



Guide to Acting

There are a great range and variety of opportunities to get involved in theatre in Cambridge, no matter what type of acting you prefer or how much drama you have done before. Many people have never acted before coming to Cambridge and given that there are usually at least three plays going on every week, there are many chances to participate. And whether you favour comedy or tragedy, method or ham acting, and whatever your level of experience, Cambridge drama has a place for you. So, if you've even considered acting in Cambridge, have a go.

It is the aim of these notes to briefly explain how the system works for actors in Cambridge and how to get involved, but if there is anything which is unclear or omitted, or if you want to talk about acting in Cambridge in general, please contact one of the actors on committee.

The Drama Scene

There is what can seem at first to be a bewildering amount of drama going on in Cambridge. Here is a quick introduction to the venues and societies producing plays in Cambridge.

There are several very good venues: the ADC Theatre is very well equipped but traditional in its style and puts on a mainshow and a lateshow every week of term. The Playroom, which belongs to Corpus Christi College, is very small by comparison but very good for productions which involve only simple set and lighting but which benefit from closeness to the audience; there tends to be a mainshow and a lateshow at the Playroom most weeks. The Fitzpatrick Hall at Queens' hosts two mainshows and lateshows a term and has a good stage. The Pembroke New Cellars have recently been renovated and shows are staged there regularly. Other venues include Robinson Theatre, Peterhouse Theatre, Trinity Hall Lecture Theatre, St Chad's Octagon, John's School of Pythagoras and the recently opened Newnham Old Labs; productions are put on at all of these venues from time to time.

In addition to a wide range of venues, there are a great many different styles of production. The Amateur Dramatic Club tries to promote a wide range of shows and is the largest of many student drama societies producing shows. The Cambridge Mummers are a regular producer with a good reputation for the shows they take to Edinburgh and they are beginning to do shows in Cambridge as well, and BATS, based at Queen's, are also very active. The Marlowe puts on one very big production a year and employs a professional director while Footlights run a spring revue, half the pantomime, and a tour show each year as well as regular Smokers (late night comedy shows which give you the chance to try out your own material). On top of this there are the European Theatre Group (ETG) and Cambridge American Stage Tour (CAST) which tour Europe and the United States respectively with Shakespeare plays at Christmas and in the summer, college drama societies, privately funded productions and a host of other groups and companies. Cambridge drama also continues into the summer with shows at Camfest (Cambridge Arts Festival) in July and at the Edinburgh Fringe in August. Out of this come productions of established plays, mainstream and experimental theatre, comedy revues and devised shows. Any or all of this is worth investigating and they will all advertise auditions in Varsity.

Auditions

Auditions are generally held at weekends and there is usually a big batch on the first and last weekends of full term. Audition for as many productions as you have time to, not just the ones in which you are definitely willing to accept parts. Auditioning for everything increases your chance of getting a part in something and, the more auditions you do, the better you get. Doing a good audition is like doing a good interview – it is a particular skill that needs time and practice to master. If you find yourself in the fortunate position of having more parts than you can take, no director will be too offended if you turn them down (provided you don't keep them waiting too long for a definite answer).

The best way to approach auditions is probably not to think about them before or afterwards: just go along, go for it and then forget about it. You rarely have to bring anything prepared in advance to an audition but generally have to prepare a speech from a selection outside the audition room. This will often not be from the play you are auditioning for.

Try to bear in mind some of these general points when performing a piece you haven't seen before in an audition:

- Try to understand the gist of the scene – what's happening, who is involved, what emotions is the character dealing with, what age and type of person the character is etc
- Decide on a persona for your character (draw on characters you have created before), maybe choose an accent you feel to be appropriate (this can be a way of getting into character quickly)
- Decide on a certain number of gestures, movements. These are important but they should not become distracting.
- Try to put some shape on the extract – try to provide variety in terms of emotion, energy, tone. Does the piece have a climax that you need to build up to, and if so should you begin in a more restrained manner to allow the tension to build up. Obviously you don't have time to go into too much detail, and the directors aren't expecting a perfectly paced performance but thinking about these things can help you give a more varied and interesting performance.
- Look up from your script as much as you can. If your head is buried in the script the director won't be able to see your facial expressions. Don't worry about losing your place on the page. If you do, improvise (you should know the general gist of the speech from having read it a couple of times) until you find your place again. The director won't mind if every word isn't the exact one on the page.
- Direct your speech to someone, not the director, but an imaginary character or even the character you are playing (monologues even though spoken to yourself are often spoken with others in mind). This will give a more focused performance and help you forget about the director.
- Use your facial muscles – your expressions are vital.
- Just give it your all, don't hold back and try to forget about being nervous and enjoy your performance – if you do, the likelihood is that the director will as well.

As well as performing an extract, you will sometimes have to do an improvisation. Don't be daunted by this word – not that much is expected of you. Just try not to be self-conscious and say whatever comes into your head - confidence and a willingness to make a lot of noise go a long way in acting!

Your initial audition will probably last ten to fifteen minutes but most directors hold recall auditions. Directors usually inform you about recalls and casting by e-mail. If you're not recalled or cast in anything, don't take it personally and keep on trying. It's usually not a reflection on your ability but more on your suitability for a role. Auditions are very hit and miss and some of the most successful actors in Cambridge started off by being turned down by every director they auditioned for.

Recalls often involve groups of people and last between 30 minutes and an hour and a half. Different directors do different things in recalls. You may be asked to improvise, play some theatrical games and/or read from the play. Just go along with an open mind, do whatever the

director wants and remember you're there to be seen, so don't err on the side of caution. It is also important to remember that recalls are as much about seeing if you like the director. The relationship between actor and director is of course a crucial one and it is important that you feel you could work well together.

Rehearsals and Performances

The intensity of your rehearsal schedule depends on how big your part in the play is and the amount of time left before the opening night. Rehearsals do not usually interfere with lectures or supervisions, although a little sweet-talking of supervisors may be necessary for the technical and dress rehearsals.

The week or fortnight of performances is the pay-off for weeks of hard work and stress and should be fun. You may be required to turn up an hour or two before each performance to sort out costume and make-up and to warm up. Be warned that the week after a show is often a very difficult one, as all the adrenalin that keeps you going during the show subsides and all the work that you put on hold has to be faced.

Acting in Cambridge

Cambridge drama has a great tradition and many famous actors have come out of it. This means that keenly taking part in drama at Cambridge can be a way into Drama School and the acting profession. But it does not mean that it has to be. The majority of people who act in Cambridge just do it for fun; they take it very seriously and do their best but don't be put off by the idea of acting in Cambridge just because you want to dabble. You can let Cambridge drama take over your life (and this can be very rewarding) but there's no need for it to.

If you do decide to get heavily involved, it's important to be aware that this will affect your work. Doing two shows a term (which a lot of people do) puts a big strain on your time and doing three or more (which can be very tempting) can make life impossible. Make sure you know your own workload and how you manage your activities, but having said this, bear in mind you can do some catching up in the hols and, if you really enjoy acting, you probably won't regret it.