometimes you're not. The disappointment you feel is natural, but no one is making you go through it because they want to. Auditioning for a show is like job hunting. While a job ad might say, "computer literate, type 50 words per minute," an audition notice might say, "woman, 25-30 years old, 5'7" or taller." You can't do every job in the classified ads, and you shouldn't expect to be the right type for every part. The difference is that you can improve your typing speed or take a computer class, but you can't very easily change your appearance or body type (although some actors go to great lengths to try).

To a certain extent, it's impossible to know if you're what a director is looking for; no one expects you to be a mind reader. You can do your homework--find out as much as you can about the production, the play, and the parts. When you audition, you might wear clothes that hint a particular character (this can backfire, though, especially if the director has something else in mind). Certainly, pursue the kinds of roles you know you can do. (If you don't sing, for instance, it will be discouraging to audition for musicals.) Despite all your work, there are no guarantees that you will fit into that mysterious directorial vision. Be prepared for this and accept it. It's a way of life in theater.

If you're a director, stage manager, designer, or techie, your skills are more easily quantifiable. You either know how to run a particular light board or you don't. You either have directed a show before or you haven't. No matter what skills you have, taste is a major factor in deciding who will work on a show in all of the creative positions. Find out who does the hiring--or, if you're a writer, who makes the decisions on play selection--and what kind of theater interests them. If you do your homework, you can increase your chances of working more steadily.

This leads to a very important consideration when you audition for a part or present yourself for a job. The phrase "who you know" has been used to the point of cliché in theater. But its meaning and import in relation to getting work is far from cliché. With the number of people competing for parts and jobs at all levels of theater, from Broadway and regional companies to community theaters, the known person is more likely to be entrusted with fulfilling a director's or producer's vision. If you're brand new to a group, chances are you will be taking tickets, painting sets, playing in the pit orchestra, or having staged readings of your work before you'll do more. This is called "paying your dues." Each time you move from one level to the next, unless you're extraordinarily lucky, you'll pay those dues all over again. If you're a star in high school, expect to be an unknown in college. If you're an award winner in college, expect to prove yourself all over again when you move into the professional world. Remember that this doesn't necessarily have anything to do with who you are and what you are capable of doing. It may mean nothing more than that other people were there before you and they are used to and comfortable with working

with each other.

It is always possible, though, that rejection can mean that you're trying to work at a level that is beyond your present capability. Thus it is enormously important for you to be realistic and honest with yourself about what you can and cannot do, and what you want and don't want. If you're not, you will be rejected many more times than if you set your sights on work that is within your reach. Sometimes, it's difficult to look at your skills objectively, especially when your family and friends are supportive and encouraging. You know deep down where your strengths and weaknesses lie. If you don't, you should find out.

There are several ways to take stock of what you can do. Ask yourself a lot of questions, such as: Do I like to sing in front of people? Do I stay on key? Am I confident moving or dancing and duplicating those movements time after time? Do I remember lines easily? Am I afraid of heights to the point where I shudder if I think about getting up on a ladder or catwalk? Can I make decisions about where people should move on stage or what a production should look like? Do I have a vision of a play and can I transfer that vision accurately into script form? You also should read external signs, such as how often and in what roles you're cast, and how you compare to the people around you who are doing the same thing. It's up to you to be honest with yourself and to pursue those avenues that suit you most.

Now, you've accurately assessed your capabilities, you think you can fulfill the director's vision, and you're working with a group of people who are just right for you. You'll have no more problems, no more rejections, right? Wrong. The roller coaster ride doesn't end. Along with your new and clear understanding of rejection, you need to have ways to cope so that rejection doesn't hamper your ability to see clearly and move on. At an opening night party, given in honor of a friend's play, we were talking about rejection letters. All of us had been produced, all of us had had our share of successes. But, we still got rejection letters, and each of us had a creative way of handling them.

One writer said he papered one wall in his study with the letters, and another said she kept a journal of the funniest ones. I've heard of writers making origami birds out of rejection letters, and still others who throw darts at them. The point is not to deny their existence, but to acknowledge that they are a part of the game. When you don't get a part or a job, say, aloud, that you realize you didn't get it, and leave it at that. Don't blame it on the weather, the fact that the director didn't have breakfast that morning, or the color of your socks. Try to determine if there is anything you could have done differently and then accept it.

The theater is made up of people, and your friendships with the people you work with are an invaluable part of your life beyond success. Actors I know support each other by meeting regularly to discuss casting calls and auditions. There is strength in knowing that everyone is in the same boat, and you can learn by sharing experiences that might illustrate mistakes made and to be avoided in the future.

Before you expose yourself to the scrutiny of a director or artistic director, get to know two or three people whom you can trust to give you honest, forthright criticism of your work. Consult with them if you have learned a new monologue, written a new script, or have a new resume. If each of those people says the same thing chances are they are on the right track and you should at least take their comments into consideration when making changes. Getting constructive criticism before your work is competitively evaluated for a job can minimize your

chances for rejection and make you more confident in your presentation.

Along with professional support, be sure to work at maintaining strong friendships and family relationships. You're never so brilliant or so successful that you won't need friends and family to relax with, rejoice with, and cry with.

Read biographies of people who are doing or have done what you want to do. You'll soon discover that even the most successful person has experienced rejection, failure, and times when he or she felt like giving up. The inspiration such stories bring puts your own disappointment into refreshing perspective. There also are some practical things you can do to alleviate the sting of rejection. Indulge yourself in some pampering when you first get the bad news. Take a bubble bath, listen to a favorite record, reach for that chocolate. Treat yourself to something special and comforting, even if it's your old teddy bear. You deserve to treat yourself nicely.

But you can't let that pampering go on too long. Whether you are an actor, writer, designer, or director, if you want to work in theater, the only way you're going to do it is to keep busy.

Continue auditioning, writing, sending out resumes, taking classes in dance, music, scene study, electrical wiring, even a foreign language, and looking for ways to weave the knowledge you're acquiring into your work. Look upon the time between shows as time to learn and grow; use every moment to its fullest.

The last and perhaps most important thing to keep in mind about rejection is that when it happens, it is not the end of the world. I know that sounds terribly trite, but it is true. Maybe you don't have the part, but you do have friendly people around you, a universe of knowledge to explore, and coming up soon, other chances to audition. What a life in the theater lacks in job security it makes up for in wonderful surprises. You never know when the next one might come along.

You can always make the choice, at any time, not to go into theater. There are many other professions and pastimes. But be prepared for highs and lows there, too. After all, theater mirrors the world.

If you choose to continue to pursue some kind of life in the theater, whether professionally or as an avocation, you should make that choice with the clear understanding that the roller coaster ride does not stop. Your highs will be the highest and your lows the lowest. If you prepare yourself for every possibility, you will survive. If you learn from each disappointment, you will certainly grow. And if you can look rejection square in the eyes and resolve to try again and again, you're on your way.

*Maureen Pratt, a playwright who lives in Los Angeles, is familiar with both rejection and acceptance, and likes acceptance better. That happened most recently in February, when her play *In Good Faith* won the best new play award in the Maryland One-Act Play Tournament.*

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