

Inside College Musical Theatre Auditions

A Study by Lucy Beck, 2007

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Auditions at any stage can be scary, but put yourself in the shoes of a 17 or 18 year old who has a mere 90 seconds to show what they're made of and you've got the real-life nail biting, mouth drying experience of thousands of young aspiring performers.

Within weeks, now, hopeful musical theatre performers will be making plane reservations to dance, act, and sing their way into the demanding world of musical theatre training programs. Even in the most generous of auditions, students have only 10 minutes to display that they have what that particular school is looking for.

In order to answer questions about what some of the most prestigious East Coast musical theatre programs want to see in an applicant, I talked with faculty at five East Coast schools: Syracuse, Pace, University of Michigan, Boston Conservatory and Penn State. Several other schools on my list, University of Cincinnati, Carnegie-Melon, and NYU Tisch have not responded as yet. A report of West Coast schools is planned.

Questions I asked schools were consistent, but I encouraged people to tell me what they felt was important for students auditioning at their school. Consequently, not all interviews fit neatly into my questions.

Boston Conservatory

Had 600 applicants last year, accepted 70. Normally accept 48, and will accept fewer this year. Students have 10 minutes for their audition: 2 minutes for each song, 2 minutes for each monologue, and 2-3 minute chat with the Director .

Penn State

Last year had 397 applicants and will accept 12-15 this year. Students have 90 seconds for the vocal portion, and one minute for the contemporary monologue.

Pace

Expects 400 applicants, will audition 100, and accept 16. Students have 10 minutes to sing two contrasting songs and perform a monologue. This is followed by an interview.

University of Michigan

Expects about 500 applicants. Did not say how many they accept. Students start with a dance audition, followed by singing two contrasting 16 measure songs.

Syracuse

Dance is first, followed singing. Students 90 seconds per song, with some flexibility.

What do all these schools wish to see or not see in an applicant?

Realness: who is this young person. To quote Amy Rogers, the Musical Theatre Program Director at Pace: I want students to come with an open heart, to share their self, not their fears, to be present in their material and to be present in the room as a human being.

A healthy voice, with healthy technique. All the schools require an up-tempo and a ballad. Boston Conservatory want to hear legit, and Pace prefers that both songs be sung in a speech-centered technique. Most importantly, as Mary Saunders-Barton, Head of Voice Instruction in Musical Theatre at Penn State, says, the emphasis is on natural and genuine expression. Although they expect good technique in voice, they don't expect a polished performance.

The basics in musicianship: Pitch, support, articulation, rhythm, phrasing and style and clarity. Mary Saunders says that schools are interested in a student's musical background because the demand for sight-singing skills and overall musical knowledge is increasingly important in today's market.

"Teachability" as coined by Raymond Sage, the Director of Penn State New Musical Festival at Penn State. Raymond said that "we will often vocalize a young singer in the audition to see if she is able to take instruction and be willing to be taught how to belt in a healthy manner. I would much rather have a raw talent with a mediocre performance that is trainable, than an enormously gifted singer/actor with a polished audition who is over-confident and hard to teach." Neil Donohue, The Director of Boston Conservatory, said that a student must be teachable. Jim Clark, Director of the Musical Theatre Dept at Syracuse University, used the word flexibility. They evaluate that by asking students to sing one of their songs in a different way, or to sing another song. All the schools also evaluate this in their interview.

An emotional connection to the music. All the schools want students to choose songs that allow for discovery and emotion. Mary Saunders said that "showing a sense of humor, delight in performance and confident preparation are huge advantages." Students need to present songs that are age and technique appropriate. To make that emotional connection, they should choose something that expresses what they have experienced or can imagine experiencing. All the schools like to hear new or unusual music, but students need to consider the difficulty of accompaniment.

None of the schools want to hear the extremes of the voice, especially not the extreme loud highs. Neil Donohue, Boston Conservatory, said that he would love to hear the beautiful old simple classics, such as, *When You Wish Upon a Star*.

Appropriate dress. None of the schools indicated that how a student dressed would affect their chances of being accepted; they just said that it should be "appropriate."

A student who is prepared. All the schools emphasized that there is a lot of important information on their websites, so students need to know the specific requirements of each school, and of the major.

A student who is prepared for the auditions. Bring water, dance clothes, singing outfit, and street outfit. Have the music back-to-back in a 3-ring notebook that lies flat. Some schools, like Boston Conservatory, want the music in non-glare plastic sheets. Others, like Syracuse, do not want music in plastic sleeves. Make sure all the notes are copied and that the songs are in the right key.

What do all the schools want the student to know about them?

Most of the schools said that they are like repertory companies in that they select who they need and who is a good fit for their program. None are looking for any particular type. Amy Rogers at Pace, said that they want individuals who know who they are, who have a well-developed self-awareness. Other characteristics she looks for are kindness and students who care about their craft and who are not star-crazy. Most importantly, they are on the student's side. They want the student to feel comfortable, and most will give tours of their facility and offer opportunities to talk with staff and students. They realize that it is a stressful time, and they want to do what they can to get to know that young person standing in front of them who may spend the next four years of their life in that particular school.

So, if you're one of the students who'll be getting your ticket east soon, go out and let them see a well-rested you. As Jim Clark, of Syracuse University said, "They want to see you at your best!"

Using Boston Conservatory as an example, here is the list of questions each school considered. Neil Donohue, the Director of Boston Conservatory spoke with me.

Can you describe the audition process?

Last year they had 600 applicants, and accepted 70. They normally accept 48, and will accept fewer this year. They want to return to a more intimate program so they can maintain the relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

Can you describe the audition process?

2 contrasting songs, a ballad and an up-tempo, looking for quality of instrument, phrasing, color, acting; a healthy voice. In the up-tempo, looking for energy, clarity and the ability to handle rhythm. Mr. Donohue emphasized that they do not want to hear the extremes of the voice. He doesn't want to hear extreme highs, or louds. Many students feel that they need to show their full range. Not a good idea. Students have 10 minutes for their audition: 2 minutes for each song, 2 minutes for each monologue, and 2-3 minutes to chat with the Director and with one or two other people who are at the audition.

Students may choose their own first song.

What kind of music would you like to hear?

Songs that allow for discovery, and emotion. Unusual music is fine. Check on the school's website for "overdone list." No-no's this year include songs from *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Would love to hear the beautiful old simple classics, such as *When You Wish Upon a Star*.

Should the choice of music be age-appropriate?

Mostly; students should choose something that they have experienced or can imagine experiencing.

Do students have an opportunity to rehearse with the accompanist?

Yes; cuts should be marked clearly, and of course, don't use lead sheets, or ask the accompanist to transpose. Put music back-to-back in a 3-ring notebook, **in non-glare plastic sleeves**. Don't bring the most difficult music to play, because occasionally they are not always to get their best pianists.

Do you ever ask a student to sing another song, or sing a song another way?

Yes, they may ask for a different tempo or style. They want to see if a student is hiding behind a very learned interpretation.

How important is the voice?

Very important. They expect most of their applicants to have studied for years, unlike acting or dance.

Does it matter what vocal style a student chooses?

Yes, sing legit.

How many people are on the panel?

Neil, another faculty member, the accompanist, and often a student sits in.

Can an accepted student schedule a lesson with a teacher before choosing the school?

Yes, just give enough time to arrange it.

How many voice faculty do you have?

15 classically trained teachers, who all have an intense interest in the variety of the musical theatre sound.

Besides the above, how do you choose a student?

There's an instinctive element in selecting the final students we want. They must be musically healthy.

Final thoughts: Neil considers the school a repertory company, where all students are treated as individuals. They look for and train the best possible performers they can be.