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Tryouts for the Rest of Your Life

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ON the 16th floor of the Ripley-Grier Studios in midtown Manhattan, Adam Pelta-Pauls nervously paced the hallway. It was a rainy morning in early February, and this 17-year-old senior from Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, Md., was awaiting his turn to audition for Carnegie Mellon's vaunted drama school. So were about 30 others.

Despite the welcoming décor — warm colors, potted palms, Turkish rugs — the tension was palpable. Students were tucked in corners rehearsing their lines, fretting parents sized up the competition and those seated in the rattan chairs lining the walls had turned foot-jiggling into a high art. Periodically, a university official yelled out someone's name, startling everyone.

"How am I doing?" Adam repeated, looking out over the scene from his 6-foot-1 frame and funky glasses. "I'm freaking out!" he said in a dramatic baritone. "That's how I'm doing. I'm confident, but whooo!"

That's understandable. All told, a record 1,200 students were auditioning for 16 spots in the fall acting class or 12 in the musical theater program. Of the nine colleges Adam was applying to, Carnegie Mellon was his top choice. Only one other, Marymount Manhattan College, required an audition.

For colleges that offer conservatory training or Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees in acting, February is peak audition season. To save students the time and cost of traveling to multiple campuses for their auditions, Carnegie Mellon and three other colleges that tend to share the same applicant pool — Purchase College (SUNY), Boston University and the North Carolina School of the Arts — coordinate several of their tryout dates. The Unified auditions, for 21 colleges (including Boston Conservatory, Webster University in St. Louis and Penn State), were also happening this weekend, on two floors of an office building near Times Square.

While most college-bound students obsess over grades, SAT scores and essays, Adam and students like him endure yet another layer of stress: proving they can act. The 10- to 15-minute audition would make or break a college dream.

Adam had auditioned before — for a state scholarship (he won), a regional Shakespeare competition (second place), even for a professional production at the Shakespeare Theater Company in Washington (he looked too old for the role). But nothing compared to this. "Those were auditioning for parts," he said. "This is auditioning for your life."

THE road to stage and screen wasn't always paved with sheepskin. Back in the 1970s, aspiring actors were "mentored into the profession," as Madeline Puzo, dean of the University of Southern California's school of theater, puts it. The old-fashioned way was to get training in a professional theater company or an independent conservatory like the American Academy of Dramatic Arts or the Actors Studio, or to be discovered and plopped on the Hollywood treadmill.

In 1970, only a handful of acting programs existed, all in the Northeast, according to Dramatics magazine, which is published by the Educational Theater Association. Today, more than 100 colleges and universities across the country offer conservatory training or B.F.A.'s. Several hundred more offer Bachelor of Arts degrees with majors in theater or acting, and concentrations in related areas like stage management, directing or scenic design.

These days Peggy Sawyer, the "42nd Street" ingénue fresh off the bus from Allentown, Pa., would have a B.F.A. from Carnegie Mellon, the University of Michigan or the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. She would have been trained in musical theater, schooled in the ways of the entertainment business and probably signed by an agent picked up at a senior-year showcase for show-business professionals.

There are still the Johnny Depps and Natalie Portmans — young actors with no formal training who go on to mega-careers — but they have become the exception.

What changed? Bill Strauss, the co-founder of Capitol Steps, was an expert on youth theater as well as

generational differences. In an interview last year before his death, he explained how theater moved beyond its boom-or-bust New York epicenter in the late 1960s and became acceptable as a middle-class line of work. Just as the National Endowment for the Arts began supporting arts education nationwide, the regional theater movement was spawning resident theaters that could offer regular employment. Baby boomer parents encouraged their star-struck children with private lessons and school activities. But they also insisted their budding thespians earn a college degree — "something to fall back on." Higher education stepped into the void.

What students have to fall back on varies. At Carnegie Mellon, 85 percent of the drama school's curriculum is focused on acting. Don Wadsworth, a professor and one of the audition judges, calls this approach "baking the actor in the theater-training oven" — mastering stage skills is considered fundamental for all acting. The curriculum is meant to get students ready for theater, film or television work right after graduation.

It is not for everyone. Most 18-year-olds are not ready to make that commitment. They hedge their bets with a B.A. and theater or acting major, and a program of study that is usually only a third acting and the rest academic. Some theater professors favor a liberal arts education for an actor because, as David Mold, director of theater admissions at Marymount, says: "Theater is ultimately an investigation into the world."

Peter Sargent, dean of the college of fine arts at Webster, says that students serious about acting must choose a college the way a high school athlete with professional ambitions would. "You go to certain colleges that enhance your probability of getting drafted," he says. That is, he means, ones that will provide intensive training, professional connections and a pedigree that casting directors are likely to trust. The problem is getting in.

Most college auditions for acting require students to prepare two monologues — one contemporary and one classical (plus, for musical theater, usually 16 bars of two songs and a dance tryout).

Adam came armed with three monologues, just in case. He had already prepared Shakespeare's St. Crispin's Day speech from "Henry V" ("We few, we happy few, we band of brothers") and an excerpt from Pirandello's "Man With the Flower in His Mouth" for the Maryland scholarship competition. But the third had been added less than a week before, after his high school drama teacher discouraged him from performing part of Edward Albee's "Zoo Story" because he had been "directed" in the performance. Auditors — those who evaluate the auditions — don't like to see students who are over-directed, she told him (though the "direction" was from a fellow student). With his teacher's advice, he selected a passage from the Jane Martin comedy "Jack & Jill," in which Jack moans to his girlfriend that he is being penalized because he is "too nice."

This change added to Adam's anxiety. He sat on the floor, quietly rehearsing the new material. The students had just come back from a prep talk from the Carnegie Mellon staff: don't stand too close to the auditors, don't stare at them during the monologue, don't waste time stating your name, loosen up and have fun (sure).

"Here," he said to his father, Tom Pauls, handing him his monologues. "Take them away!" Then he swerved into a discourse about his stage combat classes. One of the worst blows for a jousting knight is getting hit in the gut with a quarterstaff. "It makes them throw up in their helmets — really nasty on a hot day," he said, adding that the knot in his own stomach had shrunk from maybe the size of Alaska to the size of Montana.

And then his name was called. "Break a leg," his dad called after him.

AT the end of last year, Dramatics magazine published an article to help students prepare for the audition season. It emphasized the essentials: choose age-appropriate pieces that excite you and reveal something about you; stay away from dialect, props, gimmicks and shock value (profanity, highly sexual material) and stick within the prescribed time.

What it didn't talk about are the nuances that make a good performance and the characteristics a college is looking for in creating its ideal class — for example, males and minorities have a competitive edge because comparatively few apply.

These attributes, says Kevin Kuhlke, chairman of the undergraduate drama department at Tisch, are not esoteric. Each year, Tisch auditions 2,500 applicants for 375 spots in one of eight studios. The auditors know what they want, he says, and they are less impressed with résumés than with raw talent.

"We are looking for emotional transparency," he says. "Does the energy in the room change when they come

into it? We are looking for that sense of presence, a drive and a passionate commitment to make theater."

At the same time, auditors are assessing acting skills. "Can the student physically and vocally translate the circumstances of a scene into behavior?" Mr. Kuhlke says. "How well do they understand the text, inhabit the character, call on emotional resources to bare the full character?"

Don Wadsworth at Carnegie Mellon sums it up: "Everyone asks, 'What are you looking for?' It's so simple that it's boring — something truthful. Someone who brings humanity to their work. And a student who really wants to work hard."

Most college auditions work the same way. Two pieces are performed, and if they are too similar, or if the auditors see unexplored potential, they ask for a third or tweak the one already performed. The audition closes with a brief interview — What other schools have you applied to? Why did you apply here? Within that deceptively simple framework, much is going on.

First off, first impressions. "We can look at a kid and say, 'O.K., this is a very castable kid,'" says Mr. Wadsworth. "He looks a certain way, has the right coloring." He also picks up cues from how a student behaves. It's obvious, he says, when students have been taught "tricks" for how to handle themselves in auditions. "Sometimes their answers seem canned, or they say the right things in the most pleasant or positive way." Next is attitude. How receptive is the student to direction, how willing to try different approaches?

Mr. Wadsworth explains: "One of the first questions we ask ourselves is, 'How fully into the imaginary world is this kid?' That's a biggie. Can they put themselves in a situation that is not true, but act as though it is? That's a childlike gift. Are they O.K. with making the bold move, or are they judging themselves, watching themselves?"

Mr. Wadsworth says he also asks himself, "Do I want to work with this person for four years?" Students should be asking the same question about the school. "Four years at $40,000 a year. I absolutely hope they're doing that."

BARBARA MACKENZIE-WOOD has been at Carnegie Mellon for more than 20 years and has been in charge of recruiting for the last seven. In separate rooms at the Ripley-Grier auditions, she and Mr. Wadsworth were evaluating students, passing promising ones on to the other for another opinion. They would then rank them, compare notes and, by mid-March, whittle the 1,200 applicants to 30. These are then submitted to the admissions office for an academic evaluation.

Adam was called to Ms. MacKenzie-Wood's room. She encouraged him to remove his glasses, advised him to lead with his strongest piece and forewarned him that she might want to "work" with him "a little" afterward.

Adam breathed deeply and focused himself. And then he began the famous speech in which King Henry V addresses his soldiers before the battle of Agincourt.

His performance was skillful — and predictable.

"Good!" she said. "We're going to change it just a little. So, what's your action, what do you need to do?" she asked him.
"We are outnumbered, outgunned," he said. "But I also know that if I can get them out there, we can do it."
"Right," she said. "Your overall objective is to rally the troops. But I want you to do it in your own words."
For a moment, he looked stunned.
"Before you start," she added, "I want you to run around the room and let it all out. Wave your arms," she said, flailing her own. "Scream. Ahhhh."
He looked more stunned. He started, but then slowed. "I feel so silly," he said.
"You've got to be silly if you're an actor, right?" she responded.

So Adam — a burly teenager with a carefully trimmed goatee on an otherwise dimpled baby face — ran around the room waving his arms and screaming. "Ahhh! Ahhh!"

"Run, run!" she urged.

He then dove into his improvised Shakespeare. "I see each and every one of you is scared. I see the fear in your eyes. I have that same fear. We are brothers in fear. We are brothers in victory! When we win, they will speak of us forever in this day and time. Tomorrow is St. Crispin's Day!"

“Say it again,” shouted Ms. MacKenzie-Wood.
“Tomorrow is St. Crispin’s Day!”
“Again!”
“Tomorrow is St. Crispin’s Day!” he shouted.
“Again! Don’t press it down!”
“Tomorrow is St. Crispin’s Day,” he belted with conviction, leaning into his words.
“Feel better?” she asked.
“Yes,” he said, smiling broadly at Ms. MacKenzie-Wood. “That felt really good.”

“American Idol” this ain’t. Neither is it what Adam expected when preparing. But he was eager to take on her other suggestions, including performing “Jack & Jill” as a Las Vegas stand-up comedian might, acting “The Man With the Flower in His Mouth” by channeling his own father and singing.

She spent 20 minutes on this audition. Then she sent him down the hall to be seen by Mr. Wadsworth.

The long road to that second look started when Adam saw his first play, “Henry V,” at age 6. When he was 9, his mother signed him up for a Shakespeare summer camp, which he has attended every summer since.

Neither of his parents is particularly theatrical. His father has a Ph.D. in radio astronomy from New Mexico State University and works for the Navy designing instruments to measure stars invisible to the eye. His mother, a Harvard Law graduate, is the managing director of a large firm in Washington.

Drama always came easily to Adam. Academics, say his parents, were more a “struggle” — but that’s relative. He took advanced math starting in middle school. He is an honor student with five Advanced Placement courses under his belt, including calculus. His grade point average is 3.5. He is enrolled in the Creative and Performing Arts Academy at his high school, which offers concentrated theater study within the regular curriculum.

Confidence onstage grew slowly: a part in the school production of “M*A*S*H,” Otto Frank in “The Diary of Anne Frank,” a school trip to perform at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Last year he was cast in the ensemble of “Singin’ in the Rain”; this year, with voice lessons under his belt, he won the lead roles in “Kiss Me, Kate” and a contemporary take on “Macbeth.”

The college application process was not so linear. After a visit to N.Y.U. last spring, Adam nixed it. Too big, too impersonal, too urban. Juilliard was also dropped quickly — too light on academics. With his parents and a hired college counselor, Adam decided to focus on liberal arts colleges with a major in theater.

“We shied away from the B.F.A.’s,” says his mother, Eleanor Pelta, “because if in the middle of sophomore year he changes his mind and wants to major in molecular biology, he couldn’t do that at a Juilliard.” Carnegie Mellon was always in mind — its academic reputation trumping its insular conservatory. He thought he couldn’t get in with his SAT scores, but after some tutoring they shot up more than 200 points: 730, 730 and 800.

Like athletes championed by coaches, drama students with a thumbs up from auditors can have an edge, even if scores don’t quite measure up. “Negotiations” with admissions sometimes occur with highly talented applicants, says Mr. Kuhlke, but officials are wary of bending too much. “Statistically,” says Webster’s head of performance, Bruce Longworth, academic low scorers don’t survive.

Adam’s final list was a mix of liberal arts schools — University of Vermont, Vassar, Bard, Gettysburg, Kenyon, Wheaton, Marymount Manhattan and, added at the last minute with his SAT triumph, the University of Chicago and Carnegie Mellon.

The eclectic choices represent typical pushback from parents, who worry about what lies beyond a degree in acting.

Most graduates become what Betsy Nuell, who runs a thriving business around Washington coaching students for their auditions, calls “working-class actors.” Many find employment in local theaters, on cruise lines and doing voiceover or corporate work. Even among those who make it to Broadway, national tours, film or TV, most remain anonymous. They dance in the chorus; they have bit parts.

Toni Dorfman, Yale’s director of undergraduate theater studies, complains that the “complete these programs and you’ll be a success in theater” mentality “is a disservice” to students. “There’s no way to ensure young people of work in theater, let alone success.” Success, she adds, takes talent, luck and a bit of obsession: “You have to love it so much that you’re willing to put up with the disappointments.”

That's tough for most 17-year-olds to process. Does Adam know what he's up against? "Every time I tell someone I want to be an actor, they say, 'Oh, that's so hard. It's so difficult to get anywhere.' Well, what's so difficult about it? It's not a matter of getting famous for me. It's a matter of perfecting an art form."

In mid-February, Adam and his father were back in New York, this time for an audition at the Upper East Side campus of Marymount. Adam had already been accepted to the college, with a $3,000 scholarship. At Marymount, which has rolling admissions, students must be admitted academically before the theater department gets a chance to decide if it wants them.

The half-day audition began with an introduction by David Mold in the college's theater, packed with students and family members. Of the 600 who audition, about 100 will take spots in the B.F.A., B.A. and musical theater programs. Mr. Mold spoke in detail about each degree and about life in New York. He reassured students and "completely freaked-out parents" that there is "nothing better" than a theater education, because it draws on many disciplines.

Adam sat in the back of the room, texting friends.

Marymount's audition process is different from most. Students are split into groups of 20 and assigned to studios to work as a "sample class." The idea, says Mr. Mold, is to allow auditors to assess not only acting skills, but how well students work in a group and, ultimately, in an acting ensemble.

Adam drew a small black-box theater in the basement. The applicants took seats in chairs arranged on graduated risers, from which they could observe one another's auditions.

Barbara Adrian, an associate professor, led a 15-minute group exercise. In a circle, the students were asked to kick, drop their jaws, tap their chins, circle their derrieres and shake. The movements were accompanied by vocals: raspberries, ooh-wees, bah-bah-bahs and woo-woo-wah-wahs. They then walked around shaking one another's hands and reciting the words of their monologues. It was supposed to loosen them up. Adam, taller than anyone else, stood out in his awkward acquiescence.

Then each student auditioned. Classmates watched raptly and politely, knowing that they also would be judged, and their comments monitored as much as their performances.

When it was Adam's turn, he performed the "Jack & Jill" piece, hitting the laugh lines he hoped for. Classmates said they found it compelling but a little over the top. Mr. Mold, one of the group's auditors, wanted him to try it straighter: What does he expect of the girlfriend to whom he is speaking? "Throw out your homework," he advised Adam. "Focus on getting her to walk over and kiss you." Adam complied. There were no laughs.

"What does that do for you?" asked Mr. Mold.
"It was really weird," he said judiciously. "It gave it a really different energy."

Four hours later, the students filed out of the black box looking drained. Upstairs, Adam's father was waiting. Neither said much as they headed out onto Third Avenue for a bite before catching the train home to Washington.

Once inside the restaurant, Adam opened up. He was unhappy with his audition. The auditors, he said, had not considered the way he had prepared the piece but had imposed their own interpretations. He was uncomfortable watching others audition, feeling that he had violated their privacy. The entire afternoon, he said, was "weiirrrd!"

At any rate, it was all over — the SATs, the applications, the auditions. Now all that was left was the waiting.

"I'll never have to do this again!" he said, looking out the luncheonette's window. Outside, dusk was setting in at the end of a cold and clear winter day. He turned back wearily. "I'm tired," he said. "Can we just talk about something else now?"

Epiloque: Adam was rejected by the University of Chicago and Vassar but accepted by the Marymount theater program and the other colleges on his list. He was wait listed by Carnegie Mellon. He is weighing his options.

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