

Some Answers to the Most Common Questions

1. In your opinion, who is the best candidate for Grad School in Acting?

Whoa! Right out the gate, this question broke my brain! I think that I'd like to believe that that's not predetermined. For every program, in every year the conditions change. I'm a different person every time I watch an audition and every actor giving an audition is giving a slightly different version of themselves. I know that sounds very equivocal, but I'd rather not think that there is one person or one type of person that I'm looking for. I want to leave open the possibility that I'll learn something or that the actor in front of me will encounter a happy accident and I'll realize that we'd like to teach that person.

Ok, I promise that all of my answers won't be so slippery. I'll try to answer the question in the spirit in which it was asked.

The best candidate for an MFA in acting is a person who has some prospect of working as an actor and for whom 3 years of training will provide the needed tools for them to make the most out of that career. It would help if that person were consciously aware that they needed to do that work, and were ready to do it. It's important that they have the mental strength, physical stamina and generosity of spirit to make the most out of that time. I can't guarantee that I know with certainty that an actor has the resources to train well, but I'm alert to any clues I can glean.

Also, the best candidate for me and my program is also going to be the person who has some kind of rapport with me - somebody who gets me and who I get - somebody who's ready to learn from me on my worst day, and can make the most out of my program's style, and our way of working. I think it's important to state that *hoping* for that, and pretending that that's the case isn't sufficient. What I mean is that a candidate could read my views on this subject as a request for happy complacency, and the pretense of enthusiasm, but I'm serious when I say that if somebody doesn't click with me or doesn't click with our program they shouldn't pretend.

2. How many monologues should an actor prepare?

ALL OF THEM!! Just kidding. I believe that we're not alone in asking for two monologues. It's also not uncommon to ask for more pieces, and I feel good about actors who have more pieces. I guess I read this as a sort of baseline competence, and seriousness of purpose from an actor. When I ask for more pieces and the actor confidently has more prepared, I feel that I'm in the presence of someone who enjoys their vocation, and has a self-sustaining drive to work,

When an actor has more pieces, it also gives me a chance to see something new, so I would say that an actor should have four monologues that they feel great about, and that show some different aspect of their art. I'm happy to hear that an actor has more pieces prepared, but realistically, four is enough. I do know that some recruiters will push this as far as they can go, asking for monologue after monologue, to test the actor. If an actor has a capacious memory and can commit 20 monologues to memory, then that's cool, but a remarkable capacity for remembering words in public, is not equivalent to acting talent.

3. How many classical vs. how many contemporary? And what counts as classical?

Personally, I'd want half classical, half contemporary. That has something to do with my own affinities. In particular, I like Shakespeare, and all things being equal, I'd rather see a Shakespeare monologue than anything else. Beyond my own proclivities, though, I think that most recruiters want to see classical work because it's challenging, and contemporary work because it's easier to see if an actor can be personally connected to a role.

As for the definition of Classical, I should first note my own preferences. Shakespeare is psychologically and linguistically complex. It has a metrical dimension that can support an actor with rhythmic sensitivity. I also know the texts very well so it's clear to me when an actor has memorized faithfully. Doing work by Shakespeare's contemporaries is also fun, but I wouldn't actively encourage it, because plays by Marlowe or Kyd, or Jonson have all the challenge, and less of the humanity and richness. If you're doing an Early Modern English playwright, pick Shakespeare.

People also include Classical Greek Drama, Molière,, Shaw, even Ibsen or Chekhov in this category, and I can see the argument. These are period plays that require actors to understand and embody a world beyond their own. There are stylistic (formal) differences in the plays, and differences in the historical circumstances the characters are immersed in. It's useful to see how an actor deals with that. It's especially interesting for me to see an actor choose a monologue because they feel a connection with that material, and take some pleasure in bringing it to life.

I'm often disheartened by work from Greek Tragedy, but this is mostly because... To be honest, it's because actors can sometimes choose Greek tragedy because of the opportunity it affords to express emotional generalities. That's not inevitable, and I've seen really active, intellectually and personally connected work in Greek monologues, but when I hear an actor announce a Greek piece, I brace myself for self-indulgent emotionalizing.

There's another way in which I find monologues from the Greeks difficult is that they are, of necessity, in translation. It's not that I object to translation. I just think that most translations fall short of capturing the vividness of the original. I have this response to Euripides, Chekhov or Molière, and it's the rare translation that manages to invent a new kind of language that makes me feel that I'm getting the play in a living voice.

This is a fairly cranky opinion, and I can't say it's shared by other recruiters. I should also say that I'm not keeping score. If an actor does an Antigone monologue, I'm not going to discount their work, but I'd rather they were doing...José Rivera.

So, what I'm really saying is this: The categories of Classical and contemporary are imperfect. I think that what we want to see is one piece that shows the actor's ability to respond truthfully to circumstances that are personally close to themselves, and a second piece that shows that they can respond truthfully to circumstances (particularly those of style and language) that are more distant from their own personal experience.

4. In your opinion, what is the ideal monologue length?

The glib answer is “long enough to get something started, but not so long that I get bored.” As annoying as that answer might be, it probably captures the essential facts. We want the monologue to start somewhere and to go somewhere, but in all honesty, as soon as I’ve decided that I like an actor’s work, I have immediately moved on in my mind to the next step. I want to interview them, learn more about them, maybe see another monologue. It’s easy to imagine how a bad monologue could be excruciating to sit through, but even a good monologue can begin to wear thin if I’ve decided I want to move on.

To give a more direct answer, here are some arbitrary numbers: anything shorter than 30 seconds is probably too short. Anything longer than two minutes is definitely too long. U/RTA gives actors two minutes total to do whatever they want. Some actors do a single, two minute piece, but most divide that time between two monologues at approximately one minute each.

Obviously, if time limits are asked for, it’s important to rehearse the monologues that you can reliably complete them in that time frame and not feel rushed. In untimed auditions, though I’d still rather see a one minute than a two minute monologue.

5. What are you looking for in someone’s resume? How important is it that they have a lot of credits?

Really, reading the resume is partially ritual. It gives me a thing to do in my performance as the auditor. -- I realize that I’m answering these questions in a somewhat flippant way, but there’s something true underneath my jokes. The person on the other side of the table is presenting a performance of themselves just as the actor is, and looking at the resume, jotting down notes, these are on some level techniques for the auditor to regulate their own emotional state, and project their story to the actor.

But there are real things I’m looking for in the resume. I want to know the actual story of the actor’s experience. If a 30 year old actor has two credits at small theatres just this last year, then I know when they started their journey. If they impress me with their abilities/talent/whatever then the sparse, and late

credits tell me an interesting story. This is an actor with good instincts and a complex life story who just recently started to explore acting. If the same actor has a ton of credits and a long history of work, then I know that they're in a different place in their journey.

The summary here is that the right answer is the real answer. I want to know the story so I can contextualize the work.

I also want to know the names of people the actor has worked with. I've been around for a while and so I want to play the actor game of saying "Oh, you worked at _____ Theatre Festival! Did you work with _____?" It's a way of making connections, and if I need to, I can check into the relationships the actor made with people I know. This is a strong argument for always leaving a trail of good relationships behind you.

But to answer the question a different way. It doesn't need to be important at all to have a lot of credits. If that's the story your resume tells, and I like your work, then I won't harbor any negative feelings about the lack of credits. I'll probably congratulate myself on "discovering" an unmined treasure.

6 What do you look for in a headshot? How important is it to have a professional headshot?

Headshots are very important because actors need something to obsess endlessly about.

Seriously though, I feel very much the same way about headshots that I do about resumes. That is, nobody is going to be accepted into this program, or rejected because of their headshot. It's true that the quality of a headshot says something about the actor's taste, and their ability to organize, fund, and execute a project, but I think an actor auditioning for grad schools with \$1000 to spend on headshots might be better served to reserve that money for a campus visit.

Finally, a word about how I use headshots: I either ask for an electronic version of the headshot or I take a picture of the headshot to add to my folder of prospects. I make endless lists and tables with these headshots and I'm constantly adjusting and reordering these lists. It's certainly true that by the time we come

to making offers, I've interacted with these images hundreds of times, so it's possible that my unconscious responses to the image are affecting my judgement, but my goal is to use the image to remind me of the person. That means that the most important thing about a headshot is that it look like you. I don't think a professional shot is necessary to achieve that goal.

7. How many copies of a headshot and resume should an actor bring to their audition?

I usually interact one on one with actors. I'm the only one who needs a headshot, so one will suffice. It would be smart to have a few in reserve, but I'll only ask for one. As I said above, though, it's just as important for me that you're ready to send me the electronic version, or direct me to a website where I can find it. I do need a physical copy in the room, but it may not make it on the plane with me when I fly home.

Oh, and attach your resume to the back of your headshot. I'm not a stickler for rules, but if you've got an 8x10 photo and a separate 8.5x11 sheet of paper with your resume...I'm going to lose that. If you forget to bring a headshot or resume, I'm not going to be mad or view your audition in a biased way, but I will take my notes on a separate piece of paper, and I will lose that shit. Put the headshot and resume in one neat little package and you will maximize my attention to that representation of you.

8. What makes someone stand out in their audition? Is it the pieces they choose, their energy, their talent, their potential? Etc.

(I find that I have drifted from answering your questions with answers about "the actor" to addressing that imaginary actor as "you". I'll continue to drift, I'm sure, but I just wanted to acknowledge that.)

What really makes me pay attention, and what I think distinguishes someone as "truly an actor" is that the imaginary person they're talking to has some impact on them. That's such a fundamental and mysterious ingredient, and so rare and

easily disrupted that when I see something happening that appears to be coming from the imaginary interlocutor and landing on the actual person in front of me, I take note.

There are a lot of details that I might notice, and retrospectively define as the thing that made an actor stand out, but I'm reluctant to call any particular feature out.

...I'm reminded of a story you've probably heard. Johnny Carson asked Bette Davis if she had any advice for a young actress wanting to get into Hollywood. Her answer was, "Take Fountain." Now, that's a clever piece of verbal ambiguity, and it stands as a good line all on its own. I always think of it, though, as challenging the validity of the question. That is, if you ask a successful actor how you can succeed, they don't have any basis for answering that question. You're a different person and the circumstances have certainly changed since their early days. They can't tell you how you can succeed. They only know the conditions under which they succeeded - and they may have only a tenuous grasp on that. So when Davis gave advice about traffic routes, she was being more practically helpful than she could have been talking about acting, auditions, and agents.

And yet...I will give advice about standing out. It's based on an initial premise that the actor is focused first and foremost on the actual job of acting - that they are taking seriously the character's circumstances and goals, and that they are personally engaging with the actions that they've derived from a smart analysis of the text. In other words: do good acting.

But it's also useful to think of the audition monologue as a condensed, self-contained piece of theatre, and actors are too often shy about approaching a piece as a director. Think this is because we get trapped between the desire to be honest and unaffected, and the impulse to make choices. In each moment of preparing for the audition we can't make up our minds whether we're shaping the piece or living it, and between these two impulses we awkwardly interrupt ourselves. It isn't easy to simultaneously direct the piece and experience it as an actor, and so we kinda do each one halfway. Because we become what we rehearse, we often become *halfway* actors when we rehearse this way. The answer to that dilemma is to alternate between these two modes. Actually decide each time what you're rehearsing and how. Definitely make

strong choices in directing your piece, but then take those choices for a test drive, and decide how that worked. Above all, don't let fear, or the desire to show that you're clever, tempt you into rehearsing in a boring way, because rehearsing boring makes you boring.

One last note, regarding selection of pieces. This is probably contained in the previous paragraph, but...

Actors will often choose a monologue because it's got clever language, or has salacious, controversial ideas. In itself, this isn't a problem. The problem is that I see actors hiding behind the flash of the text and not really taking seriously what it would be like to be the person who needed to say those words. So what I'm left with as the observer is an actor standing uncomfortably between me and the text that they've chosen to put before me. If the content is sexual, or violent or otherwise provocative, I'm left with the impression that the actor has decided that I will be shocked by their daring and will somehow round that up to good acting. I feel underestimated by a choice like that. I'm not a prude, or a philistine. I'm a complicated, worldly person who is touched by humanity, complexity and the idiosyncrasy and variety of experience. When I think an actor is trying to shock me, I get annoyed.

So, again, the problem is not choosing shocking material. The problem is choosing material for the wrong reasons, and then not getting on with the real job of acting.

Here endeth the sermon.

9. What questions do you ask in the room to get to know someone?

This is where the resume comes in handy. I do like to have a chat about an actor's connections and context - where they've worked, and who they've worked with. It lets me situate my impressions of their skills and talents in a context of their experience.

I also like to get some idea of what excites them about acting, so I'll ask them to talk to me about a performance that impressed them, or a show that they were in that was compelling for them.

My usual question though, is “Why go to grad school?” I want to make sure they’ve thought about it, and that they have personal, clear goals. I sometimes do a little preamble where I suggest that “Why” can mean, “because of what?” or “to what end” and that I’d like to hear answers to both versions of the question.

I keep coming back to asking, “what do you need to work on” but 80% of the time I get no useful answers. I guess I’d like to believe that someone applying to grad school has a sense of what skills they lack and need to develop, but it may be impossible under the pressure of the situation to speak truthfully about one’s weaknesses. Or possibly people need the experience of grad school to come to a clear knowledge of their own process so that they can articulate what it is they’re working toward.

But actually, I find less value in questions and answers than I do in working on the pieces. By giving adjustments I can see how responsive to training they are. I can discover our rapport in the context of the work we’ll actually be doing. As a side benefit, hopefully, the actor will find that working with me made them better and they’ll be more interested in our program.

10. What are some mistakes that a lot of people make during their audition?

Choosing acting as a profession -- Joking! I’m joking!

I’m going to push back on this question too. When I hear other recruiters and acting teachers talk about auditions I get the impression of a bunch of privileged fuddy duddies clutching their pearls and collecting a list of grievances. For example, I have heard teachers advise actors to never turn their backs on the auditors. I had a colleague say that she would never choose an actor who sat backwards on a chair during a monologue. People! Calm the fuck down.

Suffice it to say that I find audition advice that begins with “don’t” or “never” to be highly suspect, and I think it reflects more on the narrow-mindedness of the auditor than it does on the teacher.

But back to your question. I think it’s probably a mistake to not think through the moments leading up to the start of the first monologue. It would also be a

mistake to rehearse this part robotically. It's certainly part of the performance, but it's an improvisation. Actors suffer when they replace this improvisation with a carefully scripted and overly polished routine. That fails because it doesn't match the vivid reality of the situation. Trying to present oneself perfectly will lead to doing a bad impersonation of a human being. Alternatively, and possibly as a way of avoiding that fate, actors will refuse to rehearse the walk into the room, the hand off of the headshot, the introduction and the naming of the pieces. If you haven't rehearsed, your going to get nervous and work inefficiently. The advice I like to give here is something Seth Rogen said when an interviewer asked about his acting method. He said, "Well I usually think, like...how would this go down?" It's certainly funny to think of Mr. Rogen having a highly developed acting theory, but actually this is good advice. Take the given circumstances seriously and rely on your own personal sense of how a human being could respond to those circumstances. In the case of the audition situation, we can think through the "text" of the event, and query the "context" and we'll build up a picture of how it might go down and what we want to achieve, and that rehearsal will help to keep us calm and task oriented in nerve wracking conditions.

If we find ourselves asking instead "How do I want them to think of me" we'll have to work backwards by thinking "I want Walton Wilson from Yale to think I'm awesome, so...how would that go down?"

What would the successful version of me be thinking, attending to, doing, caring about, in the world where Walton was impressed with me?

People do make mistakes. They talk too quietly, or they wear clothes that don't support the way they want people to read them. They make eye contact with the recruiters, forcing them to be a scene partner when they've got a more important task to do. Actors will stand immobile, or shuffle around in constant chaotic movement. These are all things I've seen and considered mistakes, and I could probably come up with a much longer list. It's important for me to say however, that for every mistake, there's a counterexample of someone who made that mistake, and I called them back anyway. This is something that makes a grad school audition different from a professional audition. I'm not looking for someone who can already do exactly what I have in mind. I'm in the business of teaching actors how to do things! It would be very strange for me to dismiss people from consideration because they still had things to learn.

11. What makes you want to call someone back?

Sheer desperation, and the drive to find someone, anyone who can act.

Jokes again, but there's a truth in there. We grad recruiters are really, seriously looking for actors who are talented, ready and interested in coming to work with us. That's often hard for the auditioning actor to keep in mind.

I think the thing that makes the most difference is the sense I get that the actor up there wants to be acting. It sounds dismissive perhaps, but most of the actors I see don't look like they're enjoying it. When I see an actor who gets a buzz out of having the opportunity to show us what they've got, I notice that.

I should make a distinction-- At U/RTAs we see a mass of auditions and we submit a callback request for the people we want to interview later that day. These are "callbacks" of one kind, and UCI holds a callback weekend for a narrower subset of the actors we've seen and interviewed.

So my answer is probably the same. I want to call someone back because I see something in their work that gives me an intuition that they will thrive in our program, grow as actors, and go on to successful careers that reflect well on my program and on me. For the U/RTA callback, I have only so many interviews I can manage - maybe 10 or 12 max - and so if I see that potential, or feel like I might see it if we interact a bit more, then I'm calling them back. The callback to the "Callback Weekend" is a bigger deal, and it means that I can definitely imagine this person in our program.

12. What are you looking for during callback weekend?

First, I'm trying to confirm that I've made a good decision. A few weeks may have passed since I saw this person act, and I need to be sure I wasn't hallucinating *. I'm also unveiling my curated group of actors to my colleagues and when I combine their impressions with my own I have a much better idea of who the candidates are.

Also, the extended contact time with me, with my colleagues and with our students is a kind of stress test on the candidate -- not that we're trying to stress anyone, but I want to know if their performance of self only lasts through a 15 minute interview, and if there's another person hiding beneath the mask. I think there's always another person under the mask. This is the human condition. I just want a chance to meet person number two, since that's who I'm going to be working with for three years.

We call back around 20. They fly in on a Friday night, spend the Saturday doing monologues, singing, and taking some short workshops. On Sunday morning they come over to my house for a pancake breakfast (my wife makes amazing pancakes and she is very generous to me and to these strangers).

So with all of that time spent with the faculty and the students, acting and taking class, and seeing the sights, we get a holistic sense of each actor; what their work is like and who they are as a colleague. That means that my advice to anyone coming to the weekend is very simple: just be here.

My advice to an actor at the beginning of this process is to put away some money and hit up friends and family. Who knows how many programs will want you to visit them, and whether they'll be able to help you with expenses. If you get invited, and you're interested in that program, you really don't want to have to turn down that opportunity for financial reasons.

Now, I've certainly taken people who couldn't make it out to campus. We've made do with skype, and video submissions, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't make a difference. We can't help but be more engaged with people who come all the way out to see us.

Additionally on this topic. It would be ideal for a candidate to be free and available from February through mid March. If you can plan ahead for the possibility of making trips to the programs that want you to visit, you'll have a much less stressful time of it. I'd also like to advocate for being a quick email responder during this time. When the communication goes slowly, and the airline tickets get too expensive then it becomes impossible to make the trip. I've seen that story played out in slow motion too many times.

13. What type of actor fits well in your particular program?

I think I must not be alone amongst recruiters in this: I want to spend my time with good humans. If I think that an actor is talented but unreliable, or that they don't care about being decent to people, then I'm not interested. When a candidate is rude to the office staff and nice to me, I'm not interested. If an actor isn't open to new ideas and needs to protect their ego at the expense of being available to the training, then I look elsewhere.

Obviously, there are lovely people who wouldn't be well suited to our program, but when I've discounted my impulses and accepted someone who didn't contribute to the atmosphere of mutual caring, respect, and support, I have regretted that decision every day.

On a more pragmatic level, we sit in this interesting space between "classical" and "realistic" acting when it comes to our training aesthetic. So we're not looking for a particular kind of actor. When we have an actor who is more grounded in the film and TV sensibility, we're challenging them to become more bold and skillful with complex texts or character transformation, and vice versa. We also don't have a particular "stamp" we'd like to put on our actors. We like good, adaptable, curious, inventive people who wear their considerable and varied skills with a natural grace.

* More and more we are asking for a video submission after the interview. For me this works sort of like the headshot does. It's a reminder of the person I saw, and maybe what it was in the audition that made me notice them. It isn't a reliable way to form a deeper impression of an actor's abilities, but it keeps them fresh in my mind. I think this is the way of things in the future, and every actor should have a video online so they can send that link the moment someone asks for it.