

ARDENT RESOURCES

Self-taping for
casting auditions

From an online workshop delivered by Elizabeth Hill

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ABOUT

ARDENT RESOURCES is a collection of workshop notes, interviews, guidance and tips about working in Theatre. It is not intended as comprehensive advice or formal educational resource on which reliance should be placed; rather it collates various insights from people working in the industry that you can choose to incorporate into your own toolkit. Nothing should be taken as a representation or warranty as the correctness or fitness for purpose of any of the content.

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INTRODUCTION

The following provides a summary of an online workshop led by Elizabeth Hill on self-taping. It's not intended as a comprehensive guide to self-taping; rather it's a collection of useful hints and tips from the workshop that you can incorporate into your own acting toolkit.

A self-tape casting is where you are asked to film yourself performing a scene or monologue and sending it to whoever is casting. This is commonplace for film and television, and less so for theatre auditions, although not unheard of, especially since lockdown has highlighted how much can be done remotely.

Self-tape auditions enable casting directors to see many more people than they would do if the casting took place in person. Technology has helped casting become less London-centric, since you can audition from anywhere and in your own time. However, it does also mean competition is higher and if your file isn't labelled clearly or it's wrongly formatted and won't open, it's easy to be dismissed before anyone has even watched your performance.

Usually, you will be provided with a specific brief that provides the character and scene(s) you need to film. Occasionally, you may be asked to submit a piece of your choosing.

The most important thing to remember is the acting, not how technically skilled you are. However, you need to ensure your tape gets seen and that the casting director is able to focus on your performance and not be distracted by poor lighting, sound and framing.

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QUICK TIPS

If you really struggle to learn the text, then have some key prompts on cue cards behind the camera and in your eyeline. There are also apps that can roll the lines for you.

If you can't find anyone to read in, try using an app like LineLearner to record yourself reading the other parts, or get someone to read the lines online using something like Zoom.

Do a take two or three times, take a break, walk away and come back to it fresh. Try to aim for 3 or 4 max; too many is also not a good idea.

Always play it back and always check the frame, lighting and audio.

BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

Learn all the text. If you're not confident on lines you won't come across as natural. Sometimes you might only have a short time to prepare or are asked to do several tapes in one week; you still have to try and be off book. At least with self-taping you can do it in your own time and do as many takes as you want.

Ask someone to read in the other characters. Your reader needs to be heard clearly but check that their voice doesn't dominate. If your reader is also operating the camera then it's likely their voice is going to be picked up more loudly than yours, so be careful and check.

WHAT IS A SLATE?

A slate is your introduction before your audition material. It's the one time you look directly into the lens of the camera. Your slate can also be done as added text titles. It may be that you've been asked to include specific information; if not, then at least include your name and the role you are auditioning for. You might also want to include the name of the show and your agent's name if you have one.

Don't do the slate in character; have confidence and just be yourself. It gives the casting director an opportunity to see something of your personality.

You can always ask whether there is any specific information required for the slate. If you have an agent, you can give their name. If no agent, you could give your email. Never give your phone.

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QUICK TIPS

Edit out any extra bits of filming; just keep your slate and your performance. Don't show yourself turning the camera on or off.

WeTransfer is the preference for sending files.

Self-taping can be useful for creating your own showcase material. You can then upload the video on YouTube and share the link when writing to directors, agents and casting directors.

IMPORTANT: If putting tapes on YouTube, there may be copyright issues or confidential material such as plot lines of shows; it's better if you use something you have written or something you can check the copyright on.

SAVING YOUR FILE

Save your file as an MP4.

Make sure to include relevant information in the file name so the casting director can easily find it and identify who you are. It should include your name and character name you are auditioning for, especially useful if you are auditioning for more than one role in the production. Name and character are the minimum it should contain; the casting director may also need to know the production/series as they will receive many tapes at a time, and not just for one show.

FILMING YOUR PERFORMANCE

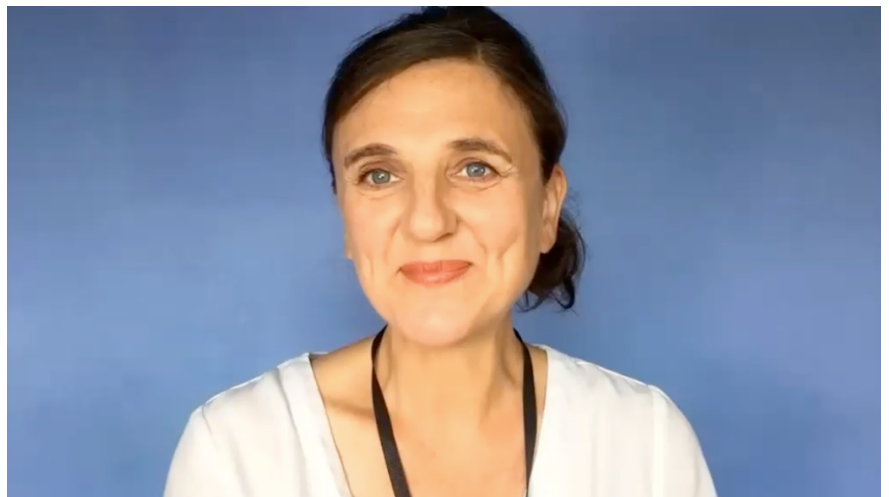
Always film in landscape, not portrait.

Shoot no higher than 720p; don't do it in the highest resolution. If the file is too big or takes too long to download, the casting director might not bother.

Make sure the camera is facing you directly, not at an angle or looking up or down at you.

Always film with a plain, clean backdrop behind you and make sure you're not capturing anything else - plugs, furniture, pictures etc - in the frame.

Position yourself central in the frame, not to the side. Your frame should be from your chest line to the top of your head. Give yourself room but no extra added space. You are the focus. You are who they want to see.



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QUICK TIPS

Make sure you wear something that contrasts with the background so that you don't blend in. Not patterned, just something that makes you stand out a bit.

If you don't have a plain wall, purchase a cheap roller blind and use that.

Make sure you iron your clothes. It may seem a small point, but on camera it can be distracting, and you don't want anything that pulls focus away from your performance.

Mark your eyeline with a piece of tape slightly to the left or right of the camera so you are consistent where you're looking.

If you are addressing more than one character in a scene, then choose a different eyeline for each.

If performing a monologue without any other characters, you can break it up by delivering parts of the speech to different eyelines.

FILMING YOUR PERFORMANCE (continued)

Use a tripod or at least ensure your camera is propped up securely so it's static, never handheld. Even the smallest wobble can be a distraction.

Never direct your performance into the lens, other than when doing your introductory slate. You want your eyeline to be wherever the character is you're talking to. This doesn't mean directing everything to your reader. Choose eyeline positions that are to the left or right of the lens but be careful not to position you reader/eyeline too far to the side of the camera so that you end up in profile.

If you are auditioning for two characters, then change what you're wearing to differentiate between the two. That's not to say dress up in costume, but something that hints at the character, so the casting director doesn't have to work hard to imagine you in the role.

You don't get any direction, so you have to make your own choices about how to play the scene. Try to keep the performance natural and try playing the scene in different ways, then choose the best take to submit. Sometimes it might even be possible to send more than one take to offer up a variation to the casting director. However, you should only send more than one if they are short pieces.

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QUICK TIPS

LED ring lights—the ones that you can put your phone into and are placed in front of you—can sometimes reflect a circle in the eye and be distracting.

If using an external mic, make sure you clip it where it won't be seen in the frame.

If you've filmed on a smart phone, try and check watching it back on a computer. The sound and lighting quality might look very different on a bigger screen.

LIGHTING AND AUDIO

If you can, use natural light coming from the windows, so position yourself so the light is in front of you behind the camera. If you use LED lights, it's better to light from the side.

Use lighting to lift your face; this is what you want the viewer to focus on. Also, try to bring out your eyes with lighting; it's the eyes that draw people in.

Check for shadows, both on the back wall and on yourself. Sometimes, depending where the light is coming from, you might cast a shadow under your chin or across your shoulder. This is just another distraction from your performance.

Check that you're filming in a quiet space and there are no background noises. Even the camera can give off a buzzing noise and be distracting.

Invest in an external microphone that plugs into your phone or camera; it'll help pick up your voice and help reduce noise from elsewhere in the room.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There is no right and wrong, because if they like you and the look of you, the technical quality can be forgiven. Most of us are not directors, editors or film makers, so do the best you can with the skills and equipment you have. It's about getting yourself seen and that means labelling your file correctly and making sure there are no distractions or intrusions that give them an excuse to switch off. Make them want to keep watching within the first 30 seconds.