The Before-the-Audition Workshop

*Introduction*

Prepare yourself. I am about to give the best advice on auditioning that you will receive:

Stop auditioning.

The term “audition” implies a sort of job interview, and it’s time you stop going to those.

Instead, happily work for free for a few minutes. If you enjoy working with the directors and/or producers, you can sign contracts and keep going. If not, it was fun and you’ll do it again sometime soon. No more auditions, no more job interviews. Just short-term pro bono work to see if you’re a good fit.

The difference is far more than semantic.

An actor’s greatest poison is the urge to impress. It is ruinous to our craft at every step of the journey. Yet it is, to many, an inherent part of this thing we call an audition:

Your agent emails saying you have an audition. You rush to read the character breakdown, wanting to know “what they’re looking for.” You read the script with that breakdown in mind. You begin to prepare, hoping to impress them and be this thing they are looking for. You go in and do your best to convince them that you are a good actor and right for this role. Then you walk out, feeling at best ambivalent and at worst like a failure. Sound familiar?

Imagine instead you are given a role without an audition: you don’t need to read a breakdown, because you already know they want you. You read the script and begin an invigorating preparation process as you puzzle out how you will bring your unique personality and skills to fighting for this character’s needs. As you begin to work with director and other actors, you make adjustments, big and small, always excited by the chance to further explore. When the work ends, your only regret is that this exhilarating process of practicing your craft has come to an end. Man, that was fun.

Why can’t this describe the audition process as well? It can, if you rid yourself of the need to impress.

Your job is never to figure out what they want or to convince anyone that you are a good actor. Your job is to have fun and explore from your own original point of view.

Think back on auditions that have gone well. You’ll probably recall that when you first read the script, you were flooded with instincts and ideas. You instantly had your own take on the character that grew and evolved as you worked. You knew how to own the part, and you took that into the room.

When that happens, it feels like magic. The great songwriter Tom Waits said that every song comes into the world differently: there are songs that you have to sneak up on like a rare bird, songs that need to be bullied into shape, and there are songs that come fully formed, like a dream taken through a straw.

The same is true of acting roles. That magically easy and fun audition is the dream taken through a straw. But that doesn’t come around often. All other parts are rare birds or in need of bullying.

But too often, when it doesn’t come easily, when your instincts don’t immediately kick in, you panic. "I don't get this; it doesn't speak to me." You feel stuck, so you start to ask questions. "Well, what are they looking for? What would another actor do with this?" And those questions - they are poison. They are traps, and they will take you down.

To avoid those traps, you need a plan: specific techniques that you can implement every time you pick up a script. Simple, practical skills that grow stronger with repetition. Ways to be sneaky, ways to bully. Ways to not give up when it doesn't come to you right away.

The basic framework of this plan can be introduced with the following habits. Some of them seem simple, but all of them require attention and practice. They only work if you dedicate yourself to doing them *every time* you pick up a script or rehearse a scene.

If you develop these practicable skills until they are habits, you will be excited by roles that once scared you. A difficult script is not a burden; it's a chance to coax something into existence. An audition is not a test of how good you are; it’s a chance to use your craft and get in touch with your unique you.

Auditioning should not, should not, *should not* be like constantly going on job interviews. It should be like working for free while hoping paid work follows. Job interviewees are hoping to get the job; you need to go in as if you’ve been hired.

This mind set, I know, is no easy trick. A lucky few have it instinctually, but for many, it is hard to overcome that need for approval. Getting past it is a mind trick that takes some practice, and this approach to audition preparation is an outline for that practice.

And from the first time you try it – the first time you think “I’m going to go to work now” before entering the casting agent’s office – you will know it is right. You will know it feels better. And you will know that it is the key to both success, happiness, and longevity in this business. And so you’ll keep getting better at it, until it’s your second nature.

Become the kind of actor you want to be by forgetting about what kind of actor they may want you to be. Stay true to the story, the character, and, above all, yourself. Stop being nervous, stop trying to impress people, and please, stop auditioning.

*First Habit*

Read it out loud – the first time and every time.

* Treat the scene as actions, not words on a page
* Know that you can’t get it “right”
* Without any other knowledge, you know that the role starts with you, and all other choices are variations and additions to that unique you.
* Always read the script before you read any character breakdown – attack the scene from your own perspective first.

*Second Habit*

Run it before you know it

* Once you’ve careful read the scene two or three times out loud, set down the script and run the whole scene
* Do not allow yourself to stop. Run the whole scene, whatever happens (even if you immediately forget everything and the scene is entirely improvised). If something throws you off and you need to recover, recover within the scene. Take what is happening and make it work.
* Test what is sticking to you brain most immediately
* Go back and see what you missed altogether. That may point you to the hardest part, which you must solve and connect to in order to unlock the whole scene.
* You’ll be emphasizing that the scene is what happens between action and cut, not a repetition of a fixed template.

*Third Habit*

Rehearse in motion. All kinds of motion.

* Early in your process, start moving around, not to realistic blocking, but simply for the sake of moving: go to a window and look out, cross to the far corner of the room, stand on a table, create a modern dance, etc.
* Move between lines, not while speaking.
* Let your instincts find the beat transitions; those are the times you’ll want to move.
* If you’ve highlighted your script by highlighting the stimulus, you may see some beat changes jump out. When you reach a beat change, stop. Move somewhere new. Begin again.
* Movement helps with memory. Spatial memory is our strongest. Also, neglecting to pay attention to the transitions if often a memory blocker (almost every time you “go up,” it’s at a beat change).
* Taking you time to think though the transition through movement helps to get a literal new perspective for a new beat.
* Even when you are still throughout a scene, you are moving through the story, so give that some physical reality as you develop that subtext.

*Fourth Habit*

Fill up the box, then shut the lid tightly.

* Play the scene in the most over the top way you can manage: big physicality, big emotions, huge stakes, high drama, etc. It should feel ridiculous, but commit yourself to that ridiculousness.
* The play it again with as little outward movement and vocal expression as you can; stay still and monotone. But be *thinking* of the over the top version you just did; keep it alive internally. The resistance – doing nothing against doing everything – is a compelling dynamic. It’s similar to how an actor is often most interesting when she’s keeping a secret from the audience.
* You can only know the big version if you *do* the big version. Just imagining it or knowing the stakes is not enough.
* Film acting is not small. It is compact. And the difference is crucial. You don’t do less. You do more with less.

*Fifth Habit*

Play the opposite choices for the entire scene.

* Discovering the opposite choice means clarifying the original choice (if you don’t know the opposite, you don’t really know the scene).
* Exploring polarities exposes interesting choices or brings out nuances that avoid two dimensional performances.
* It also reinforces the idea that there is no one “right” way to do the scene. It’s a puzzle with endless solutions
* Try not just the opposite, but varying choices along the spectrum. This keeps you exploring and not locked into to one way of doing the scene. Denying the template reminds you that there never really should have been a template to begin with.