

Casting Director Q & A with Clifton Guterman, Theatrical Outfit

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1. What is the casting director's responsibility to the director of the production?

The Casting Director, with the director's input, composes a role breakdown with descriptions and type parameters, pulls and organizes audition sides (and/or songs) from the script, sets audition dates, posts the casting call to sites and with AEA (if the theater is Equity), schedules appointments, distributes sides and scripts, and sits with the director observing actors in the room. While a director ultimately picks his or her preferred cast, a good Casting Director weighs in on the work in the room, on actors' work around town, general knowledge about the theatre's vision and mission, etc. At Theatrical Outfit, I personally call actors with verbal offers once they're chosen. I also make it a rule to contact every actor who auditions and isn't cast to tell them we went another way. As an actor myself, I really appreciate this "letting off the hook" practice. Hearing "no" is hard. Kindness helps.

2. Do you see productions around town? How does that help or hinder your process as a casting director?

Yes, I see a great deal of theatre in Atlanta. Frankly, I consider show-going a crucial part of my job, and I think it's essential to be out in the community seeing known and new actors do what they do – play roles. Auditions are not fully-realized performances, so I find it incredibly helpful to see what actors do IN a production. Seeing local theatre helps me understand actors' ranges and/or limitations. Often, I am thrilled to see an individual do something I didn't expect or have never seen at a quick audition. If I wasn't out and about in the scene, I'd miss out, and I know I'd feel foolish talking to actors about their body of work in the audition room. I can't see everything, but I sure do try to be a supportive part of the community.

3. What makes a "great" audition?

Many things: 1) text preparation; 2) flexibility in the room; 3) an openness and kindness of spirit—even if an actor is having a bad day, is exhausted from a current show or is rushed; 4) professionalism from the minute one walks in the building; 5) clear acting choices made in advance; 6) a great understanding of the script, the scenes, the arc of the character, the action, the obstacles, the given circumstances, etc.

4. Is there something to the "it factor" that may separate one actor from others?

I do feel that some actors radiate a sense of skill, confidence, relaxation, professionalism, "watch-ability" and inner life (as the character) that doesn't always show up in every individual who walks in. Then again, even the most dynamic and "cast-able" actor surely can have a bad day. Happens to everyone at some point.

5. What is the secret to remaining focused during a long audition call?

I'm sure it's different for each of us, but I suggest using the time in the waiting area to review everything in your head. Or, find a quiet spot in the building to run through the lines. Personally, I record everything on my phone and often rehearse the scene (silently) through headphones. I think conversing with other waiting actors is natural, but don't be that actor who sucks up all the energy in a space by bragging about recent accomplishments. Avoid the actor who wants to talk about his or her choices or what he or she heard the director did with someone else in the room earlier (also known as psychological warfare and completely unhelpful) or what he or she thinks the play is all about. There's always at least one of those actors. Whatever we can do to maintain our prep work and positive attitude and not be too influenced by environment and others, I say go for it.

6. What makes a great head shot and resume, and how much emphasis does the team place on the materials you present in the room?

Honestly, I feel that head shots and resumes cause us a bit too much stress. For on-camera auditions, fantastic shots – in color – that look like you today are essential. But for theatre, I've never seen a mediocre or bad photo lose someone an offer. Still, it's one of the few tools we have (outside of craft and body and voice), so I say try your best to have something current. Please have your name on the front of your head shot, as they often separate from resumes. Stapled or glued– I don't have preference. No paper clips, please. As for resumes, absolute truthfulness is key. Please be one hundred percent honest and clear. And make it easy to read. Columns are our best friend. Please include role, show title, director AND producing company. (I personally don't care about year.) I can't tell you how many times I've seen a vague credit like: "George – SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE." Um ... Ok ... so where was this hopefully-magnificent production of SUNDAY? (High school? College? Community theatre? Your living room?) And who directed you? (Your grandmother?) I jest, but do know that we often contact individuals or companies on your resume to inquire about your work. On that note, if something or someone on your resume was a horrible experience in your life and might come back to haunt you, maybe consider leaving that off. Lastly, for a theatre audition, please have YOUR email address and phone number on the resume (and audition form) and not just a local talent agency. In Atlanta, we don't go through agencies for theatre casting.

7. What are your thoughts on actors self-submitting if they are not called in, and how best should that communication go?

I'm perfectly fine with self-submission. As actors, though, we must be ready for casting to respond with anything from "You bet" to "We'll fit you in as a walk-in" to "I notice you have zero theatre credits or training on your resume" to "All of our non-AEA slots are booked at this stage, but I can add you to a waiting list" to "I'm sorry, but the director knows your work in town and doesn't see this one as fit for you." While I will do all I can to accommodate actors if I think they should be seen, if casting is signaling a strong "No," please move on graciously and put your energy toward the next opportunity.

8. Could you talk about how to present yourself in the room, dressing for the part and when to be "in character"?

I'm a huge fan of actors who walk in the building and remain open and friendly without coming across as fake, "on" or too talky. Your time in the actual audition room is limited, but we do want to get to know YOU before you begin the character work. Please don't walk in as the character. I think actors should steer clear of automatically approaching the casting table and director for a handshake unless you're already close friends or the casting personnel stand and extend hands or hugs first. For show-specific calls, I highly recommend dressing somewhat like the part and period. I'm not saying buy items and costume yourself – that's someone else's job if you ultimately get the part – but do think about period, age of the character, personality and any clues you get from the text or casting breakdown. For period pieces, I think women should avoid pants (unless the scene is about pants), and modern items like sneakers and clothes with labels or bold graphics should be avoided by all. Let your clothing (and limited accessories) support the work but not pull focus. No strong perfumes or cologne, please. And deodorant is our best friend. Please, too, for the love of the theater gods, don't audition bare-footed. It screams "Drama School" and reeks of pretension. (Unless your character de-shoes in the scene. In that case, have at it!)

9. What do you take note of when an actor enters - how important are first impressions?

I notice if an actor seems relaxed and confident. I look for eye contact – with me, the director, the reader, other actors. Are you acting for yourself or are you really present and engaged in the room? How do you communicate back to us? Are your responses positive or snarky? Are you open and willing or closed off and cagey? Do you take any direction given and at least try it, or are you stuck in the choices you came in with? Behavior (as yourself) in the room before, during and after an actual read can cloud or enhance an audition. Why? Because the director will be communicating with YOU most of the time during the process and not you in character. We all want to work with nice, professional, flexible, fun, quick-on-their-feet people, yes? Goodness knows I do.

10. When actors are asked to come in with their own monologues or songs, what's your take on what type of material to choose and why?

I say choose something in your age and type range that you could be cast in TODAY. And pick something you love doing over and over. Choose something active – you need something in that moment and are doing something (a verb) to get it from—or get it across to—whomever's on the receiving end, a person you've hopefully established for yourself. Generals aren't usually the best time to stretch way outside of type nor be avant garde or showy. Real is always better than startling. Contrasting doesn't have to mean classical and contemporary. It can be theatrical and cinematic, comedic and dramatic, poetic and natural, etc. I'm also a fan of physical variety between pieces. If you stand for one, sit for the second. If one features lots of movement, make the second incredibly contained. Educate yourself about the company you're auditioning for, and don't pick material that would likely never show up on that theatre's stage. Also know that, in some way, the material you pick for a

general says, in theory, something about you, meaning we suddenly have a sense of what attracts you and what you think your strengths are. An example: if you bring in a difficult song but aren't really a true singer, we may conclude you're not self-aware enough to know your limits. If you use all of the allotted time to present a one-note monologue solely about graphic sex or murder or an overdose, or if you undress yourself in the room – anything in the extreme, especially if we don't already know you – but show us nothing as an opposite, eyebrows may raise a tad.

11. What are some common though easily avoidable mistakes actors make in the audition process?

Over-talking; over-sharing; not knowing the given material very well – enough to improvise it; not knowing the scope of the whole play—ask for it if it's not offered—or character's arc; not at least trying any direction offered; not knowing how to talk about one's own resume when asked; not realizing that you're basically interviewing for a job once you step in the front door – that means being kind and professional to assistants, interns, random staff members walking in a hallway. Pay close attention to the audition notice. If we ask for two head shots and resumes, we actually have a reason for that – no matter how many times you've auditioned or worked for us or how recently.

12. How should actors treat a callback, and how important is the memorization of sides?

Unless instructed, I say come back with the same read/take on the character as your first audition. We loved you, clearly. Don't go changing the work or experimenting with a good thing. Do be flexible and ready to shift if the director wants that, but know that you made the cut because of your previous read. Please memorize the sides. We need to see your eyes. We need to see you connect with other actors. We need to see you living in the moment and not buried in a page of paper. Do keep the sides in hand though in case you flub a line, lose your place, your scene partner (or reader) skips ahead, etc. (It's still an audition, not opening night.) I advise scouring the full script to anticipate other scenes or monologues that could be thrust upon you on the spot. That's a rare occurrence, but I've seen it happen.

13. Could you speak to musical and dance auditions and when/if it's OK to fake it or stumble through or cut your losses and decline an audition if you're not competitive?

I think my answer really depends on the market (city). In NYC, say, if you're not a really great dancer and singer and actor, I would not attend musical auditions that include a dance call. Countless actors in large markets have been triple threats since youth and can do it in their sleep. In Atlanta, it's a little murkier. If requested by casting to sing or dance, I'd say examine the show and role requirements closely and start an honest conversation with casting about your skill level. He or she may say, "Sure, come on in and give it your all, no pressure" or "Our director adamantly wants folks with expert skill level." For example: I personally can act and can sing adequately. I cannot dance well in auditions but can learn choreography over a rehearsal process. I've been in a few musicals, but none with heaving dancing (for my

character). I decline auditions that require the character I'm reading for to be very good at all three skills in a quick audition. I say know your limits and what will or will not make you shine in a room. The last thing you want to happen is to arrive and flail in the room – especially if it's your first time in front a particular director – and come away from the experience upset, embarrassed and regretful.

14. What is the biggest obstacle to getting a perfect cast?

There's no single obstacle but rather many. At The Outfit, obstacles can be: our AEA ratio (number of Equity contracts); actor availability – more and more Atlantans are (luckily) booking on-camera work and are often unavailable for theatre; ensemble chemistry; getting a consensus from the director, playwright (if it's a world or regional premiere) and Artistic Director.

15. What's the most important thing actors can do to make your job easier?

Follow the directions of the audition notice/invite. Be prepared with specific, personal choices that you can funnel through your very unique self. Don't try to be anything else but your version of this role – not someone else's or some "idea" of it. Act not in the abstract nor in theory but in the here and now. Play actions, not emotions nor concepts.

16. As the industry evolves and technology advances and we become more and more social media savvy, what challenges and advantages do you see for today's actor?

This one's tricky. Social media has so consumed our lives that the personal and professional overlap. And in Atlanta, many of us wear multiple hats and are friends. I'll just say this: casting personnel, directors and theatre leaders might indeed see anything you post. It is what it is. If you're online-friends with movers and shakers and care, I'd say keep the posts generally PC or make your provocative ones viewable only to certain friends. Your call. I know ... free speech. We all should be able to say what we'd like where we'd like, and, yes, our private lives and opinions may not (and should not) affect our work in an audition room or on a stage. But, as we know, books sometimes get judged by their covers. Likewise, I'm not a fan of community members (anywhere) online-bashing fellow actors, companies, programming choices, execution of shows, casting, etc. It just reads as catty and insecure and sad. Storytelling is hard, no matter the resources or rehearsal time. Any of us who have done it know this. Sometimes, it's a huge, obvious success, and other times it is what it is. Grumble privately – and, yes, I too have done that with the best of them – but maybe keep it PC online.

Please, when offered a role by casting, don't immediately post or tweet: "I just got cast in OUR TOWN at the Outfit!" Very likely, casting hasn't notified everyone who went through the audition process. It's no fun finding out you didn't book a show because you see, online, that a peer did. I personally ask actors not to post until a business rep from the company has called them and offered them a letter of intent or contract. That usually gives me time to reach out to everyone we saw for a particular show.

Also, I know many actors who have personal websites or “fan pages” with reviews, photos, resumes, blogs, recipes, etc. Honestly, I’ve never visited a single one. I get why big-time celebs have them. And, I think it may benefit a working on-camera actor to have a site with quickly-accessible clips. But for theatre, we just need you to show up in person, present a great resume and current head shot and wow us.

Lastly, I’m not a fan of getting a KickStarter or GoFundMe request directly from an actor asking me to help pay for his role (or travel fare or costumes) in a production or tour that he just booked. (Yes, it has happened.) Something about that really unsettles me. I’m OK with organizations making that ask because it’s a very tough time for the arts, especially in GA, but actors, please steer clear of uncomfy solicitations.

17. Are there any trends you see in the business or in the Atlanta market that you think actors are experiencing or should be aware of?

Yes. Be skilled at acting on camera, which is a whole different beast. There is a large and growing amount of television, film, industrial, commercial, print and web-based work happening in GA now, and the momentum doesn’t seem to have an expiration date with new studios being built and more and more production teams setting up camp each week. Also, fine-tuned and simpler camera acting will only help actors drop in more truthfully to many of the contemporary (and filmic) plays being produced in the American theatre today. Actors should try their best to sign with a local, reputable talent agency for on-camera work and get the theatre auditions on their own. Also, camera acting pays the bills.

I see so many friends self-producing now and branching out into various disciplines (directing, writing, founding companies), and I think it’s fantastic. Diversification makes us more well-rounded and empathetic to everyone else making the soup. Theatre, as we know, takes a village.

18. As an actor who has worked in New York, across the country and here at home, have you noticed differences in the auditioning/casting process in Atlanta?

First off, Atlanta is incredibly rich with talent – diverse, inventive, smart, all types and ages, etc. I’m regularly astounded. And that is thrilling.

I feel like local directors and casting personnel take more time in the room with actors here in Atlanta, and that’s a wonderful thing. There’s a lot of mutual engagement and respect here, and that, naturally, is ideal.

Actors in Atlanta are incredibly supportive of one another. I don’t see a lot of standoffishness, meanness, deliberate “psyching out” or, ultimately, bitterness once a cast is announced. I often see actors attend shows here at The Outfit that they didn’t book – which I highly recommend doing, by the way – supporting the cast who DID make the cut. It’s wonderful.

During my stint in NYC and doing regional theatre, I found that the actors I met (in audition hallways) or read with or booked with were extremely prepared – lines memorized, choices made, script analyzed – from the start. There was an evident level of polish and commitment and hunger. Occasionally here at home, I see actors (of all ages and experience level) who seem to need their hand held through the process – even in the room itself. Please come in the door ready to do something with zero guidance.

Similarly, I have seen some of our veteran, popular Atlanta actors basically phone in an audition, not-prepare or, worse, come in seeming to care not an iota about the play, character and process. Yes, the director and I may have seen you do some brilliant work around town for decades – and even at our theatre, but we probably haven't seen you do THIS role. And, if three other right-type actors come in prepared, nail it, take direction and are pleasant and professional, you are not guaranteed a callback or offer simply based on your local pedigree or fame. Be amazing in the present. Or, if acting and auditioning has become a chore or bore for you, it may be time to reassess. I see this apathy very rarely with young actors. I completely understand this phenomenon – we all slow down and relax into ourselves as we age, especially if we've worked a lot around town or are used to getting pre-cast – but the audition room is not the time for a nap. If you've been invited to act, you're starting at the same level of possibility as anyone else.

19. What's it like to call in your friends and peers, and to either offer them a role or let them down ... or declining them an audition altogether if the director clearly isn't interested?

It's a little tricky, often wonderful and sometimes difficult. I love to see my friends – and all actors – succeed and book roles. I also hate to see them pour their hearts and talent into an audition process – sometimes 3 or so appointments – and not get an offer. Put plainly: I champion the best actor for the role and show, friend or not. At the end of the day, though, I don't personally assemble the cast or call back list – the director does. I can push for someone to read for a role or get the offer, but it's not my call, finally. Do I sometimes disagree with directors? Occasionally. Do I sometimes think a different actor might have been better in a role than the actor ultimately cast once I see that actual production? Sure. But, again, such is the business. I take comfort – for my own ups and downs as an actor and for peers – in knowing that something wonderful and amazing very likely will be on the horizon for each of us.

20. Any other personal pet peeves or tips?

Please don't call or write in with questions clearly answered in the audition post or invite. Please don't request an audition or go through with it if you absolutely know you have immovable conflicts with the rehearsal and performance dates of a show. Don't be rude to assistants. Don't come to an audition and ask for a highlighter, stapler or scissors. We'll have copies, but bring your own sides. Please don't ever say, "But you have my head shot on file." Please don't audition off of your iPad or phone (yep, it happens). Please don't walk into the audition space and inquire, "OK, what do you want to see?" (If you truthfully want MY

answer, it would be: “You showing us all the glorious prep work and choices you’ve crafted before this very moment. Your homework.”) Please know that we WANT you succeed and be the top choice and that we – especially those of us who also act – know very well the stress you’re under, the anxiety of auditioning, and we love that you’ve invested time and energy into our project and are here sharing your glorious gifts.

Actors who want to find out what Theatrical Outfit is casting, or submit their headshot and resume, should go to <http://www.theatricaloutfit.org/auditions>

BIO

Clifton Guterman is an Atlanta actor, teacher and all around theatre admin. devotee. He has performed off-Broadway and at numerous top regional theatres, including Arena Stage, Berkeley Rep, San Jose Rep, California Shakespeare Theatre, Barrington Stage, North Shore Music Theatre, Weston Playhouse and the O’Neill Center, among others. Locally, he has acted with the Alliance, Actor’s Express, Dad’s Garage and Synchronicity. Clifton was named Broadway World Atlanta’s Best Actor (play) in 2013, is a former Suzi Bass Award nominee and was nominated for a Bay Area Critics Circle Award for his work as Smike in *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* at California Shakespeare. He can be seen in numerous recent feature films, television shows and commercials. Currently, Clifton holds the position of Executive Associate, Casting Director and Artistic Associate at Theatrical Outfit. Clifton formerly served as the Alliance’s Artistic Assistant and also held the position of Casting Director at Actor’s Express, where he currently is a proud Associate Artist, teaching artist and National New Play Network Artist Ambassador. Clifton’s auditioning and industry workshops have been featured at American College Theatre Festival, Southeastern Theatre Conference and Georgia Thespian Conference. He is a proud member of Actors’ Equity Association and holds a BA in Drama from the University of Georgia and an MFA in Performing Arts from the Savannah College of Art and Design. Clifton is proudly from Iron City, a teeny tiny town in southwest-GA. He is obsessed with his two Schnauzers.

