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Auditions: The Do's, the Don'ts, the Sheer Terror



Jeffery Corrick - The creator of "The Audition," with different actors each night, calls it "reality theater."

By ADA CALHOUN

THE AUDITION

Wings Theater

154 Christopher Street, West Village, (212) 696-7303

SIDES: THE FEAR IS REAL

The Culture Project

45 Bleecker Street, NoHo, (212) 307-4100.

BETSY HEAD '01, an actress and a director, was on the A train in April 2004, traveling to yet another acting tryout, when she suddenly thought: "I want to direct another show just so I can watch people audition. I wonder if other people want to see auditions." She has her answer. "The Audition," which Ms. Head, 26, calls "reality theater," had a sold-out four-day run last fall; its second production starts Wednesday at the Wings Theater in the West Village.

The concept is simple: each night, a different set of 11 New York actors auditions for a panel of directors and a theater full of people, who vote for their favorite performers. In the first act, the actors present prepared monologues. In the second, those who are called back perform cold readings. "Every time we go to 'Urinetown' or to whatever, we see who wins," Ms. Head said. "Who are the people who almost win? What was the show before the show?"

By coincidence, at the Culture Project in NoHo, there's another, darker show about auditioning: "Sides: The Fear Is Real," from Mr. Miyagi's Theater Company. Through skits, "Sides" - the word is theater jargon for audition texts - sends up the tension among actors, the ridiculous concepts for shows ("Hip-Hop Medea") and the sort of director who says, "I have two words for you: orange."



Brian Barenio - "Sides: The Fear Is Real" features Rodney To, left, and Peter Kim.

"At first we were a little concerned that it would be a huge inside joke," said Hoon Lee, a member of Mr. Miyagi's Theater Company, "but we've found that people really identify with the fear, the humiliation and the awkwardness. Audience members come up to us afterward and say, 'Oh, I had a date like that!'"

Between "Sides," which reveals the absurdity and terror of the tryout process and "The Audition," which enacts it, one gets an excellent primer in how to land a role. "The biggest mistake I see people make is not connecting with the directors," Ms. Head said. "You want to address them and remember their names." If a director suggests a change, make it. Oh, and that ubiquitous chair? It's a trap. "They want to see you move," she said, "so don't use the chair unless you use it as a car or something."

She also sees the appeal of the omnipresent suicide monologue ("It's hard, but if you do it right, you get a big bang for your five minutes") and staples - never paper clips - to attach head shot to résumé. "If you paper-clip it," Ms. Head warned, "it shows you have no idea what you're doing."

The cast of "Sides," including Rodney To, Jane Cho, Peter Kim and Sekiya Billman, artistic director for Mr. Miyagi's Theater, also had a few don'ts.

Be careful of your dress, Ms. Billman advised. "When I auditioned for 'Miss Saigon,' " she said, "I wore a 50's cocktail dress that had a little train. I went to the bathroom right before I was supposed to go in, and when I stood up I noticed the whole train had been in the toilet."

Mr. To added: "Don't try to squeeze a tenor out of a baritone voice. I've fallen for that and tried to sing Journey's 'Open Arms' in B flat."

And Ms. Cho said, "The thing about auditioning is that you have to act like everything's completely normal, no matter what crazy thing they're asking you to do."

At one audition, Mr. Kim said, a choreographer told a group of dancers: "After you do the eight-count combination, if you feel comfortable, you can strip. If not, you can just take off your clothes, or strip. O.K., let's go."

Just that day, Mr. To said, a casting director had instructed him, "You, down" to indicate that he should sit, and then had taken away his sides. Mr. To's smile never wavered. "I was just sitting there," he said, "thinking, 'I am so putting this in our show.'"