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Fishing for monologues

How to catch the perfect audition material

BY EVA PATTON

IT'S THREE WEEKS before your audition, and you're on the hunt. Okay, two weeks. One week? I understand what you're facing. I was a high school (then college) theatre student without any idea where to start when it came to looking for monologues. I felt a certain embarrassment that I didn't know more than I did. So, first of all, I want you to know that there is no shame in not knowing what you do not know at age 17 (or 20 or ...). Now is when you begin. And it's imperative that, if you intend to have a career in the theatre, you do begin.

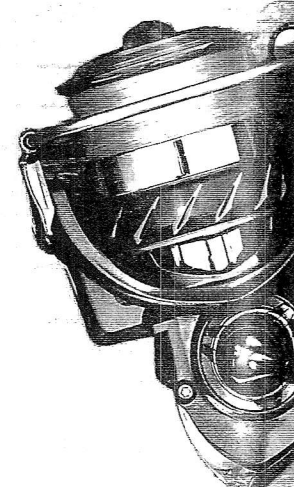
I'm talking about more than finding the right monologue for your next audition, though we will talk about that. I'm talking about beginning a lifelong habit of reading plays and thinking about the stories you, as a theatre artist, want to tell. Only then will the chronic monologue dilemma be

solved. In fact, it will take care of itself. It will involve some work, and I have some challenges for you. So, let's get started.

Challenge one: Learn to fish

I've taught acting for 26 years, and I recognize the unmistakable signs when audition season arrives. Panic fills the halls, all faculty office hour sign-up sheets overflow, and there's an unsettling competitive spirit in the air, as if there's one elusive fish left in the pond and everyone has to get it first. The fish, of course, being the Ideal Audition Monologue. You know the one: the one no one else has ever heard of, the one that fits you like a glove, the one that will make the audition panel laugh *and* cry, the one that will land you the role.

For as long as I can remember, when students come to my office door during audition season — panic stricken, sans monologue — I have done what any con-



scientific acting teacher would do: help them find a monologue. In fact, more often than not, I simply give them one. And off they go, crisis averted, audition ached, and role secured (hopefully).

Fast-forward five months. Audition season rolls around again. The same students sign up for office hours. I have a strange sense of *déjà vu*, as they ask me for monologue suggestions, but I brush it aside, telling myself that of course they need new monologues. It's not like they can use the same piece again. So, I give them new monologues, and off they go again.

Fast-forward three years. IM notification dings. It's my former student, now living in Chicago.

Me: Hey, so great to hear from you. How's Chicago?

Student: It's great. I actually have a really big audition coming up this Friday.

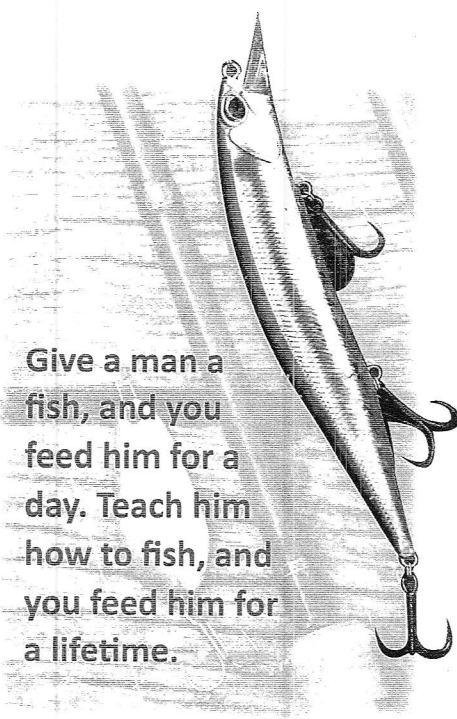
Me: That's fantastic! I'm sure you're gonna do great.

Student: That's the thing ... I was wondering ... do you have any monologues you could recommend?

Insert long-overdue eureka moment for teacher.

Dear students, I will admit it's not easy for a teacher to realize they've been doing something wrong — like *not* teaching. It took quite a few interactions like the one above before it dawned on me that by simply placing a monologue in a student's hands again and again, I'd only given a temporary fix. That's when the old proverb popped into my head: Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.

So, I committed myself to doing



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a better job of teaching my students how and where to look for excellent audition material. Now when students come to my office to “talk about monologues” — code for “give me a monologue” — I tell them to pull up a chair, and we sit together in front of my computer, as I lead them on a tour of my favorite fishing holes, which I include below for you. My hope for my students and you is that, by the time you are preparing for your college senior showcase or graduate school or professional audition, you have a wealth of rich material at your fingertips, not because your teacher handed you a few monologues along the way but because you learned how to navigate the many phenomenal theatre resources out there.

Challenge two: Develop a lifelong habit of reading plays

Around the time of my aha moment,

one of my students (a freshman acting major named Jack) scheduled an office hour with me to “talk about monologues” before his audition for our upcoming season. So, I got his fishing pole ready. Jack came through the door, took a seat, and before I could say a word, reached into his backpack and pulled out five plays he'd recently read, each with characters and monologues that were perfect for him. “Okay,” he said, “I'd like your opinion on which of these you think might be best for me given our upcoming season.”

Insert sound of angels singing.

Jack read the pieces aloud, we discussed the pros and cons of each, and then we decided on his best choice for the audition. Before we had this fruitful, student-led meeting, Jack had spent hours reading plays, researching the season, and thinking about how he might fit in terms of casting.

As we were wrapping up our meeting, I told Jack that he had raised the bar in terms of what a student must prepare before a monologue meeting. Then I asked if he would lend me one of the plays he had brought. It was one that I hadn't read. I love when that happens.

Shortly after I met with Jack, another one of my students (I'll call her Susan) came to see me to (you guessed it) “talk about monologues.” I started by showing her the Actors Theatre of Louisville's online archive of their Humana Festival of New American Plays. I was glowing, waxing poetic about this holy-grail moment, when she sighed heavily and said, “But the thing is, how do I know if these plays have any good monologues in them?”

Insert angels' singing screeching to a stop.

My favorite fishing holes

A beginner's guide to audition material from new plays

WHETHER YOU'RE looking for new monologues or want to expand your knowledge of new plays and playwrights, the list below contains some of my favorite go-to resources. Each is an overlooked mine of information. Make a habit of visiting these sites. Read the play descriptions and cast breakdowns, read the playwrights' bios, and look at production photos. As you do, you'll start to get a clear idea of which playwrights you want to explore first and which plays may have roles for you. Happy fishing.

The New Play Exchange

(www.newplayexchange.org) is a streamlined script discovery and recommendation engine for the new play sector built by the National New Play Network. NPX is the world's largest digital library of scripts by living writers. Students can subscribe for \$7 per year, allowing you to perform advanced, filtered searches, download and read scripts, and contact writers.

League of Resident Theatres

(www.LORT.org) is the largest professional theatre association of its kind in the U.S., with 74 member theatres. Through the LORT website's Member Theatres section Member Map, you can navigate to each member theatre's website to peruse their production history. I recommend starting with Actors Theatre of Louisville, where you can scroll through the plays produced in the Humana Festival.

The Kilroys' List

(www.thekilroys.org) includes the results of an annual industry

survey of excellent unproduced and under-produced new plays by female and trans playwrights. The website notes that playwrights on the list have been encouraged to list their plays on the New Play Exchange to make them as accessible as possible.

HowlRound's World Theatre Map

(www.worldtheatremap.org) is a user-generated directory and real-time map of the global theatre community. Students can create a profile and search the ever-growing directory to connect to organizations, people, shows, and events.

The Drama Bookshop

(www.dramabookshop.com) is the next best thing to visiting this little New York City gem in person and spending hours with other actors perusing plays. They have a great monologue collection organized by year of publication. Caveat: When your teachers tell you not to get a monologue from a monologue book, that's because (a) these pieces tend to be overdone, and (b) they don't want you to choose a piece from a monologue book without reading the play. You *must* read the entire play. Monologue books are only a starting place to see which writers appeal to you. While on this website, also check out the Staff Picks, New Plays, and On Stage sections to get to know the plays and playwrights being produced in New York and London.

New Dramatists

(www.newdramatists.org), located in New York City, provides playwrights with time, space, and

resources to create work. Playwrights selected as part of the resident company participate in a seven-year, new-play laboratory. If a playwright is a current resident or alumni of New Dramatists, you want to know their work. They're all listed on the website.

The Lark

(www.larktheatre.org) is an international theatre laboratory based in New York City, dedicated to supporting extraordinary playwrights. Check the Featured Playwrights and History/Timeline sections for a complete listing of playwrights past and present. Like the New Dramatists website, you won't find plays or monologues here, but if finding fresh, new audition material is your goal, the first step is having your finger on the pulse of new and emerging playwrights. Once you have a list of playwrights to research, go to the Drama Bookshop and New Play Exchange websites to find their plays.

Theatre reviews

in the *New York Times* (www.nytimes.com), *Chicago Tribune* (www.chicagotribune.com) and *Los Angeles Times* (www.latimes.com) will keep you in the loop with the latest theatre news. You don't have to buy a subscription. Your school or local library should have a copy these newspapers. So, read the reviews and look at the production photos. There may be a role for you.

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Additional resources

Doollee.com

www.doollee.com/index.php

Dramatic Publishing Company

www.dramaticpublishing.com

Dramatists Play Service

www.dramatists.com/text/browseplays.asp

Dramatics magazine

www.schooltheatre.org/publications/dramatics

National Theatre Books

www.shop.nationaltheatre.org.uk/plays.html

Nick Hern Books

www.nickhernbooks.co.uk

Playography Ireland

www.irishplayography.com

Playscripts Inc.

www.playscripts.com

Samuel French Inc.

www.samuel french.com

Smith and Kraus

www.smithandkraus.com

TCG Play Index

www.tcg.org/Publications/AmericanTheatreMagazine/PlayIndex.aspx

TCG Books

www.tcg.org/TCGBookstore/TCGBooks.aspx

And don't forget to search the play indexes and browse the stacks at your local libraries.

"Well," I said, as calmly as possible, "you will need to read the plays."

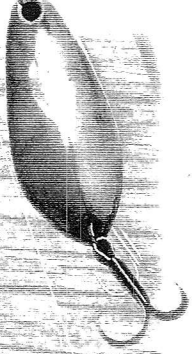
It was one week before auditions, and Susan barely had time to read one play much less work her way through a regional theatre archive of plays in search of the perfect audition piece. But I told her that if she read a play a week — starting now — then when next year's auditions rolled around, she would have 52 new plays under her belt to choose from. Too much of a commitment? Then read a new play every two weeks. The point is, if you commit to reading new plays on a consistent basis, you can say goodbye to last-minute audition panic.

You may feel that even reading a new play every two weeks is daunting. I get it. Plays aren't always easy to read. A script is like a piece of sheet music: It's meant to be performed. So, as you read plays, looking for possible monologues, be an active participant and continually imagine how this story (and this text) might look, sound, and feel in its fully realized form in production onstage.

Theatre is what we do, and reading plays is what you *must* do on a regular basis if you are a student (or teacher) of theatre. Learn to love it. Start reading regularly, and you'll find it's addictive and so rewarding — even beyond monologue fishing.

Challenge three: Find the stories you want to tell

I can remember being a young actor and basing my audition choices on what I thought the directors wanted to see. Now that I'm often on the



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other side of the audition table, trust me that the people auditioning you want to see *you*. So, when thinking about the roles you want to play and the material you want to do, don't ask "What's my type?" but "What are the stories I, as a theatre artist, want to tell?"

Think about the stories that reach you, the stories you connect with, instead of trying to figure out how someone sees you. Then use that information to lead you to material. Find out who's writing those stories. Read those playwrights. Do those monologues. Seeing the monologue hunt through the lens of your preferences will lead you to writers whose plays you love and audition material authentically right for you.

Beyond the monologue and the audition, you will be taking charge of your artistic journey. And when that happens, you will enter every audition room knowing "This is who I am, and this is a story I choose to tell." And others will see you as you want to be seen: as an artist with an authentic voice. ▼