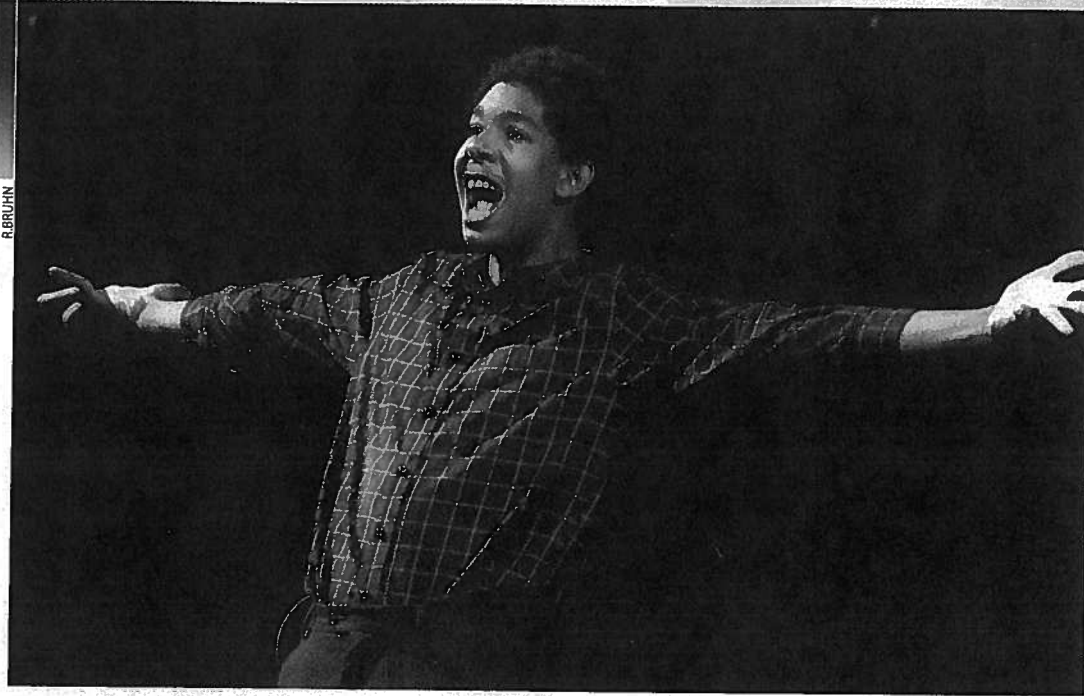


Musical Theatre Audition



BY JOE DEER AND ROCCO DAL VERA

Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera have auditioned more aspiring singers than they can count, Deer for Wright State University, where he heads the B.F.A. musical theatre program, and Dal Vera as a professor at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. They're also the authors of Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course, published by Routledge, and of a series of articles adapted from the book that appeared in this magazine. The two offer this set of guidelines for students preparing for a musical theatre program audition.

Identify the audition requirements for each school

This will guide you in selecting songs and monologues. Every school will have specific audition requirements, and they won't be the same from one school to the next. You'll need to look at these differing requirements and identify the common features among all of the schools. Chances are, you'll

discover that having two contrasting songs and two contrasting monologues will cover your bases.

It is especially important that you follow the audition requirements rigorously. Your selections should be cut to guarantee you don't go over the time limit. Keep an eye out for lists that say, "don't sing or perform these pieces." Nothing makes a faculty member disregard you faster than doing something they've explicitly told you *not* to do. If one school is tired of hearing "I Dreamed a Dream," then most of them probably are. Go to *The Pirate Queen* or *Martin Guerre* instead.

Don't create multiple audition packages

If you have prepared these four contrasting pieces, you'll be fine. Avoid creating five different packages. You can't possibly be secure with that much material under pressure.

Select the material early and prepare it with good help

Identify vocal and acting coaches with

experience in preparing students who have been accepted into good programs. Even if you love your drama or chorus teacher, if she's never helped students get ready for college before, you might want to get some additional advice.

Stay close to your own age and type

Don't stretch or try to show range by playing roles that you're not appropriate for. Although you may have specialized in old men and hunchbacks in high school, colleges are going to view you as a normal seventeen-year-old. Select material that is within the age range of about fourteen to twenty-five. Younger than this and you'll be singing *Annie*. Older, and you're playing past your own maturity. It will ring false.

There is a lot of great material within the range that you can play. Select material that is right for you. Be realistic about yourself. If you are the girl that every guy wants to date, it's going

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to seem odd if you sing about how
“Nobody Makes a Pass at Me.”

Find contrasting material

Most schools ask for contrasting packages. Contrast can mean many things: belt vs. legit, ballad vs. up-tempo, serious vs. comic, classical vs. contemporary. These are all valid contrasts.

In general, you don't get points for doing any specific kind of material. The song or monologue should be great for you. Your performance is more important than the novelty of the material. The schools are not looking for playwrights or composers, they're looking for actors with potential.

Let the material show different facets of who you are. Your silly side, your loving side, your lonely side, your passionate side, your comic side, and so on. Each selection, whether sung or spoken, gives you a chance to show something new about yourself.

It's always about acting and singing

Don't psyche yourself out by thinking that what you wear is the determining factor. Your hair, your charm, whether the person before you did the same song—none of those things are really very important.

When it comes down to it, the schools are looking for talent that they feel will develop well in that particular program. Know the material cold. Understand what you want from the imaginary partner. Decide what they do in response to you moment-to-moment. Know the story and immediate circumstances of the selection clearly, then personalize them.

If you have a pretty voice, it will help. But the whole package of the singing actor is what most schools respond to. A genuine engagement in the character's circumstance with good technical support is what gets you accepted 99 percent of the time.

Dance is often helpful, but not essential

Schools place different degrees of importance on your dance ability. Some view it as a bonus, but really focus on singing and acting. They might expect virtually no dancing skills, feeling that they have four years to get you ready.

Others insist on your having a high level of proficiency when you come in. If you already dance, stay in shape. If you don't, get into regular jazz classes, at least twice a week to start with. But understand that you can't become a dancer overnight. This is really just to get you a little more comfortable with your body.

Have real dance clothes and jazz shoes (or jazz sneakers) with you for the audition. You will almost certainly change for it. Avoid overly baggy or excessively sexy clothes.

Double check each school's requirements for dance.

Start your preparation early

Most college auditions happen between the end of January and the middle of March. So begin the process of selecting and preparing your

pieces early. You need time to winnow down your choices and own the material. In the actual audition your main attention should be on your acting work. The technical aspects of singing should have become so second nature to you that you don't think of them anymore.

Find ways to try out your audition

Perform it in some lightly pressured situations (recitals, cabarets, senior citizens homes, etc.). Think of your audition as a short one-person show and give yourself plenty of time to refine it in front of audiences before you face the high-stakes critics. Set up mock auditions with all the students from your school who are applying to colleges. Or get together with students from your region who are prepping. You may need to do some organizing, but it's worth it to get the experience of a few practice auditions. You might even all pitch in and hire a theatre professional to watch your auditions and give constructive advice.

Help the accompanist out

Make sure your music is in the correct key for you. No on the spot transpositions, please. Any cuts should be clearly and simply marked. The music should be photocopied double-sided, and put in a three-ring binder that allows for easy page turns.

Make a checklist and folder for each audition

This will remind you of what you need to bring, when you need to arrive, and where you're going. Each folder will contain maps and important phone numbers, letters you've received, brochures, and possibly other material for only the school you're auditioning for on that day.

Allow plenty of travel time—if you're flying, you must arrive the day before. Don't forget a clean shirt in your bag and a water bottle.

Stay loose and be adaptable

Every school will have a slightly different format. Don't let unexpected changes throw you off your game.

(The water spot on your shirt is not a big deal!) Some schools may have an interview portion of the audition, while others will not. Be ready to talk about why you've decided on this career path. You can really be yourself without putting on a show. No egos or divas here, but no shrinking violets, either.

They've got to pick someone—why not you?

All schools need students to train each year. So, as you approach the audition, remember that you have something very important to offer a school. If you are talented and prepared, you have a good chance of getting into at least one good program. This should be reassuring. We assume you've done some real soul-searching to determine that this is the career for you and that you have a competitive level of talent to begin a life in the musical theatre.

Stay positive

You can make it easier on yourself if you remember a few things from the outset. First, everyone gets rejected by a handful of schools in this process. This is a fact of life, and it doesn't mean that you're not talented. It might just mean that you don't fit into the needs of that particular school. Each program accepts a limited number of students, a limited number of men and women, a limited number of musical theatre or acting majors. Some schools even cast the class with one leading man, one brassy belter, one sexy dancer, and so on. They may already have one of your type. This is one important reason that you should apply for a range of schools. It will allow you the maximum chance for finding a program that suits you.

This is an exciting time for you, and one that's full of hope and at least a little anxiety. Our observation of successful students shows that following this simple advice will help you navigate the waters of college auditioning with a minimum of stress and the best possible results. Good luck! ▼