

Why you should have 20 monologues

By Karen Kohlhaas

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I have been teaching monologue workshops for many years now, and have had the opportunity to work with over a thousand actors. In the interviews for the workshops, I have been asked over and over again the most common and frustrating questions that actors have about monologues: “What material should I do?” “What is right for me?” “What material will show me off at my best?” “Do you help us choose monologues?”

Why I never choose material for actors

While I'm happy to give my opinion on a monologue an actor is considering for class, I never choose or assign material, for a few reasons. One, the actors would then be limited to my taste and my favorites and I would inevitably repeat myself. I'd be stuck seeing the same monologues over and over! Two, looking to someone else to choose material for them puts actors in a passive position, one that actors are in too often in this business already. I think it's important and empowering for actors to take charge of their artistic choices wherever they can. ***While of course an actor must take the requirements of the specific audition into account, nothing can replace an actor's choosing material for a personal, specific reason. By doing this they become an active artist instead of a passive suggestion-taker. It completely changes who they are in the audition room.***

Why actors find it so hard to choose monologues

Many, or perhaps even most, actors who are in the position of having to audition with monologues for graduate schools, agents, casting directors, summer stock, EPA's and companies hate doing monologues to begin with. They don't have a fun and reliable way to rehearse them, and so they look to do as few monologues as possible. This puts enormous pressure on the monologues they do choose. If they are successful in choosing a couple of pieces that they can stand to do, and rehearse to the point where they can perform them, they stop there. They use the same monologue or two for every single audition they go on. This obviously is not beneficial to them as actors.

The only way to turn it around

Asking one or two pieces to do everything for you is unfair to the writing and unfair to you as an actor. The monologues will very likely become general and stale after several auditions. The reasons for choosing material need to be completely turned around, and this is why I suggest working toward a goal of having 20 monologues. This takes the enormous pressure off of each piece, and frees you to make specific choices for each one. It gives you ways both to work within your casting range **and** expand that range.

First, you must find or figure out a way of rehearsing monologues that makes sense and is enjoyable for you. You need a way that you can use your acting instincts to play off

the moment so that everything you do is fresh and doesn't look preplanned. You need simple, consistent staging that shows you are comfortable moving in front of an audience, and that clearly tells your story. If you are auditioning with a monologue on camera, you still need choices that keep you physically alive, just on a much smaller scale.

I love monologues and I never get tired of seeing them no matter how many classes I teach or auditions I see. Monologues are an opportunity to create an entire world and tell a wonderful story using only yourself. When an actor has chosen material he is excited about, and has rehearsed so that he is telling the story clearly and truthfully, I am caught up in the piece and having the best experience an audience member can have: time has stopped and all I care about is the story.

Why should you work on so many monologues?

Because they are so short, monologues are an ideal vehicle to work out, explore, and improve. Scene work is essential, and actors should do thorough scene work as part of their training, but unlike a scene, you can take your successful monologues right into the audition room.

- **Monologues are your best opportunity to grow as a performer while you are starting out auditioning or while you're between roles.** You have an unlimited opportunity to grow and explore any kind of writing or character. You can work on the writing you love, immediately. If Edward Albee is your favorite playwright, you can perform his writing today; you don't have to wait to get cast in one of his plays.
- **You can use your work on monologues to stretch and change the way others see you.** One student of mine with very pretty, classic looks was tired of being sent out on boring, girl-next-door kinds of auditions. She rehearsed a "tough girl" monologue (it was the character Georgie from Theresa Rebeck's *Spike Heels*) and did it for her agent. He was delighted and started to submit her for more interesting, meaty roles.
- **You can do monologues to venture out of your comfort zone.** Some of the most exciting choices I have seen in class are from an assignment to do a 'challenge' monologue. This is a monologue that requires that you do something you are a bit afraid of in order to make it work. People have sung, done very difficult language, tackled frightening subject matter, done characters that are very unlike them; the choice is individual for each actor. Invariably the results from a challenging monologue are more exciting to do and to watch than a totally safe one.

The 20 monologue challenge

As a challenge to a class of our second-year NYU students at the Atlantic Acting School, I told them that if any of them could come to me by the end of the year and do 20 monologues in a row, I would buy them dinner. No one took me up on it! The following year, a 2nd year student named Karen Benelli asked if the offer was still on; I said sure. At the end of that semester, she performed 20 monologues in a row for me. It

was such an exciting experience to see her do this. She gave me a list of her choices and proceeded to perform them without stopping; she just did a simple, smooth transition between each one. What was even more exciting was seeing her choices of material. She covered the bases of classical/contemporary, comedy/drama monologues that were from plays. She did monologues from movies, comedy essays, and poetry. She did several pieces with accents; one piece even had 3 different accents! I got such a wonderful sense of what kinds of writing appealed to her, and of many possible ways she could be cast.

A couple of years later, another 2nd year NYU student named Kate Kirby met this challenge, and the experience was equally exciting. I saw her perform roles I could easily imagine her playing, and roles I wouldn't have imagined her in until she showed me. Many were choices I'd never seen before. Each monologue was chosen for a specific reason. The choices of writing reflected her sense of humor, her love of language, her impeccable speech, and her love of sophisticated comedy.

Karen Benelli's letter

A year after she performed her 20 monologues, Karen Benelli wrote me a letter saying the experience of rehearsing and performing 20 monologues was the most valuable experience she'd had as an undergraduate acting student. Here are some excerpts. She said the benefits were:

- First, the obvious – I have 20 prepared monologues under my belt. While I admit that right now I no longer remember them well enough to do in seamless succession, I still have them in a folder--typed, blocked, and analyzed – and I could easily whip one into shape in an evening.
- Doing the exercise helps you realize which monologues are your strongest. About five stood out as being effortless and comfortable; another five felt awkward and pushed; the other ten fell somewhere in the middle.
- Breaking down, blocking, and analyzing a monologue gets a great deal easier after so much practice.
- Finding 20 different pieces forces you to be resourceful and look for monologues in unexpected places (slam poetry, Anne Frank's diary, one-man shows...no excuses for wimping out and buying a monologue book!!).
- Doing a large span of material at once allows you to notice any (unintentional) physical habits (e.g., was it an uncomfatability with that gesture or monologue that made me speed up and lock my knees, or am I doing it across the board?)
- And, after doing 20 monologues in a row, walking into an audition and doing one or two is unfathomably easy!

I chose the number 20 for that challenge to my students randomly – it's a large round number and sounds impressive. Less important than the actual number is the point I hope I've made: stop limiting yourself to 1 or 2 monologues, because your acting and auditions will only improve! And imagine how you would walk into the audition room if you knew you could do 20!

What kind of repertoire should you build?

Actors auditioning for theater should definitely have many choices from plays they are passionate about; the writing is generally stronger, and it is important to show your knowledge of the great, more established plays in some of your choices. I rarely see choices from the most current plays, and think actors can always be paying more attention to new writing.

Having a large number as a goal allows you to look in very interesting places for your next choices after you've rehearsed a good number from established plays. A student in my classes last fall was interested in working on true life material related to a documentary project she was working on at the time. As an experiment I looked to the internet to see what I could find to give her some ideas. I went to Google and typed in the words "factory worker interview." Many things came up in the search. I picked one, which was about a working mother in Mexico being interviewed about the very difficult and unfair working conditions at the factory where she was employed. I pieced together her responses. The monologue naturally built to a climax because she was speaking about exploitative working conditions that were vitally affecting her life. I ended up with a very compelling 2-minute monologue. The whole process took me less than a half and hour. (Note: if you try this, always include the word "interview" in your search, you will be most likely to get someone who is speaking from their own experience, as opposed to an article.) My student did her own search and ended up with an equally compelling monologue about a white-collar criminal going to prison and realizing she'd become just another prisoner to the people who worked there. Other fascinating choices I've seen adapted into monologues include:

- A famous groupie from the 60's describing what it was like to sleep with David Bowie
- A hilarious interview with Mel Brooks
- An actual recording of a Wall Street trader yelling on the phone at traders in London
- A pithy response from columnist Dan Savage
- One of the first female astronauts relating her first experience in space

You can look for monologues on talk radio, in books of letters, documentaries, impassioned speeches from history; statements by explorers, scientists, famous artists talking about their work...the choices are endless. Use common sense: make sure you end up with a clear beginning, middle, climax and end. Use simple editing and you can piece together a unique, compelling story that you know they haven't seen before.

Finally, having 20 monologues prepared means you have the best possible comeback for those horrible moments when they say, "We've seen that so many times before, do you have anything else?" Or, "We don't think that monologue is right for you." Instead of

letting these comments throw you or put you on the spot, you can easily and confidently say "I have nineteen more – here's a list. What would you like to see?"

Karen Kohlhaas is a New York based theater director, a founding member of the Atlantic Theater Company, and a senior teacher at the Atlantic Acting School. She teaches private monologue classes in New York and internationally, is the author of "The Monologue Audition: A Practical Guide for Actors," and is the director/writer/producer of THE MONOLOGUE AUDITION VIDEO, a 120-minute instructional dvd for actors or anyone who wants to present themselves well, available on her website www.monologueaudition.com.

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