

TWO MINUTES AND COUNTING

FINDING the MONOLOGUE that FITS

By Michèle LaRue

No salesman in his right mind would choose to make his pitch on a two-minute deadline. But coast to coast, dawn to dusk, actors have to do it every day.

In theatre, the two-minute monologue is as essential as it is ubiquitous. Your headshot/resume may be your calling card, but your monologue is

your introduction; it's your monologue that gets you invited back (or not) for the next audition.

Your monologue should be as singular, as honest, and as memorable as your 8x10. But how do you find it? Just what should you be looking for—and where?

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Back Stage addressed these questions and more to a few of the many experts in the field who have taught, lectured, and written on the subject. Though not always consistent, their answers provide some solid guidelines for your next monologue hunt.

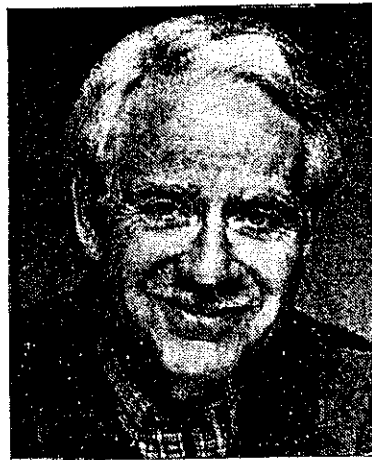
What Do I Look for?

First, recommends Jack Poggi, author of *"The Monologue Workshop"* (Applause Books), "Be very clear about what you do best and enjoy most as an actor. Most actors look at a monologue as something imposed on them from the outside—an obligation they have to meet. They start out trying to decide what people want from them. The questions are always, 'What are they looking for?' It's important to have a sense of how agents and casting directors feel. But it's also important to start with a sense of what you have to offer in the business."

Ask yourself, Poggi continues, "What special qualities, what special gifts do I have?" (Are you comfortable with complex language? With humor? With emotional vulnerability?) "What kinds of feelings come readily? What do I do in life that makes people laugh? What kind of relationships engage me?" Do you connect better, for instance, with a father-son relationship than with a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship? Actors who have done that kind of survey, says Poggi, "know what they're looking for." He is quick to add that this kind of questioning should extend beyond monologues—to "roles you'd want to play someday, or authors who help you use your gifts best." He's convinced that "once you find that author, you'll find the right roles." And those roles will probably include some monologues.

Ginger Friedman, author of *"The Perfect Monologue"* (Bantam Books), advocates creating your own monologue from "already existing dramatic literature." She emphasizes that she does *not* mean that you should write your own monologue from scratch. Rather, you should "look for dialogue that deals with the here and now—dialogue that allows the actor to create a strong relationship between the two characters." A piece of that dialogue can become your monologue. After all, Friedman points out, "a monologue is a two-character scene. It's just that one character happens to be doing all the talking for the next two minutes; the other character happens to be listening." This kind of scene "allows the actor to demonstrate to the auditors a full range," states Friedman, whose credits include several years as a casting director and a teacher of "acting for the audition."

Generally, however, you won't be able to show off your range in a scene written originally as a monologue within a full-length play. Such a monologue, Friedman continues, is most likely to be "a memory piece where the character is simply telling a story of an event which has already taken place. This makes the action totally passive because it's all past tense. We want to see that actor dealing with a sense of immediacy, where within the dialogue there is emotional action, emotional reach-out, and emotional power between the two characters. Then we can see who the actor



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truly is and what he's got to offer us, because he's working off passion, humanity, vulnerability, through the relationship between those two characters." The actor's range is revealed, she reiterates, through the relationship.

Friedman also believes that "an actor should not limit himself to material that deals only with that actor's age range, race, and gender." (Cold readings, she notes, are an entirely different story.) "If you are a 20-year-old white male, isn't it possible that a 40-year-old white or black male or female could be saying something that you could relate to?" As long as the dialogue you're working with does not describe a type other than yours, if you connect with the material, you should feel free to use it. However, cautions Friedman, "the actor should play his *own* age range, gender, and race"—*not* pretend to be a different type specified by the playwright.

Mimi Gina recommends that actors

look for what she calls "signature" pieces—pieces that you "strongly identify with because of some unique quality innate in the material." For instance, she offers, "Translate material from your particular ethnic heritage, find exposés that closely parallel your experience with your family, locate speeches with a point of view you strongly advocate." Although you're going to have to edit this kind of material, ultimately, it can "make for an engrossing audition, and show that you know your type without typecasting yourself."

Gina—a student of Lee Strasberg and formerly a teacher of acting technique and scene study at New York's Strasberg Theatre Institute—feels strongly that the actor should be an "advocate" for whatever monologue he picks. Performing material that you feel has an important message, she says, is one way to give yourself confidence in an unnerving audition. "Don't pick material you feel is wonderful," she admonishes. "Pick material you feel you *want* to communicate."

Although a logical extension of this approach would seem to be writing your own monologue, Gina emphatically advises against doing so. First, she explains, "when we write our own materials, we oftentimes can't objectively observe if what we are saying is communicated to an audience." Lacking objectivity, such a piece "can become a self-indulgent kind of personal release. But that is not what drama is. Drama is the representation of universal experiences."

Second, Gina believes that "the actor can harm himself by becoming comfortable" with material that does not offer the "challenge" of scripts. When an actor writes his own material, she explains, it's easier to say to himself that he can paraphrase or improvise in the audition. An actor should be skilled in knowing "how to infuse his emotional life into the words written by another human being. The actor bypasses this challenge by writing his own material. This can be a dangerous precedent when it comes to the next step in the audition stage—the cold reading," warns Gina, who now privately coaches audition monologues and acting technique, and teaches a related ongoing class.

Third, Gina believes "that an agent or a theatre director or a casting director feels misled...when they find out after that the material was produced by the actor. The auditioner [i.e., the person conducting the audition] is unsure as to whether the actor can be this natural with the written script—and we want no wariness on the auditioner's part."

Where Do I Find Them?

Beware of overused monologues.

(You'll find some examples below.) It's hard for an auditioner to be objective or excited about his 12th viewing of Neil Simon's "The Star-Spangled Girl."

While Friedman and Poggi put plays at the top of their resource lists, they and Gina mine rich monologue lodes from works not written for the theatre. Poggi, a professional actor who has taught acting for 30 years, declares that performers can go "as far as they like" in their research—"so long as it's material that really grabs them and that they have a real passion to do."

In your search, advises Friedman, "Forget the word 'monologue.' The worst way to look for a monologue is 'to look for a monologue.' Read plays, see plays, and fall in love with a play. Think of all the plays you've read and seen in your adult days. Have any affected you powerfully? Did they really reach you? There's a hidden monologue in each one of those plays. Create your own monologue from the scene or scenes that most affected you."

Poggi has found in novels a great deal of material "that's very contemporary, very eloquent, and shows actors off extremely well." But he acknowledges that some people who conduct auditions respond unfavorably to monologues that aren't found in plays. "Decide what you want to do, knowing that not everybody is going to like it," he says. "If you tried to follow all the rules that people in the business try to tell you, you would not be able to do anything."

By broadening your selections to include films, novels, journals, memoirs—even poetry—you're less likely to audition with a piece that everyone has heard before. But non-theatrical sources have their own drawbacks. Films, for instance, as Friedman points out, offer "less usable dialogue than plays do," because their message is usually strongly visual.

Still, after plays, Friedman's favorite monologue sources are films and novels. She finds poetry, non-fiction, and songs "not so good," because they're not strong on "relationships—two people talking to each other." Gina, on the other hand, includes poems in her list of possibilities. She also suggests transcribing films from your VCR—because the few screenplays which have been published are

usually only first drafts—and seeking material "outside of drama stores." Comb book stores for ideas, she suggests, paying "particular attention to first-person exposé sections, such as true crime, sociology, women's studies." Especially for a film or television audition, she believes, works not originally intended for the stage are the best choice. "The kind of material that's used on film sounds very different from the kind of material that's used in theatre work." The actor has to be aware of this.

Gina adds that such selections require editing: "We must always keep in mind that drama means this moment can only take place at this moment and something will change as a result of this moment. Sometimes we have to scrape away the unnecessary or the unimportant that clings inadvertently to this sort of material." To achieve this, the actor will, "to some degree, either have to work with a coach or finely hone his editorial skills." A novel can take a long, perambulating journey to its destination, but an audition must get there quickly and succinctly. In editing his monologue, the actor should clearly establish the spine of the action—and should somehow create "the essential factors" that he has learned from the full film or novel.



How Many and How Long?

Basically, our interviewees agree, you're going to need a range of two-minute monologues. According to Friedman, in New York City, two minutes is the max. Elsewhere, you'll often be asked for two monologues of two minutes each. Graduate schools frequently allow you four or five minutes "to do anything you want." (And she adds mischievously that in California, "the auditors say two minutes—but they forget.")

To be prepared for unexpectedly shorter auditions, Gina suggests that you select a two-minute monologue that can be trimmed by a couple of sentences. Poggi calls two minutes "a good standard length," noting, "some can be three; some need three"—and sometimes you get the chance to do three.

According to Poggi, a roster of two monologues may be enough for some people; six to eight would be a sensible maximum. It depends, he explains, on what the actor's goal is. If you're aiming for film or TV, you only need to have contemporary monologues. If you're going for regional theatres, you need at least

one classical, preferably two. He concludes, "It's also very helpful to have one- to one-and-a-half-minute monologues to put together and mix and match to show your diversity."

Gina recommends having at least six pieces at the ready. If you're auditioning for the theatre, she comments, you should certainly include contrasting contemporary or classic theatre material in your repertoire. "But some pieces are cross-over pieces that can work wonderfully for



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both genres."

Friedman is quite specific. You should have at least four monologues in your rep, she declares—plus, if you are classically trained, two classical pieces. "The first two selections should have no dialect or accent at all; the next two can." Within each of those two categories, one monologue should be comedic; one should be drama. If you are up to doing two classical monologues, one should be comedic; one, drama—"although sometimes you can find both qualities in one piece."

"When an actor has six monologues at his disposal," Friedman concludes, "he has to intelligently choose the one that is going to most complement [the audition]; what might best present the qualities that they're looking for in this play?" (Although there's never any way of knowing for sure just what your auditioner is after.)

Friedman, whose next book, "Call-back," will be published by Bantam in September, defines "contemporary pieces" as those written "roughly after 1920—those that are 70-100 years old." Conversely, "classical" selections come from the likes of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chaucer, Chekhov, and Balzac. For Poggi, "classical" is "something that is not in contemporary colloquial American English. It's in verse or some heightened form of English," and written before 1840. But he distinguishes an intermediate classical period (Chekhov, Strindberg, Wilde, Shaw), called "modern classics," and

another subdivision of "American classics" like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller.

Selecting your monologue is the first and most critical step towards your audition: as in directing, good casting is three-quarters of the job. Once you've made your choice, of course, you'll still need to give it long and thorough rehearsal. Mere memorization, as Friedman emphatically points out, is by no means enough.

Nor is monologue preparation a one-time activity. Your work doesn't end with the debut of your first batch.

"Keep replenishing your reper-

toire," urges Poggi. "Monologues get stale after a while. Let one go, put it aside for at least six months or a year; put it aside and keep bringing in new stuff." He remarks that developing new material will also increase your enthusiasm for your work.

Then, too, as years pass, you're going to change as a person and a performer. Make sure that your audition material grows with you. "Work toward having your pieces feel like old shoes," advises Gina. They should be "comfortable, familiar, and friendly, to be dropped as you change and as they 'wear out.'" □

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Overexposed

There are auditioners who don't care if they view the same scene often—if it suits the actor and the actor performs it well. But most casting directors crave variety. *Back Stage* asked seven of them to list the monologues they've seen too often.

Responding were: Laura Richin, Abaldo/Richin Casting; Wendy Etlinger and Stephanie Diozzi, Wendy Etlinger Casting; Stuart Howard, Stuart Howard Associates; Pat McCorkle and Diane Silverstadt, McCorkle Casting; Michele Orlip, Michele Orlip Casting.

Here are the nine monologue sources they advise you to avoid:

• *A Boy's Life* by Howard Korder
• *A...My Name Is Alice* (the Laundry scene) by Joan Micklin Silver

• *As You Like It* (Phoebe) by Shakespeare

• *Bliss Window* by Craig Lucas

• *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* by John Patrick Shanley

• *Henry V* (Henry) by Shakespeare

• *Identity Crisis* by Christopher Durang

• *Laughing Wild* by Christopher Durang

• *Lone Star* by James McLure

(Richin expands on this, adding "all of Chris Durang's stuff." Howard empathizes that *Laughing Wild* and the laundry section from *Alice* comprise 25 percent of the men's and women's monologues he sees.)

—M.L.R.