

Staying 'In The Moment' with Audition Monologs
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As the TBA Generals approach and audition season picks up, here are a few thoughts on selecting and preparing an audition monolog.

Selecting

Choosing a good piece is the first and most important part of the audition process. The material you select tells auditors a lot about you as an artist, your tastes, and how you see yourself. To find new pieces, see and read as many new plays as you can, identify authors who tend to write for your taste and range, and ask everyone you know to keep an eye out for pieces for you and do the same for them. Pick pieces that you have a strong connection to. Even if it is the silliest piece imaginable, it should tickle you in some way and express a side of yourself that has some meaning for you. Ten different auditors will like ten different pieces, so forget about trying to please everyone and choose pieces you love.

Choose material that is in your range. Save stretch work for class or (if you're lucky) for rehearsal. Remember, an audition is a mini-performance. Try to assess your own strengths and weaknesses as honestly as you can, and get feedback from others on your selections. Start a weekly or monthly monolog/cold reading group with your friends where you can try out new pieces for each other and practice your cold-reading technique. It helps if the members are different types, ages and ranges to lessen the feeling of competition in the group for material. Never use a piece a friend introduces you to without asking their permission, and avoid the monologs from collection books, as they tend to be overused. Finding new audition pieces is a never-ending part of most actors' lives, so it's helpful if you can learn to enjoy the process.

Preparing

Over the past five years, teacher and director Richard Seyd has developed the Trigger Approach, a system designed to help actors stay more 'in the moment' while performing. Here is a simplified version of that system as it relates to preparing an audition monolog.

It is helpful to divide monologs into two types - story pieces, and pieces that contain a spontaneous series of thoughts (of course some pieces will have elements of both). With a spontaneous series of thoughts, the first thing you do is to break down each thing you say into individual expressed thoughts (these often coincide with punctuation, but this can vary). Break the text down into the smallest thoughts you can without losing the sense of the line. For example "Fine I guess" could be broken down into 2 separate thoughts (Fine / I guess), but as 3 thoughts (Fine / I / guess) begins to lose its meaning. Once you have broken the text down into separate thoughts, put each thought on a separate index card. The reason for this is because when you see a monolog on a page, and learn it from the page, you are seeing the totality of the piece and where each thought lies on the page. You then have to work to imaginatively turn that into a movement through time, which is what any monolog actually is. If you put each thought on a separate card, and not look at it on the page again, then you are working on the piece from the beginning as a movement through time, and not a chunk of text.

The next step is to do the "trigger" work. Begin by using the stack of cards as your script, going thru them one at a time (numbering them on the back is helpful in case they get out of order). Go slowly at first, not worrying about pace. Start by saying the first thought to whomever you imagine you are speaking to, and then before you look at the next thought, think what it might be. Then look at the next card and see what the writer actually has you express. If what you thought it might be was different from the actual line, ask yourself two things:

1. What is in the immediately preceding moment that triggers the next expressed thought?
2. What is the difference (even if it is only a slight paraphrase) between what I thought it might be and what the writer actually has me say?

After answering these questions, even if only tentatively, go back to the beginning and continue working your way through the entire piece this way. At no time should you be saying the lines out loud directly off the cards, but only speaking when you are looking away from the cards at the person you speaking to. As you are speaking each thought, imagine before you speak how you want to affect the person(s) you are talking with.

The idea behind this process is to help you to understand what specifically you are responding to as you go from moment to moment. It is not "memorizing" in the traditional sense of the word, but learning the specific content that leads to the next thought. You are creating for yourself a deeper understanding of the thoughts, which will in turn create

for you the freedom, in performance, to not think ahead and be more fully in the moment as you learn to trust that your next thought will come. Rather than experiencing it as a prepared speech, it will feel that it is coming from inside you, one thought at a time, and you will no longer see the words on the page as you perform. Many actors also find that they lose their self-consciousness working this way, and feel much less nervous.

You will also find that you can risk a fuller expression of each moment without worrying that you will forget the words. Anticipation is often a reaction to a fear by actors that they will forget the words, and if you have memorized by rote (that is to say, without and understanding of why you say what you say), going very deeply into each moment may very well leave you lost for words, since you have no connection from one thought to the next. If, however, your understanding of the text is built on each moment leading to the next, then the more deeply you go into each moment, the more likely it is that the next thought will appear for you effortlessly.

With story pieces, you can do much of the same Trigger work, breaking the text down into thoughts, putting each on separate cards, working out how one thought leads to the next, and using the cards as you learn the piece. However, the source for many of your thoughts will not only be the immediately preceding thought, but also images from the event itself, as you replay it in your mind. Therefore it is important to create the event for yourself in great detail, even greater than that given in the script. That way, as you tell the story, you will be choosing details to tell, and leaving others out (as we do in life), and still maintaining a strong inner experience of the event in all its fullness. Even though you have the totality of the experience inside of you as you tell it (in other words, you know how it ends), how the story is told will still be spontaneous, arising out of the memory of the event itself and the interaction with the other the story is being expressed to.

A few other questions can be helpful to ask yourself when preparing a story piece. First, how long ago did this story occur? If you are telling about an event that happened yesterday it will have a different tone than if you are telling about an event that occurred 20 years ago. Also, ask yourself how many times the character has told this story before. If you are revealing a story of a difficult trauma from your past, it will feel very different to tell if it is the first time you've ever spoken it to anyone, as opposed to one that you've worked through and told a hundred times. If you do choose that you've told it many times, ask yourself what kinds of reactions this character might have gotten when he/she told it in the past, and what expectations they might have as they tell it now. Finally, ask the very important question of who you are speaking to. If you are not clear and specific with this choice, you will tend to drift back to watching yourself as you perform, rather than focussing on something or someone outside of yourself. Also, if you are not clear on the circumstances of the play, you will tend to play emotions rather than situation, which will take both you and the auditors out of the piece.

One way to help create a very specific other is to imagine reactions that the person you are addressing is having as you speak to them. (You can do this with any audition monolog, not just story pieces.) For example, you might imagine that they turn away, or say something inflammatory just as you reach a certain part of your story. Simply address the piece to a spot on the wall, an object, or out in space. Decide what the space or spot is doing rather than trying to imagine an actual person as this can take away energy from what you are trying to do. It is generally better to address your piece somewhere over the heads of the auditors or between two people, as most auditors get uncomfortable if you do your piece directly to them. Also, don't do your piece to an actual onstage chair - it is too concrete an object and tends to limit the auditors' imagination of who you might be talking to and how that person is reacting.

Many times, clues to answering questions about who you are talking to, or your relationship to the story you are telling can be found in the play or script, but if they are not, you can create a powerful backstory for yourself. Always make the strongest and highest stakes choice you feel the piece can hold, one that stirs your imagination, and is fun for you to play. When performing an audition piece out of context of the play, you can change the given circumstances to your liking, but good writers will usually give you plenty to work with if you read the whole play carefully. Also, radically changing the context of a piece from a well-known play (ex.: anything by Shakespeare) may be very jarring to people that know the play well.

A few last thoughts: Keep your pieces short. At the TBA Generals, if you do two pieces, each should not be more than 45 seconds long (if you have 2 minutes total), or you will be nervous about going over. Start with the piece that you are most comfortable with, and introduce your piece(s) loud and clear. The introduction is just as important as the piece itself, so practice them together. Break a leg!