

AN EDITOR'S EYE ON THE STAGE

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My son has become a theatre impresario. For the week after he placed an advertisement in *The Stage* calling for CVs and photographs from applicants for the ten-strong cast of a rock-musical to tour Eastern Europe, I got to help open, categorize and respond to the resulting mail. In the course of this exercise I have come to see theatre production as a sort of editing in three dimensions, dealing with actions rather than words, people instead of papers; and to regard theatre agents with the same jaundiced eye that editors and proofreaders focus on the worst type of author.

Like editors, producers are selecting, grooming and amalgamating the work of a group of contributors, keeping relations with them cordial and standards correct, to achieve eventually a composite new whole.

Like authors, aspirants to the stage mostly don't bother with the notes for contributors, nor pay any heed to copy dates. Our production was rushing through a tight schedule; the advertised deadline for receipt of applications was Saturday 3 August. That day, and the following Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, the Post Office sent a special van to deliver our massive theatre mail; thereafter we continued to receive daily bundles. There were also hand deliveries driven to the door, faxes, and pleading phone calls.

Opening it all was heart-breaking, knowing that only three girls and seven boys, plus two understudy/swings, could be selected. Some 60-70% of the applications were for the three girls' parts, the odds against them thus even more heavily weighted.

We received in all about 800 applications; and this in early August, when so many are away on holiday – probably there would have been many more at any other time of year. The majority were clearly talented and eager, with serious, professional presentations; good glossy 10 x 8" pictures in stiff-backed envelopes. Still, 790 or so would have to be rejected regardless.

A sense of desperation seeped through, distressingly. They knew the statistics of applying for stage jobs, needed work, wanted this tour, and strove to stand out and be noticed, smiled upon. They enclosed poems; pleas; several copies of the same c.v.; cassettes; outrageous photographs; Letraset notices, 'PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE AUDITION ME', 'Look no further – you have found your Frank'N'Furter'. One stuck a teabag to a witty letter. But you stop smiling and gasping after opening the first hundred or so.

We stapled each photo on top of its accompanying c.v., with covering letter at the back, and sorted first into four piles: loonies / boys / girls / multiples.

The loonies were the obvious to-be-discarded (all editors receive junk papers like this): sprawling handwritten accounts of paper rounds or YTS work in warehouses folded up

and crammed into tiny envelopes, offcuts from photo-booth strips spilling out unattached. Others were somewhat more intelligent, but still sloppy or unsuitable, and badly presented. Sending a 3 x 5" s.a.e. for the return of a 5 x 8" photograph indicates a lack of serious expectation. So does 'Film and tv work: negligible', conscientiously included.

Boys / girls was an essential first division, but seemed not a possible one for the agents' submissions, where anything from two to twelve of their clients' CVs and photos were sent together in one envelope with a single covering letter listing names and details. The worst agent sent the most clients, without even a list, in a flimsy, tearing envelope, under-stamped. We paid the excess postage, glared at the dozen photographs, and tried not to blame the actors for the shortcomings of their agent. No problem, that, now; I pity them.

Multiple applications at first went into the fourth pile, but there were too many of them. We had to sort them into boys / girls eventually, separating them thus from their covering letters, which were assembled in another pile.

Boys and girls were then subdivided into fair / good / outstanding, with some small special categories – colleagues, unsolicited applications for posts such as wardrobe mistress, translator, etc.; body-builders. One of these last, singing and dancing moreover, was essential, but a rare commodity (well, how many do you know?).

The schedule was tight. We went through CVs on Sunday; my son took them to the Director on Monday and they drew up the lists for auditions; on Monday evening and Tuesday we rang the chosen ones, drawing up a schedule for auditions for Wednesday and Thursday – 35 ten-minute slots each day. The selected CVs were gradually sorted again into booked for audition / waiting reply / can't reach / can't attend an audition / reserves, etc.

Ringling the actors who'd applied individually direct to us was a joy. Their addresses and phone numbers were attached to their photos, easy to find, and their delight was apparent down the phone, making me feel like a kindly character in a B-movie myself. Obviously it was a help to us to be able to make the calls in the evening – but you can't, to agents' offices, and we had no home numbers for the actors whose agents had made their applications – couldn't approach them direct. Agents' clients who hadn't been contacted by Tuesday evening had to be left till office hours on Wednesday office hours.

Early on the Wednesday morning my son departed for the auditions in London while I opened that morning's hundred or so late applications. Eight slots that afternoon were still empty. I had a pile of CVs of people to ring in specified order – the last chance for eight lucky applicants from our eager 800.

After 9 a.m. I started phoning, working down the pile. I was also hunting body-builders, ringling strange men to ask about their muscular physique if I thought their photos, late arrivals unseen by my son, looked hunky. Calls to home telephone numbers elicited joy and rapid agreement to audition that afternoon; agents' offices provoked only answerphones, and I couldn't allow any places to be tied up waiting for replies that might not fill them in time. The first agent to answer his phone got two of his actors in, the second one promoted from the bottom of the reserve pile – a reward for actually picking up the phone. Other agents did far worse by their trusting clients.

One agent had moved some time before and was still sending his clients' CVs out with the obsolete telephone number – the new number was on only his one-copy-between-them-all letter. Luckily for his clients, his successor on the previous line answered the phone and gave me the new number, where I gritted my teeth at the answer phone which told me, 'If it's urgent we'll ring you back after six o'clock', and I concentrated on the mantra, '*It's not the actor's fault if the agent messes up his chances and loses the producer's goodwill*'. Some agents had put no address or phone number at all, not even the agency name, on the CVs – only on the once-accompanying overall letter. It took

quite a bit of rummaging to identify the letter and find the number, as well as a lot of determination not to let the actor suffer for the folly of the agent.

Several London agents' numbers were still prefaced with 01 – no indication whether to insert 7 or 8. One was even printed without 01. I dialled what I saw; got the voice telling me to try 071 or 081; guessed wrong; got through the third time, hating the actor, and invoking the mantra. The most obscure agent seemed new to the business and floundering. 'He'll have to bring a rock song', I said into the phone. 'A love song?' 'No, a rock song.' 'How do you spell that?' 'R, O, C, K.' 'Anything else?' 'He'll have to move.' 'Move house?'

Actors compete to get agents, regarding them as essential career props and paying them a good percentage of their earnings. After that week's exercise, casting a musical from advertisement to audition, however, I would say that actors would do much better to promote themselves, individually, efficiently, and directly, sending in carefully copyedited CVs. Maybe they need the services of freelance editors more than those of agents.

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