

Preparing for the Irene Ryan Preliminary Competition

The buzz in the hallways, the excitement in the air, the formal room monitors and the hopeful encouragement of your colleagues all inspire and or intimidate each actor involved in this competition. What experience will you have this year? Will it be a rewarding memory of success in performance, of new worlds discovered in workshops, lifelong friendships formed, last year's fleeting greetings renewed?

What your experience is, is ultimately what you choose for it to be. Your choice begins long before you arrive at the Festival Site.

If you are competing individually, your PREPARATION prior to the festival is where the seeds of your success are planted, fertilized and cultivated in hope of your talent blossoming at the festival. There are many aspects of the event that are beyond any one person's control. So our goal would be to identify that which is within the actors' control and bring a level of mastery to those elements.

There are several things that really catch my eye as a judge.

So let's see what seems to work and then we can investigate how to achieve them.

I love when:

- Actors enter the room with a strong, clear and easy feel.
- Ease is evident in their breathing, the flow of their movements, and the centered radiance in their eyes.
- They are neither rushing nor lethargic.
- They are not over or under confident.
- They seem to know this is where they are destined to be and that we the viewer will be moved by their gift to us.
- They introduce themselves and their partners with spark, fluidity and honest contact with the audience, speaking from the highest expression of themselves.
- They have a clear plan to arrange the set and a well-rehearsed transition from the introduction they have made, the staging and the scene beginning.

The ideal actors do a number of things well regarding their scenes:

- They choose material well suited to their talent and their body type.
- They choose material that has range within it, allowing for climactic moments and changing dynamics.
- They have strong character objectives with strong responses to the character's success or failure in the scene.
- They execute the well chosen material with a clear through-line of action-well directed.
- They play the scene rather than the text.
- They find a moment or two for a pause- that makes it funnier or more meaningful.

- They are clear in their diction, and the speech quality is appropriate to the style of the material.
- They are dynamically responsive and generous with their partners.
- They end about 15-30 seconds shorter than the time limit.
- They depart gracefully, leaving the audience moved in a surprising way.

Choosing the Material: Your scene choices are a reflection on you and are taken as such in the decision making process. What does that mean? If you display the same talent and skill as another actor in material that is well suited, we are likely to select you over an actor who is talented with less appropriate material for themselves.

Let's review the things that work and some ideas of how to accomplish them.

1. They choose material well suited to their talent and their body type.

At the preliminary event, the judges know that you have a contrasting scene and monologue at the ready, for when you are selected for the semi-finals. We don't however, have the knowledge of what that is. So, since range is an element we are seeking, in deciding which scene to do first, you might want to choose the one that demonstrates the widest range of skills.

2. They choose material that has range within it, allowing for climactic moments and changing dynamics.

It can be very tempting to select the most climactic scenes of a story as they provide the opportunity to act strong emotions. However, since we are called actors rather than emoters, find a scene that has EVENTS that happen, without which the story could not unfold as it does. If we can see each story as the archetypal battle between good and evil, an event is something that tilts the power more toward one or the other. These events change the relationship, storyline, situation, etc. that the characters are living. Sometimes the material may not seem to have the necessary dynamic for a strong arc. You can create an imaginary inner life that justifies the build and release of tension. You may start by simply rehearsing as if there is a reason to grow in dynamic. You might rehearse the opposite pattern-start aggressive, end softly. Play with the material in ways that you are sure it would never be done. Rehearse with your partner doing the opposite of you- slow/fast, staccato/legato, expanded/contracted, laughing/crying, etc. These rehearsals will help you avoid cliché interpretations. Ultimately you will want to choose the way that tells the story more clearly and dynamically.

3. They have strong character objectives with strong responses to the character's success or failure in the scene.

Each character has an aim, purpose, goal or objective he or she is pursuing and considers themselves to be a force of good, even if they are the "bad guy". Each event moves that character closer or further away from success or failure to attain the goal. A failure is likely to cause the character to drive harder toward her/his aim. To have to try new tactics, etc. will cause emotional responses which are then masked or revealed according to the choices the actors makes for the character. The climax of the scene will be when the forces of good and evil are at the height of combat and good is often in its most vulnerable position, with evil about to be victorious, and perhaps, somehow those forces of good overcome. This is not to say that we want to see fight sequences. Rarely have brutal combat scenes been successful in part because they rarely are done well enough to keep the flow of the scene focused on the acting rather than on actor safety. Nonetheless, one of the greatest weaknesses in scenes is a lack of dynamic

change. The scenes are all explosive tension and emotions with no real action or they are filled with low level conflict that never attains a climactic moment. We need the arc. Some tips on how to build an arc follow.

4. They execute the well chosen material with a clear through-line of action-well directed.
A good scene will have at least three major beats that create a clear beginning, middle, end and at least two transitions between these parts. Be sure there is a change between the beginning and the end. The stronger the change, the more dynamic the scene will be. Consider the dynamics of a song that leads to a crescendo and finale moment in three minutes. If the song starts with a crescendo and continues from there, we experience no change. And when the song starts softly, builds and climaxes we are excited by key changes and tempo changes, etc. All of these musical elements can be present in every scene to give it the feeling of a full journey that we have taken.
5. They play the scene rather than the text.
Create powerful atmospheres for each of the three sections and the transitions. These atmospheres are a feeling in the air--every scene should start and end with strong atmospheres before and after the dialogue. I recommend rehearsing the scene in silence while trying to communicate the needs of the character, etc. in movements, breath, tempo, rhythm and radiant eye life.
6. They find a moment or two for a pause- that makes it funnier or more meaningful.
The atmosphere in the middle or towards the end in the climax can often be strongest with a well chosen pause. Well placed pauses can lift a humorous moment to hysterically funny, or a drama to a painful tragedy. Having the courage for pauses in a timed event takes courage and a shorter scene.
7. They are clear in their diction, and the speech quality is appropriate to the style of the material.
Get direction from a good director. That is the person upon whom to rely to insure the above dynamics and the below discussion on style,
There are some simple directing choices that have not worked which include staging on the floor where the audience can not see the actor. You must be seen and heard above all else.

All of your selections must have a sense of style. That sense of style is immediately recognizable and must fill every motion, sound and breath of the actors to such an extent that the audience can feel the style in the atmosphere itself. Anything less than this will automatically lessen the impression your scene makes on the audience. The style begins with an air before motion and speech. One notable weakness often seen in acting is a lack of engagement in the lower body. In style, this disconnect between upper and lower body becomes glaringly evident. Be sure, particularly in your classical scenes, to make a clear choice on the style you will do. And be sure to consider that your contemporary pieces are a style as well. Pinter and Williams are two different styles. Lack of style is a style.

8. They are dynamically responsive and generous with their partners.
There have been many actors who chose scenes where they have a heavy majority of the dialogue to such a point that it is almost a monologue. And some of those actors have been completely upstaged by their nearly silent partners. Since the final competition includes a monologue, we are very interested in your ability to respond and interact with a partner in your scenes. We experience your relationship with your partner from the moment you both are in the

room, until we no longer see you. It is fine to have a scene that favors the actor in competition but too little or too much for the partner to do will reflect on your decision making processes. The judges are definitely seeking to promote good decision making skills along with good human relationship skills. We hope that your participation in this competition will inspire you to grow as an artist. We want to assist those with promise by helping them get exposure and opportunity they might not otherwise get. This exposure will only serve those who can build upon the opportunities offered. All such building toward success will require successful relationship cultivation. Seeing how you relate to your partner, actor to actor and character to character gives us a great deal of information and is 100% in your control.

9. They end about 15-30 seconds shorter than the time limit.

Select a scene that is shorter than the time limit to accomplish the ideas suggested here. For example, if you have 3 minutes, try to find a scene you can do in 2:30. One of the saddest moments for a judge is to see a wonderful actor eliminated by exceeding the time limit. Almost as sad, is seeing the talented performers race through their scene, sacrificing the composition of the scene to avoid disqualification. The seeds of both of these situations are planted in the scene selection process and are 100% in your control. When you remove the worry of running out of time, you free up your talent to respond in the moment to slow the tempo or increase it because of the artistic impulse between you and your partner rather than a stopwatch.

10. They enter and depart gracefully, leaving the audience moved in a surprising way.

When you enter the room, imagine you have a radiant sun shining calmly from the center of your chest. Picture the sunlight sparkling from your eyes and that your breath emanates easily from you and in from the space. Your presence is impacting the audience at every second and this entrance is your first impression. Complete your preparations efficiently and conduct your introduction with warmth for the audience. Rehearse how you will transform into your character. Give yourself 1.5-3 seconds to shut down this "easy, radiant sunshine" and to turn on the atmosphere of the scene and to adopt the image of the character. This 1.5 to 3 seconds of silence/stillness is also a transition time for the audience to shift out of radiating direct interaction welcoming you, to simply receiving your gift. An unclear transition leaves the audience feeling unclear about when you shifted from you to your character. That lack of clarity causes loss of ease for the audience. We are in your hands and your bodily movements tell us when you are "you" and when you are the character. It is always an amazing thing that auditors get see- this moment where an everyday person disappears and an artist begins to express her artistry. It is magical when well done. And is easily achieved with a complete stop of all moving body parts for that ever so brief moment of at least one second to 3 seconds maximum. And in keeping with a clear beginning, middle, end, we also want to "sustain" the final unspoken moments of the scene for that 3 second count. Keeping the scene shorter than the limit, will allow this kind of magic to happen in the silence before and after the scene, after and before your everyday self enters and exits. As you leave the room, you might send a quick little flash of sunshine to fill the space on your way out.

When all is said and done, PREPARATION is the single greatest element to build your skills and nurture your talent. Rehearse every aspect including the entire process of entering, prepping the set, introductions, transition, beginning, middle, end of scene, transition back to self, thank you and exit. Rehearse this in a space of equivalent size as the room. Visualize the whole process before you go to sleep at night. Picturing the entire process builds concentration skills and trains the body to fulfill the images that you have created. It is a technique used by virtually all trainings today from athletics to sales. Why not use it too? Luck is 90% preparation.

Lisa Dalton has judged the regional preliminary Irene Ryan Acting Competition at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in Fitchburg, MA for the last five years. Over the past 30 years, Lisa has judged additional Acting Awards and events such as the Cable ACE Awards, Donna Reed Festivals, Thespian Society State and International Festivals, SAG Awards and the Emmy Awards.