

Getting into the Performing Arts

Choosing your route

There are many different training routes into performing and one of the main decisions you'll have to make in your education is whether to apply to drama school or a performing arts course at a university. 86% of actors working in the profession have received formal professional training, and advice from the industry is to stay within mainstream education before applying to drama school, if that's the route you wish to take.

There are advantages and disadvantages to either route. Applying to study a degree at university will be likely to give you more options outside of performing, which could be useful as a back up, or while you are looking for a job in performing arts. Applying to drama school will give you intensive, industry-related performance training but can be extremely costly. It is also competitive to get places and often has academic entry requirements, as well as a rigorous audition process. If you are aged 21 and have already completed a previous degree (in any subject) and/or you have substantial experience in performance, you are eligible to apply for post-graduate 1 or 2 year courses at drama school.

The acting industry

Think carefully about the following points before deciding whether you want to pursue a career as a performer:

- Around 80-90% of all performers are out of work at any given time
- The industry is rarely fair, and talent is sometimes irrelevant
- Performing is the easy part. The hard work comes in the form of constantly chasing jobs and staying disciplined
- Total dedication, patience, a real passion and self-belief are essential

If these seem things that you can readily deal with, then you should be set to make a go of a career as a performer. The routes below are by no means the only way to enter the industry but we have listed things the average wannabe-actor does not know about or is unwilling to do, and following these may give you an advantage.

Getting started

Most people in the industry would say it's essential to do a recognised qualification in acting, dance, or singing, or a combination of all three. These can take many forms but generally it is recommended that at some stage you go to a drama school accredited by the National Council of Drama Training (NCDT). Although you can apply to most drama schools at 18, life experience is valued by drama schools - consider travelling, working abroad, doing a degree or working for a few years before applying. It provides valuable subject matter for your application form and an opportunity to start saving for the fees.

Before applying to a performing arts school

- Get as much practical experience as you can. Tutors will want to see that you are serious about your chosen career and have taken steps to practice regularly or improve your skills.
- Join a drama club at school, an amateur theatre company and/or take evening or weekend classes.
- Read plays, go to the theatre, practice songs you like singing, watch films.
- Know the industry, check the credits of your favourite programmes and write down the names of directors and casting directors you want to work with.
- Buy 'Empire' and see what the latest films are and which actors are working, with whom and on what.
- Buy 'The Stage' newspaper (out every Thursday) as it contains news from the industry and reviews of regional productions, as well as information about training, classes and auditions for jobs.
- There are two useful books with invaluable information about every aspect of the business which could prove a worthwhile investment - both are regularly updated:

'Contacts' is a directory of everything from agents to casting directors, theatres to TV production companies, photographers to recording studios. Most of the photographers have chosen to have adverts with examples of their work, so you can see at first glance whose style appeals to you. The section on TV Production Companies has a breakdown of all department heads.

'The Actors' Yearbook' (available online at www.acblack.com) is a more thorough version of 'Contacts' with detailed sections about agents, (how many clients they have and how to approach them), theatres (recent projects and casting procedures) and casting directors (how to contact them and what they cast). There are also entries from industry professionals with tips for getting ahead. 'The Actor's Yearbook' probably suits those already training or in the profession, although the section on training has a lot of detail about drama schools, drama courses at universities and the application and grant process.

Funding

Grants and loans are not offered to everybody, so be prepared to pay for your course. If you are unable to cover all the fees, consider delaying your application for a few years to save some money. Think of innovative ways to raise money (get sponsored by friends and family for a sporting achievement, do a cabaret night with some friends or have a jumble sale). Write to charities and organisations to see if they offer funding to students - think carefully about what you write to make your application stand out and convince them they should support you above anyone else. There are also Career Development Loans, which are offered by a few banks specifically to support vocation-related training - see www.direct.gov.uk.

Getting work

- **Make yourself known**

The most important thing to understand is that you are a product - nobody is going to buy a product they don't know about. There are various ways to contact people about work. If you are fortunate enough to have an agent, that's great but that alone is not enough. They may have 50 other clients to find work for. Don't rest on your laurels, and be aware that having a bad agent can be worse than having no agent at all (no agent should charge you to join their books).

- **Get professional experience**

This will increase your confidence, help you make contacts and give you credit on your CV. The Old Vic Theatre runs a project called The New Voices Club, offering actors, directors, producers and writers aged 18-25 the opportunity to learn from industry professionals, receive support for projects they are passionate about, and network with like-minded peers. To be considered for membership send a CV with your name, address, telephone number and date of birth to newvoices@oldvictheatre.com stating whether you are an actor, writer, director or producer - see www.oldvictheatre.com/newvoicesclub for details.

- **Contact film schools and offer to act in student films**

- **Contact fringe theatre companies**

Find out what plays they are doing and when - try to get involved.

- **Take classes run by professionals**

Learn new skills and meet prospective employers (the 'Actors Centre' in London is a good place to meet people and take classes). Record a showreel of your material to send out to people.

- **Join 'The Spotlight'**

If you have trained at an NCDT-accredited course, or have professional experience, you will be eligible to join The Spotlight. It costs around £130 per year but is a casting service that has been used by the industry for many years, both in directory format and online. It is considered an important tool for any new actor, and displays up to 5 photos, a showreel, a voicereel, and a detailed CV. Casting directors can instantly search for selected criteria and contact you directly or through your agent.

- **Join Equity**

Equity is the performing artists' union (again, you need to have graduated from an NCDT-accredited course or be a professional). They not only register your professional name to prevent others from using it and negotiate the minimum terms and conditions for contracts, but also provide free help and advice (including legal advice), free public liability insurance cover, a free job information service and will distribute royalties.

- **Write letters**

You have to sell yourself to people, often before even getting an audition, without being pushy or aggressive. Be honest about who you are and people will see it and appreciate it. Include a CV and make sure it is clear, has your up-to-date contact details and contains facts only (a couple of genuine credits simply displayed will be more appreciated than 2 pages of invention and they will check that the information is accurate). Include a photo - a black and white, 10" by 8" headshot by a professional photographer. If you change your photo or move house, write another letter. Update with any recent credits or future work they can see you in. It is really important to ensure people keep being reminded about you.

- **Auditions**

If you are fortunate enough to get an audition, be prepared to shine but also to be grilled. Know the answers to the following questions so that they know you mean business: What media do you principally want to work in (TV, film, theatre)? Which professionals do you want to work with? What are you realistically going to be cast as? What are your weaknesses and how do you propose to turn them into strengths?

- **Network**

See shows, go to industry bars and parties, and meet people. Write down who you met, where, when and how – then write to these contacts, referring to your most recent meeting. Remember to be yourself - industry people see straight through pretence and will remember people who are arrogant, rude or drunk. Anybody in the industry could in some way do you a favour in the future, so always be courteous and don't gossip.

Staying the distance

How do you succeed when your friends have given up, you're penniless and you've no leads on future work? Write a letter, read a play, research a new theatre company, write another letter, learn a monologue, do a class, write another letter – just keep going! Someone will eventually have seen your face on their desk so many times that they will call! Be patient and keep your passion for what can be the most rewarding of careers.

Links:

www.oldvictheatre.com - has an excellent guide on getting into acting, with very useful contacts and web addresses

www.drama.ac.uk – has links to the Conference of Drama Schools website

www.cdetr.org.uk (Council for Dance Education and Training)

www.thestage.co.uk

www.spotlight.com

www.equity.org.uk

www.actorscentre.co.uk

www.getintolondontheatre.co.uk – has details of current productions and tickets