

Overdone monologues!

By Karen Kohlhaas

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THE RESULTS ARE IN!

10 industry professionals rated 116 frequently-done contemporary monologues for their degree of "overdoneness."

The male and female winners

- The woman's tunafish monologue from *Laughing Wild* (1987)
by Christopher Durang
- The man's tunafish monologue from *Laughing Wild* (1987)
by Christopher Durang

DISCLAIMER

It is *not* my intention to make actors abandon these overdone pieces only to do other pieces that are terrible, or terrible choices for them. As noted below, most of the pieces are done a lot because they are great, or good, or at least catchy in some way. But mainly they are done a lot because they are the most popular ones in the monologue books. Actors (especially ladies, especially ladies doing comedic), you are going to have to do a little more work to find lesser-known, good material from plays. I think that ultimately those who do this work, and rehearse effectively, will have better results, and a better time. If you are *not* willing to put in the work, you probably should stick to the beaten track; just know that many of your auditors, male and female, could perform Libby's monologue from *Blue Window* (a great play by one of my favorite writers), or Phil's monologue from *Boys' Life* (ditto), right there along with you.

WHY NOW

I used to only be concerned that actors did monologues for my class that they cared about. I left the choice of material up to the actors (and still do, see [Why you should have 20 monologues](#) on this site). After a few years, there was a growing number of monologues I was seeing over and over. I began to tell actors when they chose these monologues, but it was fine with me if they still wanted to work on them. This number grew (and grew and grew) and now I believe we are at a saturation point (and have been) with over 100 pieces which have been so frequently done for *so long*, that I truly feel it hurts the actors' chances in the room to do them. In my and others' opinion, when actors do these overdone pieces, it looks like they are just sticking to the monologue books, and are not aware of many plays and playwrights.

WHY NOT DO A FREQUENTLY-DONE MONOLOGUE?

This survey is not meant to slight the writers in any way! Many of these monologues are well written and are from great plays, and that is why they are

overdone. It's just time for actors to move on from many of them. It doesn't serve anyone to do a piece the auditors have heard 200 times. People will argue, "If you do it better than anyone else they've seen that's all that matters," but there is no way for you to know whether you've done this, and why would you want to put that pressure on yourself? You'd be worrying about being "better" instead of telling that story fully, and guess what that can do to your acting. It can be very hard to find out which monologues are seen a lot, and this is an attempt to let you know what those pieces are. Industry and educators reading this survey are invited to [e:mail me](#) with additional overdone pieces, and periodically I will add them to the site.

HOW THE SURVEY WAS DONE

I started with a list of the contemporary monologues I see the most, and asked colleagues to add to it. I knew I was on the right track when I found some shorter overdone lists on the internet, and our list included many of the same pieces. I then polled 9 other industry and educational professionals who see thousands of pieces, and asked them to rate the pieces from 1 to 3. I took the survey too. The ratings meant:

- 1 – I have not seen this monologue
- 2 – I have seen it but am fine seeing it again
- 3 – I have seen it so often, it doesn't matter how well an actor does it, I'm completely sick of it!

Several of the participants spontaneously created a fourth category, either by actually putting a "4" after some of the monologues, or by putting ten 3's, or by putting many exclamation marks after some of their 3's. I think doing this was kind of cathartic for them. I let these pieces have a score of 4, which is why some of the averaged scores are higher than 3.

I did not include writers such as Miller, Williams, O'Neill, and others of their periods because I think so many of their plays are modern classics and will always be with us. Likewise with Chekhov, Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, etc. I wanted to focus on the monologues from plays that actors bring in the most frequently when asked for a contemporary piece. The survey takers were also asked several questions about their preferences on material for monologue auditions, (such as age, profanity, subject matter) which had extremely interesting results. (See [More survey results](#) to read their answers, and to find out who the survey takers are.)

WHAT THE SURVEY REVEALED

Most important: Actors are not reading enough!!!

We looked up the years the plays were first produced. About two thirds were written before 1990; and the average year of the plays was 1985! This confirmed that a lot of the monologues have been overdone for up to 15 years! I think most of the plays themselves are very important for actors to know, but it's time to start reading and supporting the writers of this decade!

116 monologues – 71 female, 45 male – is not a large number. There are so many great plays out there that actors never do monologues from, mostly because they have not been pre-digested into the monologue books. *IF YOU WANT TO BE AN ACTOR AND YOU ARE NOT REGULARLY READING PLAYS, INCLUDING NEWER PLAYS, YOU ARE CHEATING YOURSELF AND YOU ARE NOT SERIOUS.* Younger actors, you should get to know the writers of your generation. In her interview for [THE MONOLOGUE AUDITION VIDEO](#), Amanda Charlton, who also took this survey, said it the best: “

“People who just pick them out of the monologue books I think are lazy or not that interesting. A true artist wants to find the best material – is interested, just plain old interested. And that I can tell right away. If an actor comes in with a new piece from a great, hot playwright that not a lot of people know – I’m extra aware of that person – I’m interested in what they’re about.”

Men have more options

The odds are very roughly like this: there are many times more produced and published male playwrights than female ones; there are many times more male characters than female characters, But, there are many more female actors auditioning for everything than male actors. Because of these odds, I heard once that females had a 5% chance of getting accepted to a particular acting school, and males had a 50% chance because the school was looking for a male/female ratio that would enable them to cast their mainstage productions. There are 71 women’s monologues on our original overdone list and 45 men’s, and there are always more women than men auditioning. So the next time a male actor complains about finding audition material, you know what to tell him.

Actors over 35 have more options

The vast majority of the roles on the list is for actors under 35. The competition thins out as years go by! “Actors are not as limited in the practice of their craft by age as other performing artists, so those who stick it out, or those who return, or turn, to acting later on have incredible roles waiting for them – that are not on these overdone lists!

Those seeking characters of color can have more options

The list results reflect a truth of the showbiz industry in this country, which is that it is white character dominated. There are fewer accessible plays by writers of color, with characters of color, but once you find them they are less well known, and therefore less often done in auditions. Also, our survey takers were asked whether it is important that an actor audition with race-specific monologues, see [More survey results](#) for their answers.

They don’t always have to be from plays!

It’s true! (But you should check carefully about each audition you prepare for, and be aware that requirements can change over time.) I was surprised to learn that not all educational institutions require that all monologues be from plays in their

yearly auditions. (See [More survey results](#). But note: I told responders that their answers would not be matched with their names/schools/companies, so you will have to research this for each school you audition for.) Auditors have told me that it is a refreshing relief when people bring in something that is a new, well-written and well-told story, regardless of the source. See the October 2006 article on this site, [Found monologues](#).

Not everyone agrees

One theater casting director who I invited to take the survey declined, saying he truly does not mind what the piece is as long as it is done well. And, a former student recently told me about a set of auditions where they specifically encouraged well-known, even overdone pieces (and discouraged original writing or pieces from alternative/less known sources), seemingly because they would rather have strong, overdone writing than weak lesser-known writing. I think you can have both strong writing *and* originality if you are willing to work at it, and that doing so will increase what you have to offer as an actor. And, I have to say in my experience the above casting director and theater auditors are in the minority, given the vehemence with which so many of our participants rated so many of the monologues on the list. This included unsolicited comments next to particular monologues like “Please god make it stop.” In the end, the only solution is to [have many monologues prepared at all times](#), perhaps deliberately including a piece or two from the overdone list.

SO WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

Read!

Develop your knowledge, passion, and taste. It all starts with the writing. Regardless of whether you want to primarily do theater, TV or film, having interesting, truthful, energetic, beautiful, powerful writing, *that affects you*, should be your starting place.

Look for good writing

What is quality writing? I have seen great “real life” monologues that were not written, simply transcribed from the words of an actual individual. There should be truth. There should be good structure – a clear beginning, middle, climax and end. There should be a point to what is being said. You should feel that what is being said, is being said well. But, you should also:

Experiment

Let go of your perfectionism and just try stuff. I have had the experience many times as a director of not quite knowing what I thought of a play, and then falling in love with it while working on it. If you get too picky, you’ll wait forever. Monologues are short! Get together with some friends and just read pieces to each other.

Look for material in the long term

Finding a monologue the day before an audition is like looking for a new dress two hours before the party starts – everything looks horrible because you are desperate. I know every single actor reading this article has had this experience if he or she has ever auditioned with monologues. You must look in the long term. This is an enjoyable thing to do. Grab pieces from plays, movies, tv, books, interviews, anything that strikes you. Keep a notebook of them. Play with them, read them out loud. Pick pieces for particular reasons and challenges you want to work on. Use them to explore and get better as an actor. Have many that you can do at all times. If you develop this discipline you *will* be able to prepare a new piece quickly when you need to because the habits will be in place.

Click here to read [More survey results](#). Meet the survey-takers, and find out more about their preferences when it comes to choosing material.

Click here to receive the [monthly newsletter](#), which will have info about new surveys and articles about finding material and other audition issues.

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