

The MTC Guide to Musical Theatre Casting

By MTC Executive Artistic Director Kevin Connors

In all performing arts fields, speculation surrounding casting is a hot topic, and the actor is frequently left hypothesizing why he/she gave a great audition and didn't get a role, or the role. Casting is an arduous and complex process for directors, and most of the factors that affect casting would astonish non-theatre folk. We would like to shed some light on the casting process, both here at MTC, and in other companies your child may encounter.

GENERAL MTC CASTING POLICY

THIS ARTICLE WILL OUTLINE WHY MTC IS UNIQUE FROM ALL OTHER THEATRE COMPANIES YOU WILL ENCOUNTER IN MANY WAYS. MTC has produced over 150 student productions and cast over 2500 actors in those productions. While we are happy to clarify positions in this article, or give our student actors feedback on how to improve their auditions, THE OFFICIAL MTC POLICY IS THAT WE DO NOT DISCUSS CASTING DECISIONS. This includes how and why actors were cast and, in particular, the size and prominence of a specific actor's role.

We understand there will inevitably be times when you, as parents, must deal with a student actor's disappointment at not being cast in the role they wanted. The reality is that a significant part of theatre is about 'the role I wanted and didn't get'. Successful actors learn how to deal with that, and you can help us teach your children this process. We hope that this information will provide insight into MTC's general philosophy, the casting process itself, and how best to be a supportive and realistic parent to the student actor.

THE NATURE OF THEATRE

Theatre is a collaborative art form or "team sport", and Musical Theatre works are designed to be performed by multiple actors in various size roles. Large-scale musicals, such as THE MUSIC MAN, HELLO, DOLLY, or FIDDLER ON THE ROOF are all written in the traditional format of several 'principals' (usually 8) and an ensemble whose members play numerous small roles. Most student theatre companies produce productions within this structure and exactly as published. MTC, however, pushes the envelope with regard to providing more opportunities for more actors. For example,

- All actors in MTC performances are given 'named roles' as opposed to just 'ensemble' or 'Man #1', and each actor is trained to develop his individual character. Not only is this good acting training, but in large group scenes, the audience is looking at 25 'characters' as opposed to disengaged, generic chorus members.

- All MTC actors do exactly the same actor preparation and character development work regardless of the role size.

In this collaborative environment, there must be a central figure that helps to bring all the elements together that result in the unified product – the show. That person is THE DIRECTOR, and the Director's word is final on all issues. That concept is an irrefutable principle in the theatrical world. It is the actor's job to realize the Director's vision and accept his/her decisions without question. Challenging the Director's authority, judgment, or decision will get the student actor reprimanded, and the professional actor fired. This holds true in every facet of the production, including casting.

THE MTC PRODUCTION PHILOSOPHY

MTC's teaching philosophy is based on providing a nurturing, non-competitive, conservatory-style environment in which students can learn the craft of theatre. However, realistically, 15 actresses can't be "Dolly," or 10 boys can't play "Oliver" simultaneously. In our effort to give **every** actor a moment to shine, MTC staff adapts existing scripts or writes original ones to give more actors featured moments in the show, which may be in the form of lines, solo passages in songs, features in dance numbers, or 'comic bits'. Therefore, it is always an ENORMOUS MISTAKE to judge the size of a role based on the NUMBER OF LINES. **Counting lines is NOT A VALID assessment of time on stage or amount of material an actor will be learning in a show, and should, therefore, be avoided for all productions.**

MTC sees all of its students as theatre artists, and trains them to think of themselves as such. As artists, there is nothing more important than the work – in this case, the show. No individual artist is bigger than the show. Every artist's contribution is unique and invaluable, but no one contribution is larger than any other. This can be tricky, particularly with actors, because actors work with their egos. And while the ego must be nurtured and healthy, the actor must never place him/herself above the work or the other actors. An actor may be cast as "Dolly" in HELLO, DOLLY in one season, and have a much smaller role the next, and successful actors learn to accept that. If an actor is only willing to accept a principal role, he should not audition.

MTC VS. OTHER THEATRE COMPANIES

Many students and parents incorrectly assume that the individual attention and encouragement given to MTC's student actors is a 'global concept' and all theatrical environments are warm and fuzzy. This could not be further from the truth. While it is our philosophy that a student actor must train and develop in a nurturing, safe environment; parents and students should also be aware that MTC is a unique place and the global world of

theatre (student, amateur, or professional) is vastly different. The following are just a few key elements you and your child should be aware of that may be different in companies outside MTC (including school shows, community or summer theatre productions, college or professional):

- Very few companies craft scripts and create roles for ensemble members
- Most companies don't accept every actor who auditions
- Some companies do not take an individual interest in each actor (and their performance) as MTC does
- MTC makes every effort to provide parents with a complete scenario of the production process start-to-finish prior to auditions (including rehearsal schedules, volunteer requirements, etc.) – that may not be the case elsewhere
- MTC cast sizes are kept to a size whereby we can provide the best theatrical experience to all cast members, giving each as much stage time in a show as possible. Many companies cannot provide that level of experience, because they are dealing with casts of 75 or more (particularly school productions)
- MTC's productions are staffed by well-established, seasoned theatre professionals – most childrens' theatre companies are not
- MTC is enormously conscious of efficiency in the rehearsal process. We produce our Student Musicals with approximately the same number of rehearsal hours as a professional summer stock production. With student actors, that is a miracle, and reflective of the professional process at MTC
- MTC strives to use each actor as much as possible in each given rehearsal as well – many companies call every actor to every rehearsal, resulting in large amounts of 'down time' for many actors who are not used at all

Parents can help their children greatly by making them aware of the uniqueness of the MTC experience. And as they audition and participate in other productions, they should understand that every company has its own style and philosophy.

CASTING ELEMENTS THAT AFFECT WHO GETS WHAT

MTC teaches its students that many elements go into casting a role in a show. We realize that, to young actors, every show seems like life or death, but you - as parents - can help us try to keep things in perspective for them. Below is a list of elements, besides the audition itself, that can affect how a role is cast, and some may surprise you.

TYPE – Each actor is a specific physical type. Generally, types fall either into 'leading man/woman' or 'character man/woman'. Leading roles include characters like Marian in *THE MUSIC MAN*, Sky Masterson in *GUYS AND DOLLS*, or Irene Malloy in *HELLO, DOLLY*. Character parts are frequently comic, villainous, or off-beat and include Tevye in *FIDDLER*,

Dolly in HELLO, DOLLY; or Marcellus in THE MUSIC MAN. ***It is vital that an actor know his/her type and what roles he/she is right to play, and it is also important to realize that there is not an appropriate major role for every actor in every show.***

HEIGHT AND AGE: In casting a show, the Director must create a realistic visual picture for the show to work artistically and be believable. Ideally, a 5'10" girl is probably not going to be cast as a romantic lead opposite a 5'2" boy, nor can a 10-year-old boy be cast as THE MUSIC MAN if the Marian is 15. Some roles have inherent physical restrictions which eliminate certain actors (Annie or Oliver cannot be the tallest person in the cast). Help your child keep this in perspective when discussing appropriate roles, realizing every role impacts the whole picture.

VOCAL RANGE: In musicals, songs are written in certain keys for a reason; e.g., most female leading ladies are sopranos, while most female character roles are belters. There are exceptions, but in general the keys make the sound of the show and the characters work artistically. The actor must know his/her vocal range and what roles match that.

HOW A GIVEN ACTOR FITS INTO THE WHOLE PICTURE: Probably the most important element to casting. What a given actor offers the production is a vital consideration in how they are cast. For example, two actresses audition for the role of Hodel in FIDDLER, and both fit the above criteria (vocal range, height, type). Actress A is a dancer, but Hodel is a non-dancing role. Also the director doesn't have an actress to play Chava, who has a solo ballet in the second act. He casts actress A as Chava, and she won't get to sing FAR FROM THE HOME I LOVE (which Hodel sings). Actress B will play Hodel, mainly because Actress A had to be moved to Chava because of her dance ability, a fact that actress A will not understand, having given a great audition for Hodel. While the audition is an important part of casting, it's not the only part, and these other elements are often transparent to the actors and their parents.

We train our students in these concepts, which are vital not only in theatre, but in life. Participating in theatre is a fun and rewarding experience, the benefits of which, we feel, impact their entire lives. One of the most valuable life skills that we all can impart is to view theatre and life with a more team-spirited perspective.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO MANAGE THE PROCESS

The best time to discuss realistic casting aspirations with your child is before the audition itself. When an audition comes up, discuss the show with your child and what roles they might be right to play. Remind them that there are many students who might be right for a particular role and that they should concentrate on doing their best audition, let the chips fall where they may, and focus on the experience and growing as an artist. Also, encourage them

not to think of their role in terms of other actor's performances of that role. While they may watch another version (movie, Broadway, or another stage adaptation) of a show, they should view that production as only a general guideline, knowing that MTC's production will be a unique adaptation relative to the theatre concepts presented in this casting guide.

Again, it is MTC's mission to provide young actors a safe and nurturing environment in which to develop. MTC's conservatory training also prepares young actors for the reality of the performing arts world at large: we need your support as parents to help us achieve these goals.

CASTING AT MTC: OTHER THINGS THAT COUNT

- Classroom behavior
- Class attendance and punctuality
- Commitment past and present to the production process (learning lines on time, being on time and present for rehearsal, etc.)
- Cooperation in the rehearsal environment
- Being a team player
- Ability to support and work well with other actors

Actors at MTC or elsewhere in theatre must demonstrate these qualities to be successful.

CASTING AT MTC: THINGS THAT DON'T COUNT

- Seniority above all else
- Level of parents' monetary contribution
- Parental volunteer position
- Board participation
- Previous lead roles
- Friendships with regard to casting
- Professional credits

MTC does not play favorites and there are no stars

MTC students are expected to:

**ARRIVE PROMPTLY
ATTENTIVELY**

BE PREPARED

PARTICIPATE

RESPECT FELLOW STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND THE MTC FACILITY

MTC encourages performing arts students to develop their potential in a class environment of creativity, demonstrating respect for others and self-discipline. In addition, MTC strives to establish close and productive relationships with the parents of our students. Parents are encouraged to contact an MTC Director or teacher to discuss a student's progress, participation or behavior.