

How Audition Environments Affect Professional Theatre Actors in the United States

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Abstract

Theatrical auditions are opportunities for actors to showcase their skills and display interest in a theatrical production. A 10% booking ratio (which is how many auditions one has attended compared to how many jobs one gets hired for) is considered to be successful in the US theatre community. Therefore, based on the sheer amount of auditions that actors have to attend for consistency in employment, auditions are a primary part of an actor's life. One factor that influences how actors behave in an audition is the physical audition space. Audition spaces matter to actors because physical spaces not only determine their acting choices, but also their state of mind. Therefore, through interviews with professional actors and sociological analyses, the research sought to answer the question, "How does an actor's assessment of a physical environment affect them while auditioning?" Existing literature has addressed how a person's stress level affects them before and during an audition, how to combat anxiety created by usual items found within a theatrical audition, and how an auditionee's background can affect their audition. However, after exhaustive research, little research was found that specifically focused on how physical audition spaces affect auditionees. To answer the research question, data was collected in the summer of 2019 in two cities notable for their live theatre opportunities: Chicago, Illinois and New York City, New York. At these locations, over 40 individual interviews were conducted with professional theatre artists. Preliminary findings suggested that the room size, the acoustics, and the amount of people present within an audition room affect actors the most while auditioning. If through the research actors can understand more about how some audition space characteristics help or hinder other auditioning actors, actors can take more control in their own auditions.

Keywords: Theatre, Audition, Physical Environment

1. Introduction

An audition is an interview for a particular role or job as a singer, actor, dancer, or musician, and it consists of a practical demonstration of the candidate's skills. Auditions are opportunities for actors to showcase their talents in order to show interest for and be casted in a role within a theatrical production, and they are the majority of a professional actor's life.⁴ A 10% booking ratio (how many auditions one has been to compared to how many jobs one gets hired for) is considered to be successful in the US theatre community.¹⁴ Therefore, the average actor would have to go to around 200 auditions in a year in order to land around 20 jobs, and that is not even accounting for the multiple auditions that actors have to compete for one role when casting directors are determining who they would like to hire.

Aside from the sheer number of auditions that an actor may go to throughout their life, theatre artists focus on auditions because an actor needs to master the unique qualities of the theatre audition form and process. Being able to perform well at an audition is such a distinctive skill compared to performing because, first off, an actor only gets 30 seconds to a couple minutes for an initial audition. In New York City, actors are sometimes only allowed 8 bars of

music for their audition. Moreover, many directors and actors within the interviews that were conducted stated that a director forms an opinion based off of an auditionee within 10 seconds of their performance. Another aspect that makes auditions unique is that scenes performed in audition rooms are isolated. In other words, audition pieces are not seen within the context of a play, so they come with no background, and they typically do not include other characters. They are also traditionally only about a minute long. Consequently, to portray them effectively is a difficult task to do. With no introduction, context, or other character to play off of, one has to tell the auditors at an audition who their character is, where they are, who they are talking to, and what their motivation and goals are in the scene. Little acting training prepares actors to do this.

Many factors influence how current professional theatre artists view and behave at auditions, such as their past training, their preparation, and their past experience with auditioning. However, whether the casting directors or participating actors realize it, an additional influence is the audition space. No actor can control this variable. Audition spaces matter to auditioning actors since physical spaces determine not only the choices that actors can physically make while auditioning, but also their state of mind at the audition. For example, if a space is small, an actor objectively cannot walk around the space much. Additionally, it may also make them feel constrained, making their audition performance smaller and most likely not as effective. Therefore, the impact of actors' perceptions of audition spaces on their self-assessment of their audition performances was investigated in this study. 42 interviews were conducted with professional actors to speak about their past audition experiences in order to find patterns. Within this paper, it is argued that the physical space at an audition can affect an actor's perception of their success while auditioning. This is because several elements of a space can impact an auditioning actor's psychology, such as the shape of a space, the lighting within a space, and the amount of people within a space.

2. Previous Research

Existing literature has addressed how a person's stress level affects someone before and during an audition^{2,3,8}, how to combat the anxiety created by the usual items found within a theatrical audition^{4,7,10,14}, and how an auditionee's background affects their audition.⁹ However, after exhaustive research, little research was found that specifically focused on how physical audition spaces affect auditionees. The studies that discussed how varying audition organizations affected a person focused rather on auditionees' experiences before auditions and the requirements of the auditions rather than the physical audition spaces.¹¹ Additionally, very little research exists on specifically theatrical auditions; much of the related research that was found only focused on classical music ensemble auditions.

However, Sheridan examined the effect of psychological and environmental changes on emotional expression in contemporary dance.¹³ For her study, she developed several pieces of original choreography for an experimental performance. Then, the participants chosen for a performance learned the pieces of contemporary choreography and underwent several psychological and environmental tests to determine any effect on their emotional expression. Surveys were collected from dancers following each live dance performance, and the alterations of performance environments were found to make dancers feel differently about the success of their performances. The physical room characteristics in the study included the following: whether there was an audience or not, what type of lights the dancers were in, and whether there were mirrors within the room or not. Surveyed participants all said that they felt like they could express emotion more clearly when the lights were off. Moreover, more than half of the surveyed participants said that they could express emotion better when there was no mirror and no audience in the room. Based on these findings, it was expected to find actors who have participated in auditions to have felt more successful about their performances in auditions where the light was lower, where there was no mirror in the room, and where less people were present in the room. It was also expected to discover that other physical aspects of an audition space affect actors of all backgrounds.

In summary, to focus on this topic and contribute to the existing literature, the research sought to answer the question, "How does an actor's assessment of the physical environment affect a theatre artist when they are auditioning?" Based on the literature outlined, it was expected to find that the physical space at an audition can affect an actor's perception of their success while auditioning.

3. Methodology

To answer the research question, data was collected over the course of a three-week period in the summer of 2019 (late July into early August). During this three-week period, interviews were conducted in two cities notable for their live theatre opportunities: Chicago, Illinois and New York City, New York. At these locations, 42 individual interviews lasting approximately 20 minutes to 80 minutes were completed.

Interviews are “active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results”.⁵ This project utilized semi-structured interviews, a form of qualitative research in which the researcher asks all participants the same series of predetermined questions with some flexibility based on the direction of the conversation. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer has the opportunity to change the order of the questions that are asked or pose additional questions that may probe further into something the respondent might have shared. This provides the researcher with the ability to explore and capture nuances of a particular topic. This would otherwise not be possible through other methods of data collection, such as a survey. Given that this study explored the variety of effects posed by different environments on individuals, it is fitting that semi-structured interviews was the method of data collection, and the interviews were built with the help of *A Guide to Qualitative Field Research*.¹

It was decided to focus on New York City and Chicago because of the cities’ plethora of theatre auditions and their large actor populations. Additionally, it was hypothesized that audition spaces would vary between the cities since New York City is made up of more large theatre spaces while Chicago has more storefront theaters (which are smaller theaters, both in size and the amount of people involved). Moreover, it takes more money to produce a show in New York City because spaces are more expensive to rent; therefore, shows with larger budgets are more common in New York. It was additionally predicted that shows with greater budgets would have larger audition spaces, affecting actors’ performances and headspaces while auditioning. Therefore, in order to reach actors with different audition experiences to discuss, actors from both Chicago and New York were interviewed.

Data was gathered by interviewing active theater artists in public places such as coffee shops. In-person interviewing was critical to the success of the study, as much existing literature indicates that there are disadvantages to long-distance interviews. Iacono et al. assert that the researcher has less control over the interview environment in a Skype interview; participants may be unaware of what is within range of their camera and inadvertently disclose something that they would rather keep private.⁶ Additionally, ethical concerns needed to be considered, such as the fact that interaction is mediated through the use of technology (which is owned by third parties). Moreover, Seitz identifies several disadvantages of electronic interviews including dropped calls and pauses, inaudible segments, inability to read body language and verbal cues, and loss of intimacy compared to traditional in-person interviews.¹² All of these difficulties can disrupt the flow of an interview, negatively impacting the quality of data collection and preventing the interviewer from establishing rapport. Establishing rapport was critical for this project since participants’ personal experiences were discussed.

For the sake of a narrower focus, participation in this study was limited to active American artists that were over the age of 18 and pursuing a career in theatre performance. The sample was not restricted based on student status, equity status, if they did not make their living exclusively from acting, or any other demographic.

Participants were provided with consent forms detailing the confidentiality of the data and privacy of their identities. With their consent, these interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and compared to other interviews in order to answer the thesis of this project. Auditions spoken of included both equity and non-equity auditions, and actors did not necessarily define which auditions were equity/non-equity when describing their experiences. Common themes in reactions to certain audition spaces were looked for. The data was coded based on interviewees’ audition experiences with various aspects of audition spaces, such as organization of the audition room, lighting, and how many people were in the audition space.

4. Data and Analysis

Table 1. Typical audition characteristics for Chicago and New York City compared

Chicago	Both	New York City
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly small rehearsal spaces of stages at theatres used for auditions. • Auditions can be found in the Actors' Equity Association building, proscenium theatres, thrust theatres, small rehearsal rooms, dance studios, office buildings, lecture halls, churches, and personal residences. • More makeshift spaces used for auditions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial auditions typically ask for 32 bars of music. However, auditors sometimes ask for only 16 bars or even 8 bars of music. • There can be multiple callbacks and work-throughs after an initial audition. • Self-tapes are becoming more common. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly studios used for auditions. • Auditions can be found in casting studios, the Actors' Equity Association building, dance studios, and personal residences. • More companies rent out studios. • Equity calls are larger than in Chicago.

As hypothesized, patterns when it came to types of audition spaces within different geographical locations were found (see table 1).

For this project, Chicago actors were interviewed first. 70.6% of the actors interviewed mentioned that small theatres were often used for Chicago auditions, ranging from black box theatres (akin to large black rooms) to proscenium theatres (traditional stages with curtains). 52.9% of actors mentioned that rehearsal spaces within theatre buildings were used. Many Chicago companies used audition spaces that were within their own buildings. 41.2% of actors mentioned makeshift spaces. Makeshift spaces included churches, offices, classrooms, basements, personal homes, dance halls, lecture halls, bars, and warehouses. Additionally, 29.4% of actors discussed dance studios. 35.3% listed the Actor's Equity building, but many did not attend the majority of their auditions there since Chicago companies will sometimes rent out studios within the Actor's Equity Association building, but not usually. A couple actors also mentioned academic spaces within colleges, such as Columbia College Chicago, Roosevelt University, or DePaul University. Some of the actors interviewed also briefly discussed on-camera auditions. Although on-camera auditions were not a part of the study, many actors who have agents are sent out for such auditions, and the actors stated that these auditions were usually in small rooms within studios or office spaces. Most actors mentioned the rising trend of "self-tapes". "Self-tapes" are where companies send out what audition material they want from actors, and then actors record themselves doing the material within their own spaces, oftentimes in their own homes.

On the contrary, 90% of the actors spoke to that were based in New York City stated that studios were the most common places to have auditions. The most popular studios mentioned were Pearl Studios and Ripley-Grier Studios. Many also mentioned the Actors' Equity Association building in New York City, but most did not have personal experience with it since Equity calls are very competitive in New York City. If one does not have their Equity card (meaning they are not a part of the Actor's Equity Union), then they have to wait to see if they can be heard after all of the members of the union. This sometimes means that an actor will wait all day and not even be heard by the casting team if the audition day finishes before the casting team can see everyone.

When it came to actors' preferences of audition spaces, the majority of actors were found to prefer what is most familiar to them. Therefore, it was discovered that Chicago actors to prefer stages more than New York actors. However, there was not a strong correlation when it came to actors' preferred audition spaces and geographic location.

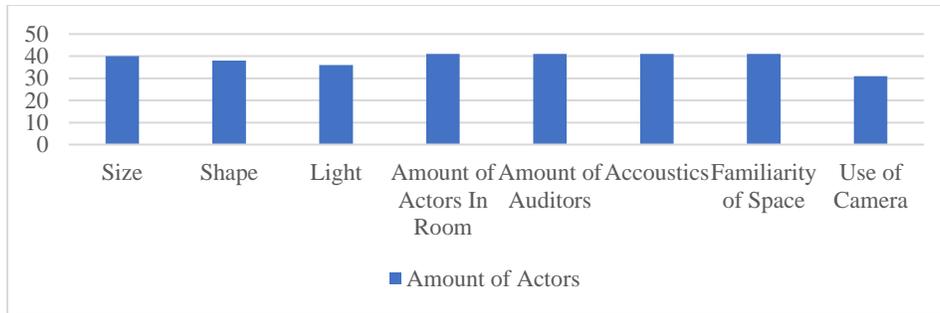


Figure 1. Number of interviewees affected by individual audition room characteristics

If an interviewee described that a characteristic of a space changed how they desired to present themselves, that was accounted for as them being affected by it. As expected, most actors were affected by the size and shape of an audition space, the light within a space, the amount of people in a space (both actors and auditors), the acoustics of a space, how familiar they were with a space, and whether they were being recorded on a camera or not during their audition (see figure 1). Lighting caused the least amount of effect on subjects. Actors stated that this was probably due to the fact that lighting is easiest to standardize of the characteristics analyzed.

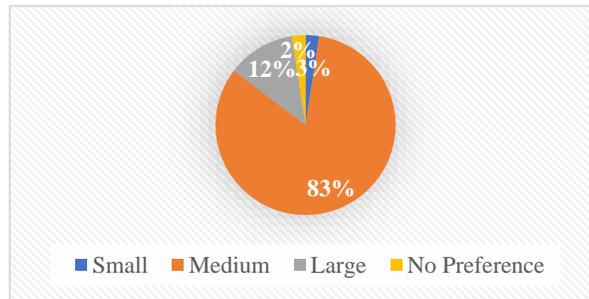


Figure 2. Preferences of interviewees on audition space sizes

“Large spaces” include ballrooms, concert halls, large theatres, and some makeshift spaces, such as churches and lecture halls. “Medium spaces” include small theatres, rehearsal spaces, and average-sized studios. “Small spaces” include small studios and rooms.

Some actors found comfort in a small space because of the intimacy. They enjoyed making connections with the auditors in the room, such as shaking their hands. One interviewee stated, “The bigger the space, the scarier it is.” However, others found comfort in larger spaces because they are intimidated by intimacy. They would rather have that physical space between themselves and the auditors. The majority of actors wanted a space that was not “too large” or “too small” (see figure 2).

Some actors stated that they felt like they overacted in a large space, while others felt limited in their sounds and emotions in a small space. One actor stated that one should have two pieces ready for an audition if they do not know what type of space the audition will be in. In other words, one should have a piece better suited for a larger space and a piece better suited for a smaller space. A few musical theatre actors mentioned how they preferred bigger spaces more when they were singing rather than when they were acting. To avoid a room’s acoustics surprising them, one actor stated that they always say, “Hello,” when they walk into a space. That way, they can access how loud they should be within a space.

When thinking of space, many mentioned not how big the space was, but how close or far the auditors were. However, where the auditors are is not always determined by a space. Sometimes an audition may be in a big space, but the table of judges are close to the actors auditioning, seemingly creating a small space. Therefore, the space between an actor and the auditors typically determined how large the actor perceived a space to be more than the physical space itself. Additionally, actors sometimes mentioned acoustics when speaking about the amount of space a room had since there is a strong correlation between these two aspects of a space.

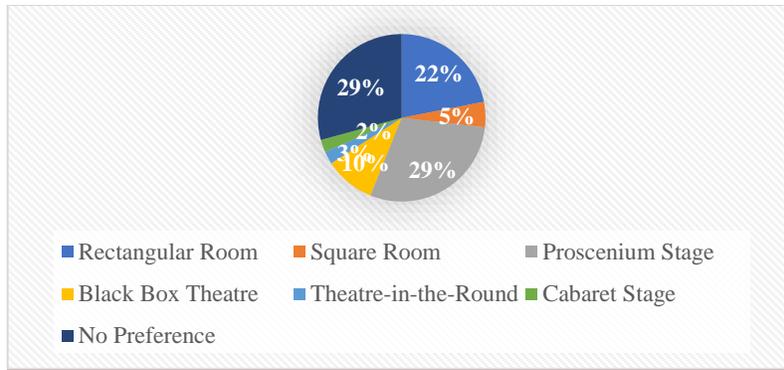


Figure 3. Preferences of interviewees on audition space shapes

As seen in figure 3, most people preferred a square room, a rectangular room, or a proscenium stage. Actors stated that this was due to the fact that they were most familiar with these spaces, either in rehearsals or performances. Many mentioned how if a room is much wider than long or vice versa, that affected how they viewed their performance negatively. Additionally, four actors mentioned how high ceilings were not desirable due to the fact that it made the space seem uneven.

Again, similarly to the shape of a space, actors seemed to pay more attention to where the auditors were rather than the shape of a space. Also, a room's shape as it pertained to the acoustics of a space was also discussed multiple times within interviews.

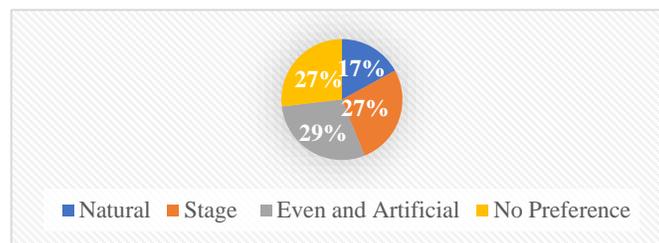


Figure 4. Preferences of interviewees on audition space lighting

As one can see from figure 4, many actors prefer artificial light. Actors reasoned that this was because that is what they are used to within both audition and performance spaces. However, some actors preferred natural light because they found natural light to be energizing and florescent light to be draining. People who expressed this also usually mentioned when artificial lights went wrong, such as when lights flickered. However, it was mentioned in most interviews that, whether they preferred artificial or natural light, artificial lighting is most common in audition spaces.

Some actors felt that lighting affected their emotions. They found dimly lit places to be connected to negative and dreary emotions, while more lit places felt livelier. One actor mentioned that they felt that they had to match their audition pieces with the lights within the audition space, which was sometimes difficult. For example, they found it hard to match their energy in a dramatic audition piece to a room with fluorescent lights. The same actor also mentioned that they noticed lighting more when it greatly differed from the lighting in the waiting room (the space actors are held before their audition).

As also seen with the past two characteristics, actors mentioned how lighting worked in relation to the auditors. Lighting affects whether actors can see the auditors or not. Some actors liked when they could not see the auditors since then there is a "fourth wall", which is an imaginary wall that is in-between the world of the play and the audience members. When there is a "fourth wall", actors do not acknowledge audience members, and this is most common in theatrical performances. However, other actors felt thrown off when they could not see the auditors because they felt like they could not respond to their reactions and make genuine connections. Overall, it was clear that auditors have a big impact on how actors felt they did within an audition since many characteristics of spaces reminded actors of them.

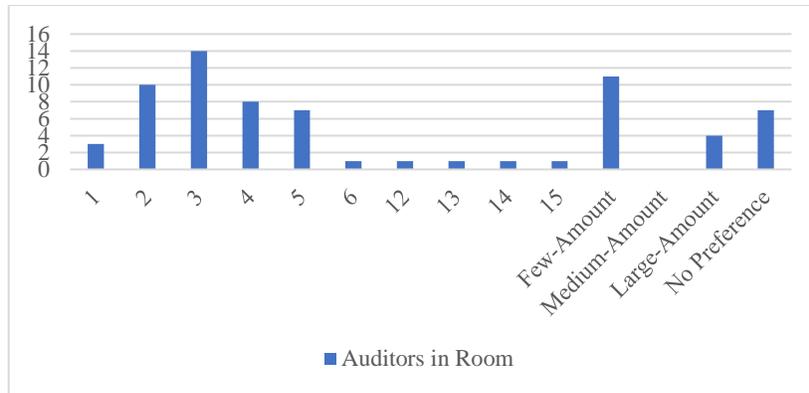


Figure 5. Preferences of interviewees on number of auditors within audition spaces. If range was given, all numbers within the range were accounted for

Most people wanted about three auditors in the room, as seen in figure 5. Many actors stated that this was due to the fact that 2-3 auditors in a room is seen as average by theatrical auditionees.

Some did not prefer a large number of auditors because there were more people to possibly disappoint. However, others preferred more auditors because then there was a better chance that at least one of the auditors would like them. Additionally, typically, the more auditors there are present for an audition, the closer an actor is to getting a professional job. This is because, towards the end of a casting process, more people within a production want to be in the audition room in order to have a say in the final casting choices. Therefore, when some actors see more auditors in the room, they see this as a success.

Some actors did not mention the number of auditors but did discuss how auditors acted. For example, many remembered negative experiences with auditors, such as auditors eating, talking during their performance, being rude, or not looking up during the actor's performance. Therefore, how the auditors act affects actors as much if not more than the number of auditors present.

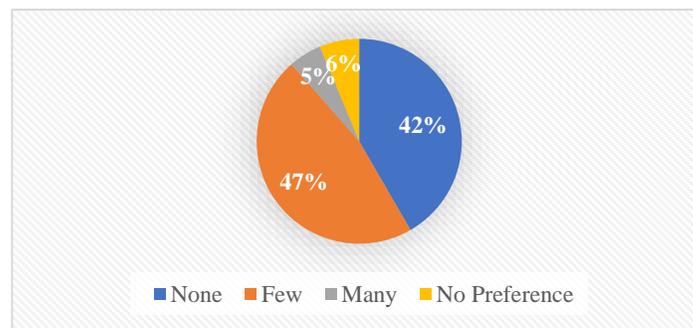


Figure 6. Preferences of interviewees on number of actors within audition spaces

Most people, if they mentioned other actors in the room, wanted few (if any) other people in the room, as seen in figure 6. This was usually because they felt that they could see themselves being compared to more people if they saw the other actors. Also, actors typically feel that they cannot copy anyone that they see, so the more people they see, the more creative they have to be, which can negatively impact the actor's confidence if they cannot think of anything original to do. Additionally, for auditions where one is meant to dance, having more people in the room results in less space to dance and a higher likelihood of collisions.

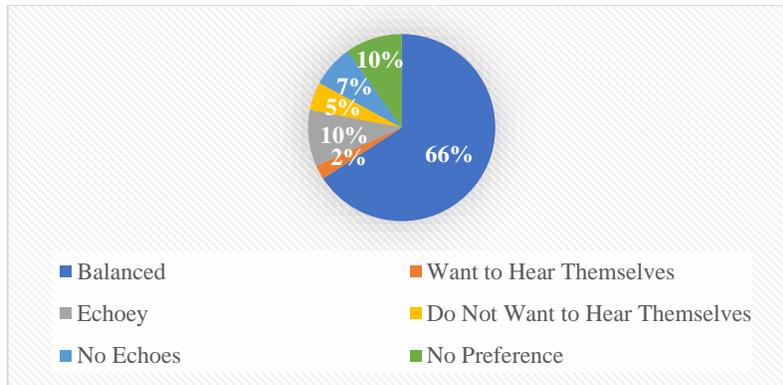


Figure 7. Preferences of interviewees on audition space acoustics

Almost every actor found acoustics to be a very important aspect to a “successful” audition. Some really liked spaces that were reverberant because they felt like they could fill up the space easily with their sound, and they could additionally check that they sounded “good”. However, many also mentioned how much they disliked echoes because they could hear themselves, which would throw them off. It would throw them off because they would get distracted by the sound and/or start being too critical and “in-their head” about their sound. Others also mentioned how much they disliked “dead” rooms, which are rooms that have no reverberance. As one can see in figure 7, most people want a balanced sound, meaning that they want an equal amount of reverberation and deadness.

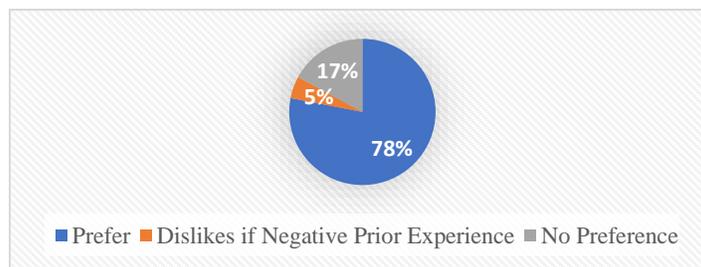


Figure 8. Preferences of interviewees on familiarity with audition spaces

As one can see in figure 8, people greatly prefer to be familiar with an audition space than not to be. That way, they can be prepared for the audition space’s acoustics, shape, and amount of space. Additionally, the moments before an audition can greatly affect how an actor walks into an audition space and how an actor feels about their performance after the audition. Therefore, they prefer familiarity in the space because they also know how to get to the space’s building, where parking is, where bathrooms and water fountains are, and what other resources are in the building. Many actors say to try to see a space and navigate themselves to it the day before an audition in order to gain more confidence.

However, as noted by figure 8, some actors did state that if they did not perform well within audition space, they did not prefer to audition again within that space since they felt that the space was associated with their failure.

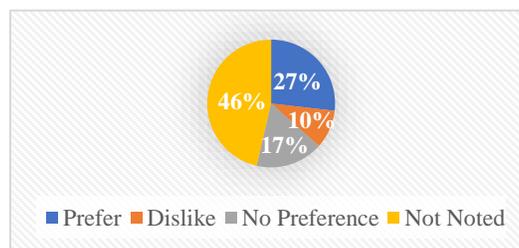


Figure 9. Preferences of interviewees on familiarity with auditors within audition spaces

More than half of the interviewees mentioned how their familiarity with auditors affected them (as seen in figure 9). Some actors found that they had more strength and confidence when they recognized a casting team. They felt that they could make more bold choices since the team already knew what they were capable of. However, other actors felt that, when they knew the people on the casting team, they cared more about the auditors' opinions, therefore causing more pressure for the actors. The more pressure they put on themselves to succeed and impress the auditors, the more the actors psyched themselves out and felt that they performed badly.

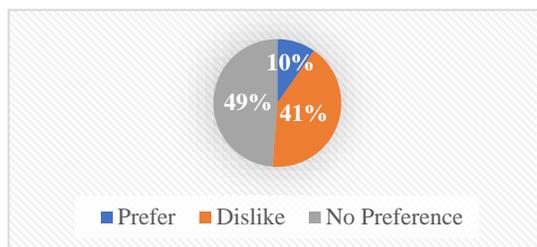


Figure 10. Preferences of interviewees on presence of camera within audition spaces

As seen in figure 10, A few actors stated that, when there was a camera in an audition space, they felt that they had to be “perfect” since auditors typically look at audition tapes multiple times, and that means that they will then see a mistake repeatedly. Additionally, many actors felt that theatre is not a medium meant for film, as acting on a stage can come off as too large on a screen. Therefore, some actors mentioned that when they see a camera, they try to subdue their acting, which makes them feel unsuccessful in portraying their full skills. However, most actors rather did not care or actually preferred a camera in the room. Some actors were indifferent since they saw a camera as just one more auditor or because they were simply used to cameras. Others felt better with a camera because it gave them more chances for auditors to see everything that they did perform correctly, even if they saw only a mistake in-person. If one is nervous about completing an audition in front of a camera, they should reframe their thinking so that it is similar to the actors who believed that recordings gave them more chances to show-off the successes that they had while in the audition room.

5. Limitations

Unfortunately, this study was limited in terms of the number of people that could be interviewed due to available time and funding for the project. In a future project, it would be desirable to interview more actors on their audition experiences to back-up and solidify the patterns that were noticed in the pool of interviewees.

6. Conclusion

As one can see, space characteristics do have an effect on an actor's state-of-mind, therefore impacting actors' perceptions of success within audition spaces. The majority of the actors interviewed were affected by the size and shape of an audition space, the light within a space, the amount of people in the space (both actors and auditors), the acoustics of a space, how familiar they were with a space, and whether they were being recorded on a camera or not during their audition (see figure 1). Additionally, the majority of actors had preferences when it came to the audition space characteristics that were focused on within this study (see figures 2-10). As the data shows, there is quite the spectrum concerning how actors are affected by audition space characteristics along with preferences. Preferences were found to be related to the average space in actors' geographic locations. The majority of actors desired to have an audition space similar to the average space within their locality, and the average audition space differs between Chicago and New York City (see table 1).

The charts do not mention some characteristics that were spoken about by interviewees, such as the floor within a space, the weather outside, anything that may affect allergies (such as sawdust), and the temperature of a space. Also, some interviewees talked in elaborate ways about the waiting room space and how much they had affected their psychology before they even walked into the actual audition room.

The research, as hypothesized, supported the results that Sheridan found: characteristics of a space do affect a performer's perception of success.¹³ However, when it came to certain specific characteristics of a space, the data contradicted Sheridan's. As stated before, Sheridan examined the effect of psychological and environmental changes on emotional expression in contemporary dance. When it came to the specific physical room characteristics that she probed, she focused on whether there was an audience or not, what type of lights the dancers were in, and whether there were mirrors within the room or not. Surveyed participants all said that they felt like they could express emotion more clearly when the lights were off. However, having a dark room would be very abnormal to actors. Therefore, not similar to Sheridan's subjects, it was hypothesized that dark lighting would negatively affect actors, and a couple of interviewees did mention that lighting would not affect them unless they could not see anything in the room, proving the project's hypothesis correct. Moreover, more than half of Sheridan's surveyed participants said that they could express emotion better when there was no mirror and no audience in the room. However, the actors that were interviewed for this research found that they preferred more of an audience because then they could see more of a reaction to their choices. As for mirrors, most actors did not mention them since mirrors are not common in theatrical audition rooms unless it is a dance call. When actors did mention mirrors, actors who were not dance-trained did not want mirrors since they were distracted by their reflections, while actors who were formally trained in dance desired mirrors because they could then check that their technique was correct while at auditions.

While the study was focused on how actors perceive space, there seems to be an additional finding about how actors perceive the ways in which auditors interact with audition spaces. When specifically thinking of the space within an audition room, many interviewees mentioned not how big the space was, but how close or far the auditors were. However, where the auditors are is not always determined by a space. Sometimes an audition may be in a big space, but the table of judges are close to the actors auditioning, seemingly creating a small space. Similarly, actors seemed to pay more attention to where the auditors were rather than the shape of an audition space. Lastly, multiple actors mentioned how lighting worked in relation to auditors since lighting affects whether actors can see the auditors or not. Overall, since many characteristics of audition spaces reminded actors of auditors, it is clear that auditors have a big impact on how actors feel they did within an audition. One could hypothesize that this is because firstly, actors begin an audition by addressing the auditors. Furthermore, auditors decide whether or not actors receive a job, so actors pay the most attention to them. Therefore, auditors' placement, the number of auditors, their actions, and their looks are noted and remembered by actors the most after an audition.

7. Acknowledgements

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