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THE STAGE MUSICAL THEATRE TRAINING

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Put your best face forward

Photographer **Michael Wharley** says knock-out headshots are essential, even at drama school, but as the business increasingly goes online, there are many other tools to help promote and sustain your career

As you enter musical theatre training, it's worth keeping an eye on the realities of professional life beyond, where a world of auditions, networking and self-promotion awaits.

As Sally-Ann Gritton, head of acting for musical theatre at Mountview, says: "The final 12 months is the time to start combining skills that have accrued through training, with an understanding of yourself as a professional who has ownership of your career."

For Adrian Jeckells, principal at the London School of Musical Theatre, a key part of this involves "proactively running yourself as a business".

But how best to market yourself as a young professional? In Jeckells' words, by "assessing yourself as a commercial entity" – understanding your casting types, skills and strengths as casting professionals will perceive them.

It's a career-long task. But it begins with what James Hopson of Pippa Ailion Casting (Wicked, Legally Blonde and more) calls, "the most important marketing tool for an actor" – the headshot.

As a professional photographer, here's my take on classic and modern advice for getting the best headshots:

- Your drama school will suggest photographers, but assess a variety, and choose one whose style or approach inspires you.
- Treat your session like a trip to the hairdresser, not the dentist. Expect to play an active role in the session, brief your photographer on your casting types and you'll get better shots.
- In the words of Pippa Harrison, head of client relations at Spotlight: "Your photos absolutely must look like you." Casting directors want the 'you' who auditions to look like the 'you' in the photo.
- Get advice from your peers, tutors and friendly industry contacts – it'll help you choose shots that fit your casting types/career ambitions.

Modern headshot trends:

- Colour is now widely accepted and expected, so have at least one colour shot. In my recent 1000-actor survey, 52% of respondents said they already have both colour and black and white headshots.
- Casting (bar the auditions themselves) is now largely handled online. Upload headshots that show the full range of your casting to ensure you are seen for



A recent headshot of actress Victoria Robinson

a broad spread of roles.

- Hard copy 10x8 prints are needed for some written letters and applications, but emailing a JPEG is now widely accepted.

But headshots are just part of marketing yourself effectively, and while securing representation after drama school is a great boost, as Jeckells observes: "It's never enough to sit back and let the agent do all the work." Instead, Gritton suggests broader aims: "You should be staying in touch with peers, getting involved in readings and new projects, generating your own work, developing as an artist," not to mention "staying in touch with agents/casting directors". In other words, make every contact, meeting, theatre trip and audition a chance to connect, learn and network. It's a task made much easier in 2011 by online opportunities.

At drama school:

- Be online, on Spotlight and CCP, asap. Conference of Drama School students can apply for Spotlight Graduate membership in October of their final year. Students on NCDT accredited courses can sign up for a free CCP profile.
- Keep your online CVs updated – use the 'currently appearing in' tools to keep agents and casting professionals informed.
- Stay in touch with industry professionals who have seen your work.

After drama school:

- James Hopson of Pippa Ailion Casting says: "Don't worry about lack of experience, it's the one time in your career when that's no problem."
- Be truthful. Says Hopson: "Be as clear as possible about your skills – whether it's your true vocal range or how good your tap actually is."
- Add selected (high quality) voice clips to online CVs to show your vocal skills.
- Buy a domain name (ie www.yourname.com) and have a simple, inexpensive website made.
- Make the most of social networking to build, consolidate and strengthen your professional connections: LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, IMDB Pro are some of the better places to be.
- Control what information is available about you online and consider creating parallel accounts to keep work and play separate.
- Use the internet to generate expertise. As Pippa Harrison says: "Online, you can learn about every casting director in the country and what they are casting."

In the final analysis, talent underpins most successful careers – and no amount of self-promotion can make up for it lacking. But with drive, determination and application, you can give your talent the best chance to flourish.

Michael Wharley is a London-based actors headshot photographer, see www.michaelwharley.co.uk

Honesty is the best policy

A standard resume with all the required data presented in the right order is key. But less is often more and the CV you send out should be tailored for each part, says our careers coach **John Byrne**

Given that CVs are often the first point of contact, it's important to make a strong first impression. It is also true that there are good and bad ways of standing out. The best starting point in developing your own individual CV is to make sure you know what a standard CV looks like, which elements should be included and in what order. The standard format is there for a good reason – ask any casting professional and they will tell you that the numbers of CVs that are submitted for even the smallest parts these days can run into hundreds.

CVs that are unusual, rather than simply listing the required information where it can quickly be found, are likely to attract attention – but only for as long as it takes to bin them so they don't hold up the normal sorting process.

The next step is to be clear what job it is supposed to be doing for us. The job of the CV and the headshot is to get us an audition to achieve that end result. Just like in any other profession, we should have a standard CV, but the version we send for each individual opportunity should be tailored in whatever way works best for our particular goals.

This can help prevent a tendency among recent graduates and beginners. The

temptation is to pad it out with any and every part they have ever done, usually fluffed up to make it seem like the lead in a West End show.

Regarding new students, the purpose of musical theatre courses is to identify potential. Too much padding and the CV either raises the question of whether everything listed is accurate or, alternatively, doubts as to whether there is anything new the applicant could learn from the course.

Similarly, productions that are open to hiring recent graduates already know they are hiring recent graduates so they are not expecting a CV that would rival John Barrowman's or Elaine Paige's in terms of credits. They are looking for a demonstration that the applicant is open to trying a range of parts and doing his or her best.

Truthfulness is the keyword to keep in mind when you list skills. Multi-talented performers are always marketable, but if your aim is a career rather than one short-lived opportunity, it is much better to write down a smaller number of accents, musical styles or vocal ranges you can definitely do well than a longer list that includes ones you are hoping to 'blag' them with.

Enthusiasm and flexibility are desirable, but just as with headshots that don't look like the performer, wasting time at

an audition while you have a go at something you claimed to be highly skilled at is counter-productive.

In the musical theatre context, dancing skills are one area where it is easy to be over-optimistic. Few people would list ballet as a skill unless they had some formal experience or training. Likewise, it is worth remembering that while other styles may look less formal to the untrained eye, they still have recognisable steps and techniques with which the judges' trained eyes are likely to be familiar. They will pick up very quickly if you are trying to pass off the dancing you do on a club night as actual choreography.

If there's a skill listed on your CV that you don't already have, see if there are classes that enable you to learn it. As with your career, your CV will grow and develop over years rather than weeks. Building it up accurately and presenting it the right way from the start, as well as taking any feedback on board, are the best ways to ensure that your CV in the long term is more solid than any amount of puff or wishful thinking could ever achieve.

A useful performer's CV template can be found at [Skillset's website at www.skillset.org](http://Skillset.org). Tips can also be found in the 'How to' section of www.thestage.co.uk

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