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Why Didn't I Get The Part?

by Geron E. Coale

The cast list is posted. Anxious actors gather around, holding their breath, looking for their names. There are squeals of delight, murmurs of surprise, and groans of disappointment. Many walk away muttering under their breath, "Why didn't I get the part?" Some - the inexperienced, the immature, or the brash - might even confront the director with that question, expecting a simple answer. But as every director know, there isn't a simple answer. Casting a play is a complex, intricate, and usually frustrating process that defies easy explanations. But actors deserve an answer to the question, if for no other reason than to help them prepare for the next audition and cast posting, The criteria a director uses in selecting a cast fall into three broad areas: acting ability, suitability for the role, and relationship with the ensemble. To be cast, you must meet the director's requirements in each of these areas.

Acting Ability

The first thing the director looks for in an audition is basic acting ability. As each actor reads for the role, the director is mentally asking questions like these:

- Does the actor have a grasp of the language? Does he appear to understand what he is reading?
- Is the actor making sense of what she is reading? Is she conveying meaning?
- Is the actor able to grasp the emotional content of the reading and convey that to the audience?
- Does the actor show variety in her reading? Does she seem to be able to express more than one emotion, purpose, or intensity?
- Does the actor appear "natural", or is he formal, stilted, or forced?
- Does the actor have "stage presence", that hard-to-define poise, power, and presence of mind that makes an audience want to watch and listen?
- Is the actor able to use his face, hands, and body to reinforce and expand what his voice is doing?
- Does the actor have that sparkle of excitement that enlivens a scene and engages an audience's interest?

If the answer to some of these questions is no, you won't be considered for a role. But you're not cast yet; there are still two more criteria. The next one involves the actor's suitability for the particular role.

Suitability for the role

A play is not just actors on state; it is actors in specific roles. An actor may be immensely talented but still not get the role. Why? Because the director must be sure the actor will work in

any given role. The qualities that suit an actor for one role but not another generally fall into two categories: physical and emotional.

First the physical qualities: in order for an audience to enjoy a play they must be able to believe in the characters. And whether we like it or not, the first criterion for believability is appearance. Height, weight, coloring, body shape, and age are all elements of physical believability. If the character is a shy sixteen-year-old boy, then a thirty-year old, 220-pound linebacker will not be able to believably play the role, no matter how talented he may be. The phrase, "type casting" is often used with disgust, specially by actors who don't get roles they want, but it is a reality of the theater. Audiences bring to the theater certain stereotypes that must be taken into account. They expect fathers, bosses, kings, and gods to be tall and powerful, have deep voices, and look imposing. Young lovers are expected to be attractive, lithe, wholesome, and - yes - young. The actress playing the ingenue can't look like she's been working in a bar and grill for the past ten years. And make-up can only do so much. It won't change an actor's body shape or, beyond a point, age. (Age is a complex characteristic that involves much more than just wrinkles or the lack of them. Posture, movement, vocal quality, muscle tone, skin texture, and other factors all affect an audience's perception of age.)

But even if you do look the part, you may not get it unless you are also emotionally suited for it. Playwrights write into their plays characters who are sweet, intelligent, introspective, forceful, witty, sardonic, playful, mischievous, serene - in short, characters who may be defined by any of a vast number of qualities of personality. The ability of an actor to match the emotional requirements of a character is just as important as the ability to match the physical qualities. Not even the most talented actor can play power and weakness, wit and dullness, charm and repulsiveness with equal believability. If a director senses that an actor won't be able to carry off the innocence or vulnerability or dependency a given role may require, that actor won't get the role. It's not a question of acting ability, but emotional "type". If you are talented and have the right physical and emotional qualities, you are two-thirds of the way home. But sometimes you still don't get the role. Unless you meet the director's expectations for a third criterion: your potential relationship with the rest of the cast.

The Ensemble

Actors generally appear on stage with other actors. And they always appear in relationships: father/son, husband/wife, master/slave, boyfriend/girlfriend, cop/robber. In most plays, the relationships are more complex than these simple dyads, involving three or four (or more) characters.

Directors select casts, not just individuals. They must choose actors who will work together on stage. A director is like the manager of a baseball team filling out a lineup card. Sometimes the ability of a particular player to play a particular position is secondary in importance to the team's need..to field a balanced team. Maybe the first baseman is asked to play shortstop because there is not a good shortstop available, but there's another first baseman who is adequate. A good shortstop combined with an okay first baseman is a better infield than a superior first baseman combined with a terrible shortstop.

Sometimes the best actor for the male romantic lead may not get that role because he doesn't look good or connect emotionally with the best actress for the female romantic lead. If the

second best actor for the male lead looks great and clicks emotionally with the actress, he's going to get the role - especially if there's only one actress who can be cast in the female role. Casting is often like working a puzzle. If Actor A goes in Role 1, then Actor B must get Role 2. But Actor B works better in Role 3, because there is no one else who can handle the dialect. So Actor B must get Role 3, which means that Actor C is the best one left for Role 2. But Actor C and Actor A aren't even believable as father and son, so Actor A doesn't get Role 1 - even though he may have auditioned better than anyone else for it. In fact, Actor A may wind up with a minor role, or no role at all, simply because of the way the rest of the cast lineup must go to make the best possible ensemble.

The mature actor recognizes that it is the play, not the individual performances that matters. She would rather have a small role in a play that is successful than a large role in a show that's a flop because there are too many weak or miscast actors.

So: if you are talented, and you fit the role physically and emotionally, and fit nicely into the ensemble the director is considering, there's a good chance you'll be cast. But maybe not. There is a fourth criterion that all directors use, although some of them may not admit it or be able to explain it.

The Director's Instincts

Theater is, after all, an art and not a science. Artistic choices cannot be reduced to formulas and factors, and directors make casting decisions intuitively, going with their gut feelings, as much as they depend on their rational analytical skills. Sometimes their choices defy logic or explanation. But successful directors learn to trust their instincts, because in art that's where the percentages are.

The next time you don't get the part you think you deserve, put yourself in the director's chair for a few moments. Not getting cast doesn't mean you're not a good actor. It means only that for this role in this show with his mix of available actors, the director has made another choice. There are a lot of variables in the equation. The next time you audition, it's quite possible that the ones that kept you from being cast this time will work in your favor.

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