

## **GREENBELT YOUTH MUSICAL**

# **THE CASTING PROCESS:**

**A Q&A RESOURCE BY DIRECTOR CHRIS CHERRY  
FOR PARENTS AND YOUNG ACTORS**

### ***How does casting work?***

The Greenbelt Youth Musical is an open-enrollment program. We don't hold entry auditions for participation in the program. Everyone who enrolls in the program is automatically in the show. This produces an acting company that is a strong community, whose members are diverse in ability, equal in importance, and united by a common purpose.

The first rehearsals, which are held in December, are devoted to seeing and hearing the performers act, sing, and dance, so that I can assign the roles. The rehearsals are structured in a way that allows the performers to demonstrate what they can do, with a minimum of performance anxiety.

First, the entire group is taught a song from the show. After learning a song, the group sings it together. Then we divide into two groups, and each group sings through the song. Then those groups are divided, and each of the four smaller groups sings the song. Finally, when everyone feels reasonably comfortable, we line up, and the first person in line sings the first line of the song, and then runs to the back of the line, while the second person sings the second line, etc. We keep going in this way, down the line and through the song, several times. We generally learn three songs, so that by the end of the rehearsal, everyone has sung multiple mini-solos after first becoming comfortable with the song by singing it with at least three groups of diminishing size.

We intersperse our songs with scene readings from the script. Copies of portions of a scene are handed out, and some of the performers get up and act out the scene, reading from the script, as the rest of the group watches. When the scene is done, anyone who has been watching can claim a script from someone who has just performed, in order to perform that role in the next round. We go through multiple rounds of the scene, for as long as there are people who want to try it. Then we move on to another scene and repeat the process. This approach puts the performers in the driver's seat; they choose when to get up and what role to do. Any performer can get up and try any scene, so by the time we're done everyone has had ample opportunities to act different parts.

There is sometimes a dance component to the casting rehearsals as well. The entire group is taught a dance sequence. Then we all perform it together as a group until everyone is sufficiently comfortable. Then the performers are asked to do the dance sequence in smaller groups, while the rest of us watch. There is a big round of applause for each group. In fact, the participants are applauding for each other throughout the rehearsal, after each song and each scene reading. Already they are becoming a community of support for one another.

The day following the first casting rehearsal, I sometimes hold a second-look rehearsal. The purpose of this rehearsal is to give me an additional look at the actors who I need to see again individually or in specific combinations with each other, before I can decide how best to use them.

The casting rehearsals are a lot of fun, and the performers leave happy and excited. They are also secure in the knowledge that they've had ample and equal opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and that the casting will be done by the director based on the fair, thorough, and open assessment in which they have participated.

### ***How do you assign the roles in a play?***

Casting is a very difficult and sometimes agonizing job, and doing it correctly is critical to the success of the production, both as an evening of entertainment for the audience and as a positive and fulfilling experience for the actors in the cast.

#### **Step One**

After I've heard all the actors sing and watched them do their scenes, my approach is to look first at the principal roles and ask myself, "Which of the available actors are best suited to this particular role and would do the best job performing it?" The result is a list of the viable actor candidates for each role, noting my provisional first choice, if I have one.

That's not the end of the matter, though, by any means. For one thing, the same actor may be the provisional first choice for more than one role. But even if each actor miraculously turned out to be the provisional first choice for a different role, my job would not be done, because **the roles cannot be cast in isolation**, without reference to the other characters. Relationships between characters must be believable and appropriate for the actors involved.

For example, even if he's suited to the part in other respects, I probably can't cast the smallest actor in the cast as the father figure of an actor who looks older than he does. Likewise, even if they individually would be ideal for the respective roles, I can't cast actors who are brother and sister in real life as a romantic couple in the play. Similarly, I can't cast two actors whose vocal ranges are incompatible as characters who must sing a duet. I can't cast actors with drastically different degrees of vocal power or stage presence in roles that are supposed to be counterweights in the plot of the play.

#### **Step Two**

So once I've used the question, "Which actors would do the best job performing this role?" to help me narrow the candidate list for each role, I now must ask myself a new question: "Which **casting configuration** would do the **best overall job** of conveying the story of the play?" I may try many, many configurations on paper, before I hit on the one that I decide is the best overall fit. **This final casting may be strikingly different from my initial provisional role assignments.**

Thus, although it may be tempting to do so, **it is always extremely unwise for an actor to draw personal conclusions from the final casting.** If an actor thinks to herself, “Chris didn’t think I was right for the Cinderella role,” she may be completely mistaken. I may in fact have written her down as my provisional first choice for the Cinderella role, only to find that the sole male actor capable of performing Prince Charming was her real-life big brother, or an actor who was too much younger or shorter, or whose vocal range was incompatible with hers.

Quite often, an actor is equally suitable for multiple roles in the play, but is the sole viable choice for one of those roles. In such cases he must be assigned that role. Of course, he will never know from the final cast list that he was a leading contender for the other roles. He therefore should not assume that the director either did not consider him or found him unsuited for other roles.

***Do you pre-cast any of the roles?***

Nope. I base my decisions on what I see and hear the actors do at the casting rehearsal, when they dance and sing for us and do scene readings from the script. Based solely on their performance at the casting rehearsals, I have cast in lead roles actors whom I have never seen before in my life. Four notable examples: Liana Ventimiglia as Hippolyta in ***The Trials of Hercules*** in 2008, Johnny Murphy as Eurylochus in ***Homeward Bound*** in 2009, and Christin Wright as Penelope in ***Homeward Bound*** in 2012, and Ezra Pitts as Odysseus in ***Homeward Bound*** in 2019.

***Do participants in other Greenbelt Recreation Department performing arts programs, like Creative Kids Camp or Camp Encore, have an advantage in the casting?***

They have the general advantage that participating in any performing arts opportunities can give to young actors – that is, they have gained experience and confidence, which they bring with them to the initial rehearsal. However, they are not given any special consideration in the casting process. Everyone has an equal opportunity during the casting rehearsals to demonstrate his or her ability.

My familiarity with the participants in the program varies widely. Some actors I have known since they were six years old and first came to Creative Kids Camp, while others I have never met before. Some actors work for me during the summer or the school year as assistants or camp staffers, while others I neither see nor hear from during the ten months in between youth musical productions. None of that makes any difference in the casting, and the cast lists over the years reflect this.

***How is it that some kids are cast in leading parts in successive productions?***

Whenever a performer is cast in lead roles in successive Greenbelt Youth Musical productions, the situation is analogous to the quarterback on a school football team, a section leader in a choir, or a first chair in a school band or orchestra. In each of those cases, the same

individuals may be awarded their respective positions in back-to-back years, as a result of a competitive try-out process.

Likewise, in the case of the Greenbelt Youth Musical, based on the actors' demonstration of abilities at the initial rehearsal, I apply the same two questions every year:

- Which of the available actors are best suited to this particular role and would do the best job of performing it?
- Which casting configuration would do the best overall job of conveying the story of the play?

Sometimes, the answers to those questions yield a lead role for a performer who had one the previous year. Sometimes they don't. Each production is cast afresh, always with an eye toward **assembling the strongest overall cast for the particular show being presented.**

The important point is that the show is **a group effort.** Everyone involved in the production is working on a project larger than themselves. We are united in telling the story in the best possible way.

### ***My daughter received a smaller role than last year. Isn't she progressing?***

It's important for actors (and parents) not to misinterpret the casting as an indicator of individual progress from year to year. In other words (and scholastic achievers especially need to know this), getting a role is not like getting a grade. It isn't a progress report. If actors are curious to know how I think they have progressed or grown over the preceding year, I'm always glad to tell them. But if they try to extrapolate that assessment from the casting list, they will almost certainly draw an incorrect conclusion.

The reason that individual growth in skill may not be reflected in an actor's successive casting results is that two major variables will have changed from the previous year's production. First, the pool of the available actors (that is, the kids who have enrolled for the production) will have changed. There may be significant turnover in its membership, due to the departure of some veteran actors and the arrival of some brand-new ones. Moreover, all of the returning actors, being adolescents, will have undergone significant changes in the year that has passed since the last production.

Second, the list of roles to be filled will certainly be different from the previous play. In consequence, a particular actor's suitability for the roles being cast can vary from the preceding year. For example, an actor who is perfect in the role of Romeo in one year's production likely won't be the best choice for King Lear in the next, and this is no reflection on his talent or his growth in skill over the intervening year. The roles simply have different demands.

Over the years, there have been some wonderful young actors who moved with grace from lead roles to supporting roles in accordance with the needs of the productions. Some notable

examples from past years include Cody Sanders, who played a string of lead roles from 2003-2007. He was not cast in the title role of *The Trials Of Hercules* in 2008, because among the actors participating that year, he wasn't the best fit for the part. Instead, he played several small supporting character roles. Likewise, Dina Goldberg-Strassler, who was terrific in the lead role of Penelope in *Homeward Bound* in 2004, was not cast the next year in the lead role of Felicity in *The Joy Gods Return*. Instead, she played the hilarious supporting role of Kelli Capelli.

In both cases, the actors responded to their casting with exactly the right attitude, reflecting a sense of professionalism, growing maturity, and an understanding that **the Greenbelt Youth Musical cast is a community engaged in a group project**, rather than an assortment of competing would-be stars. Cody and Dina rallied to the cause of the shows, participated fully as company members, and had a ton of fun in their roles.

### ***Do you have any advice for young actors about casting?***

My advice is to come to the casting rehearsal ready to enjoy yourself and willing to show what you can do. Beyond that, **decide not to worry about the casting at all**. I've given a detailed description of how the casting process works, in the hope of demystifying it. The upshot is, in order for an actor to be cast in a particular lead role in a show, circumstances must be such that the overall casting pattern that best serves the play will slot him into the role. The truth is that those factors are outside the actor's control, so it's pointless for an actor to fret, either before the casting takes place or afterward.

Many adult actors I know have difficulty accepting this simple truth, and they make themselves needlessly (and sometimes melodramatically) miserable over casting results. If they just stopped and thought about it, they would realize that despite their talent, they can't possibly be the best suited for each and every role. In addition, they would recognize that the overall casting configuration for a show depends on balancing multiple factors in order to best serve the particular play being produced.

Actors also sometimes torment themselves by agonizing over what they could have done differently in the casting rehearsal that would have changed the outcome. The truth is that a casting rehearsal or audition provides a pretty clear picture for the director, who is simply gauging everyone's relative suitability for roles. He's not expecting flawless audition performances. So if an actor is well-suited for a part, it will be apparent in an audition even if she makes mistakes. Conversely, even if she auditions perfectly, she still won't be cast in a particular part if she is not well-suited for it, or if she is a poor match for a necessary scene partner. So actors should simply decline to engage in those fruitless "If only I had . . ." musings.

Sometimes, disappointed actors will even make the unfair assertion that the director passed over them because she dislikes them personally or is playing favorites in the casting. In my experience, that is virtually never the case. Good directors base their decisions on what is best for the production, not on their personal feelings about the actors. Directing is very hard work, and the overall success of the play is the director's motivation and reward for her enormous investment of

time and energy. She is therefore exceedingly unlikely to jeopardize the quality of the production based on mere personal likes or dislikes.

As you can see from the way the casting process works, actors are seriously mistaken if they interpret the casting personally, as a verdict on their individual talent or worth. I believe that young actors, once they better understand the casting process, can avoid this common actor mistake -- and much unnecessary distress, as well.

***Couldn't you rotate the parts somehow, so that everyone gets to play a big role, or couldn't you make the parts all the same size?***

Just as football teams and baseball teams don't rotate their players through the different positions, a musical theater program can't rotate actors through the roles. For one thing, there isn't nearly enough rehearsal time to rehearse multiple actors in different roles. For another, different roles require different vocal ranges; they're not interchangeable. Moreover, just as it would be obvious (both to the players and the crowd) that the pitcher and the left-fielder aren't ideal for each other's positions in baseball, so, too, the cast and the audience are acutely aware that specific actors are better fits for some parts than for others.

One of my jobs as a director is to ensure that the audience enjoys the show and is not distracted by unsatisfying casting. It does a disservice to the play and to the cast if the audience members spend the intermission asking each other, "Why the heck is that blonde girl in the green dress playing Juliet? It should be the redheaded girl with the braces." The girls themselves will feel it, too, causing distress for them both. In this scenario, the only people in the entire auditorium who are happy are the parents of the blonde girl in the green dress. And they are happy for the wrong reasons.

As for making the parts the same size, it simply isn't possible within the art form of a book musical. The shows created for the Greenbelt Youth Musical do intentionally feature more principal roles than many traditional Broadway musicals, such as *Hello Dolly* or *Mame*, which are star vehicles for one lead performer.

Nevertheless, our shows must still obey the rule of the art form, which is that a book musical concentrates on the story of its central character, rather than telling the multifarious stories of all its characters. This is what makes a story hold our interest. For example, *The Sound Of Music* tells the story of Maria, not the individual stories of all seven Von Trapp kids -- to say nothing of all those nuns in Nonnberg Abbey. If the show delved into all their stories to the same degree, it would be a marathon event that lasted for days! It's safe to say that not even the proudest parent would sit through that.

***Well, how about double-casting the show in order to maximize the opportunity for larger parts?***

People who casually suggest this have no idea what they are asking. It's a little like glibly asking the coach of the Redskins why he doesn't coach the Ravens as well. Double-casting is the

same thing as directing two productions at once. Not only is it twice as much work, but the results are generally half as good, because of the decreased preparation time for each cast. As it is, the Greenbelt Youth Musical rehearses for far fewer hours than most high school or college musicals do, because the multi-talented kids who participate in the program have multiple commitments. Double-casting would effectively cut those limited rehearsal hours in half for each of the casts, which simply wouldn't be viable. Neither cast would be adequately prepared.

In their anxiety to dole out lead roles or speaking parts to more people, advocates of double-casting overlook that the result is a decreased number of performances for each actor. It isn't possible to use the leads from Cast A as the chorus for Cast B and vice versa; there isn't anywhere near enough time to rehearse them in both capacities, and it's too much for the actors to learn, anyway. So it means that each cast must be idled for half of the performances. Thus, double-casting has the net effect of reducing, rather than expanding, performance opportunities.

However, the worst drawback of double-casting is that it destroys cast unity and sets up a situation where comparisons are continually being drawn between every pair of actors who share a part, as well as between the two casts as a whole. This is the opposite of what we achieve in the Greenbelt Youth Musical with our unified cast, where everyone encourages each other and feels united by a common purpose.

Double-casting only lead roles within a production is equally problematic. The double-cast actors get half as much rehearsal in their parts as the actors who aren't sharing roles, and their scene partners likewise get half as much rehearsal with each of the double-cast actors. I'm opposed to giving actors less than the full amount of rehearsal time, because it makes them feel much less confident and secure in their roles. This can lead to increased performance anxiety, a higher risk of mistakes on stage, and subsequent unnecessary feelings of failure. By refusing to double-cast roles, we ensure that all cast members feel prepared, so that they are all poised to have a successful and pleasant performing experience.

It is my goal to give every young actor in the cast a happy and fulfilling experience, so before the casting is set, I review it to make sure that everyone has an appropriate amount to do in the show. It isn't unusual for me to create some additional speaking roles or songs to augment some performers' assignments, but there is a limit to what I can do in this regard without slowing down the play. It simply isn't possible in a large-cast show for everyone to have solos or speaking roles, but I try to ensure that those who don't have large speaking roles still get plenty of stage time in production numbers.

***Will my child be left out socially among the cast if he doesn't have a large role?***

No, not at all. If anything, members of the chorus have **more** opportunity to socialize, because they spend more time offstage, with more members of the company. Consequently, they usually emerge from the production with a flock of new friends.

In any event, the cast of a Greenbelt Youth Musical is a community whose members are of equal importance. At the end of the play, they take their bows together as a group to signify that

the production was a group effort. There is no star treatment, and there are no social distinctions. Off-stage, anyone who attempts to lord it over others based on the size of his role is gently, but firmly checked by me, but I find that this is seldom necessary. The kids themselves realize that the success of the entire endeavor depends on everybody's contributions, so there is an egalitarian spirit among the group that is reflected in their socializing as well.

Moreover, everyone is having so much fun and feeling so good about what they are doing that a general goodwill pervades the entire enterprise. I am frequently touched and pleased to see the more extraverted, socially skilled, and mature members of the cast drawing others into the circle, helping them build their social confidence and self-esteem.

### ***Can my child grow artistically if she doesn't have a lead role?***

Yes, absolutely! In fact, for most of theater history, the way that young actors received their training and grew in skill was to get themselves cast in small roles or in the chorus. They learned through performing in plays and being on stage with more experienced actors.

Formal theater training programs are a fairly recent invention. I teach in one such program, a master's degree program in classical acting for professional actors offered by the Shakespeare Theatre Company, which is considered the nation's foremost classical theater company. After teaching in that program for twenty years, while simultaneously working with young performers in the Greenbelt Recreation Department's performing arts programs, it is my conviction that actors of all ages can grow best and learn the most by being in good productions with supportive directors and casts, regardless of the size of their roles.

Of course, the Greenbelt Youth Musical doesn't purport to be an actor training program. Our principal goals are recreation and enjoyment, self-discovery and personal growth, affirmation and community building. Paradoxically, though, because the focus isn't on training, and because the participants aren't graded or evaluated, there is a freedom to learn without pressure.

Motivated young actors can learn a great deal from participating in the youth musical. Among the many things I teach them about: Professionalism, using the given circumstances and back stories, identifying and stressing operative words, timing entrances and exits for seamless scene changes, maintaining the imaginary world of the play, preserving the mystery and magic of the theatrical endeavor, propelling the action forward, and the paramount importance of serving the story.

In addition, for the participants whose interest in theater is keen, our rehearsal process makes it possible to learn a great deal from watching the scenes they're not in and by listening to what the director has to say to the other actors. Younger or less experienced actors also profit from the examples around them and the association with their more mature or skillful cast mates -- all the while having a wonderful time. This is the best environment for learning, in my opinion.

### ***How can I help my child grow personally as a result of the casting process?***

When the casting for a show is first announced, some of the actors may be happier than others with the results. In most theater settings, many of the aspirants who audition for a show are not cast in any parts at all; they are excluded from the production, and they are left to deal with their disappointment on their own. By contrast, in the Greenbelt Youth Musical, everyone is included in the cast, so they are members of a community. There is welcome and inclusion, rather than rejection and isolation. The community of the cast gives support to all the actors -- and it also requires their support, which helps them to subsume any personal disappointment with the casting.

Casting is announced via e-mail, so that actors have a chance to manage their initial reactions in private. Any momentary feeling of unhappiness should fade quickly as the actors throw themselves into the production and enjoy being part of the company. My strong recommendation is that after the casting is announced (and throughout the project), actors should use their social media solely for positive messages, such as posting general congratulations to the entire cast and expressing enthusiasm for being part of the production. "Looking forward to being part of a great cast!" "Can't wait to start rehearsals with this terrific group!" That is the way to build up our cast community.

There are many excellent life lessons that parents can help young actors learn from the transient disappointment that may arise from the casting process. Here are half a dozen:

#### **1. If you focus only on yourself, you'll be needlessly unhappy.**

As discussed earlier, an actor who erroneously interprets the casting personally, as a thumbs-down verdict on her individual ability, doesn't have an accurate understanding of the casting process. As a result, she may shed some unnecessary tears.

More importantly, though, the question that determines the final casting, "What overall casting configuration is best for this play?" exemplifies the overarching value of participating in musical theater: The jointly held goal of putting on the best achievable production trumps any self-focused, personal quest for glory. **It is deeply satisfying to exert yourself to advance a project that transcends you, to be a part of something bigger than yourself.** As soon as your actor focuses on the production, instead of on himself, he'll be happier.

#### **2. The fact that you're disappointed doesn't mean it was unfair.**

What a crucial life lesson this is! It is common for toddlers and young children to exclaim, "It isn't fair!" whenever they don't get their way. As they move toward adulthood, however, it is important for teenagers to learn to differentiate between disappointment and unfairness.

A process that is fair can yield a result that you don't like. Parents can be an enormous help to their teens by sympathizing with their feelings, while challenging their assertions of injustice. Kids can learn that it is fine to express their disappointment to you, but that asserting that a process is unfair or that a decision-maker is biased is a serious charge. Such an assertion had better be based on hard facts, not temporarily bruised feelings.

### **3. Setbacks are inevitable in life; how you handle them is what's important.**

Sulking, grumbling, lashing out, talking negatively about others – these are unproductive and unpleasant responses to disappointment. If your young actor indulges in them, she will not only prolong her temporary unhappiness, but she may poison the atmosphere of rehearsals and drag down the production. Worse, she could be setting a negative pattern for responding to disappointment that will not serve her well in life.

Here is some advice to give her: Always be gracious, in victory or defeat. Grieve whatever loss you feel privately, and get on with the show. Congratulate your cast mates sincerely. Save the drama for the stage. The important thing is that you are part of the company, and we need you to help strengthen the company with a positive attitude, a commitment to do your work, and encouragement for others.

### **4. Honor your commitments; quitting harms your reputation.**

Quitting because she didn't get the part she wanted is not an option you should support for your young actor. Quitting has consequences; it signals to everyone else involved in the project that the actor places a low value on working with them and that she is more interested in time in the spotlight than in participating in a collaborative effort with cast mates. It is also disrespectful to the director, who has put a great deal of time and care into crafting a casting configuration based on the full roster of enrolled actors. A director who has had an actor bail out of a small part would be extremely leery of casting that same actor subsequently in a larger part.

### **5. Everyone has unique gifts; embrace yours and collaborate with others.**

Some people can sing beautifully, some can dance gracefully, some can memorize quickly, some can play an instrument with skill. Encourage your actor not to waste time or energy envying other people's gifts. Tell him: Explore, embrace, and celebrate your own gifts, while applauding others for theirs. Find ways to use your gifts creatively in collaboration with others – like musical theater! That is the way to a richly satisfying life.

### **6. Try a generous helping of gratitude.**

A final word of advice to give young actors: Instead of complaining, try being thankful for the opportunity you have been given and for the exertions of others on your behalf. Cultivating gratitude will make you a happy person in life – and expressing it will make those around you happy, too.

*-- Chris Cherry*