

Mastering the Shurtleff Method: A Technical Analysis of the 12 Guideposts for Professional Auditions

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In the professional landscape of performing arts, the audition process is often regarded as a distinct discipline, separate from the craft of acting itself. Michael Shurtleff, a legendary casting director responsible for iconic productions such as **The Graduate**, **Chicago**, **Becket**, and **Jesus Christ Superstar**, revolutionized this perspective with his seminal work, *Audition: Everything an Actor Needs to Know to Get the Part*. Shurtleff's approach is not merely about character study; it is a technical framework designed to solve the immediate problem of the "cold reading" and the high-pressure environment of the casting room.

The Theoretical Framework of the Shurtleff Methodology

The core of Shurtleff's philosophy lies in the transition from intellectual analysis to emotional immediacy. He posits that an actor's greatest asset is their **authentic self**. In an audition setting, where time is limited and context is often missing, the actor cannot rely on weeks of rehearsal to find a character. Instead, they must utilize a set of technical tools—which Shurtleff calls the **12 Guideposts**—to create a vivid, high-stakes performance instantly. This methodology prioritizes **vulnerability** and **active choices** over safe, literal interpretations of the text.

The Science of the 'Moment Before'

Technically, an audition does not begin with the first line of dialogue. It begins with the **Moment Before** (Guidepost 3). This is the physiological and psychological state the actor carries into the room. It involves the creation of a preceding event that provides the kinetic energy necessary to launch into the scene. Without a robust Moment Before, the performance often suffers from a "static start," where the first few lines are wasted as the actor tries to find their footing.

In-Depth Breakdown: The 12 Guideposts

The 12 Guideposts serve as a systematic checklist for script analysis. When an actor receives a "side" (a portion of the script), they must rapidly apply these filters to ensure the performance is multi-dimensional and engaging.

1. Relationship

Relationship is the fundamental building block of any scene. Shurtleff asks: "What is my relationship to the other characters in the scene?" However, the technical requirement goes deeper than simple titles (e.g., father, boss, lover). The actor must find the **emotional history**. Shurtleff famously asks, "Where is the love?" Even in scenes of intense hatred, there must be an underlying connection or a lost love to make the conflict meaningful and high-stakes.

2. Conflict: What Am I Fighting For?

In the Shurtleff model, conflict is defined as **positive action**. The actor must identify an objective that is active, not passive. Instead of "I want to be understood," a technical choice would be "I want to force them to admit they were wrong." This shifts the performance from internal reflection to external pursuit.

3. The Moment Before

Every scene is a continuation of a life already in progress. The technical execution involves choosing a specific,

sensory-laden event that occurred just before the first line. This ensures the actor enters the scene with a **specific physical and emotional temperature**.

4. Humor

Humor is often misunderstood in dramatic auditions. Shurtleff clarifies that humor is not about being funny or telling jokes; it is a **human survival mechanism** used to cope with pain or tension. Incorporating humor adds layers to a performance, preventing it from becoming one-note or overly sentimental.

5. Opposites

Consistency is the enemy of an interesting audition. Humans are inherently contradictory. If a scene is about love, the actor must find the hate; if it is about strength, they must find the vulnerability. Technically, this involves identifying the primary emotion of a beat and intentionally weaving in its **diametric opposite**.

6. Discoveries

A scene must contain a sequence of **new realisations**. If the actor knows everything that is going to happen, the performance becomes predictable. The technical goal is to find things for the first time, ensuring the character's reactions are spontaneous and "in the moment."

7. Communication and Competition

Communication is a two-way street. Shurtleff emphasizes that acting is about **affecting the other person**.

Competition adds a layer of urgency: "I must win this point; I must overcome your resistance." This creates a dynamic power struggle that is visually and emotionally compelling to casting directors.

8. Importance

Auditions fail when they are played with "everyday" energy. Shurtleff demands that actors raise the stakes. The situation must be a **matter of life and death** (emotionally speaking). This technical adjustment prevents the performance from being casual or boring.

9. Find the Events

Actors must act the **changes**, not the status quo. An event is a shift in the relationship or a change in the direction of the scene. Identifying these structural beats allows the actor to chart a narrative arc within a three-minute audition.

10. Place

Place refers to the **physical environment**. How does the setting affect the character's behavior? Is it cold? Is it a church where they must whisper? Creating a specific sense of place through sensory work anchors the actor's physical life.

11. Game Playing and Role Playing

This guidepost acknowledges that we wear different masks depending on who we are with. It is not about being "fake," but about the **social strategies** humans use to navigate relationships. Determining the "game" being played (e.g., the authority game, the seduction game) clarifies the character's tactics.

12. Mystery and Secret

The final guidepost suggests that there is always something about the character or the situation that is **unknown or withheld**. This creates subtext and intrigue, inviting the casting director to look closer at the actor's eyes to see what they are hiding.

Technical Analysis: Comparison Matrix of Acting Methodologies

To understand the unique positioning of Shurtleff's work, it is helpful to compare it against other established acting systems. While Stanislavski focuses on long-term character building, Shurtleff focuses on the **immediate result** required for a successful audition.

Feature	Shurtleff Method (Audition)	Stanislavski System	Meisner Technique
Primary Objective	To get the part (Immediate Result)	Psychological Realism	Living truthfully under imaginary circumstances
Core Tool	12 Guideposts	The Magic If / Given Circumstances	Repetition / Emotional Preparation
Approach to Script	Proactive, active choices for impact	Deep analysis of through-line	Spontaneous response to partner
Conflict Definition	"What am I fighting for?" (Positive)	Obstacles and Objectives	Impulse-driven interaction
Temporal Focus	The "Now" and the "Moment Before"	Past history and Super-objective	The present moment

Procedural Execution: How to Apply Shurtleff to a Cold Reading

For a professional actor, the application of Shurtleff's guideposts must be algorithmic. Below is a step-by-step procedural workflow for breaking down a script in under 15 minutes.

1. Step 1: Identify the Relationship (Guidepost 1). Don't just say "it's my boss." Say "this is the person who holds my future in their hands, and I love the power they represent." Locate the underlying affection or need.
2. Step 2: Define the Fight (Guidepost 2). Determine what you want from the other person right now. Make it an active verb (e.g., to crush, to seduce, to beg).
3. Step 3: Invention of the Moment Before (Guidepost 3). Visualize a specific action that happened 10 seconds before the scene starts. Feel the physical sensation of that event.
4. Step 4: Layer in the Opposites (Guidepost 5). If you are playing a scene of anger, find a moment to smile or show genuine care. This disrupts the expectation of the casting director.
5. Step 5: Heighten the Stakes (Guidepost 8). Ask yourself, "Why does this HAVE to happen today?" If the answer is "it doesn't," change it until it does.
6. Step 6: Audit for Humor (Guidepost 4). Even in a tragedy, find the irony or the small relief of a joke. It makes the character human and relatable.

Case Study: Overcoming Common Audition Failure Modes

Even skilled actors often fall into traps that Shurtleff's guideposts are designed to circumvent. By analyzing these failure modes, we can see the technical necessity of his approach.

Failure Mode A: The 'One-Note' Performance

Symptom: The actor plays "sad" for the entire two minutes because the character's grandmother just died.

Shurtleff Solution: Apply **Guidepost 5 (Opposites)** and **Guidepost 4 (Humor)**. The actor should try to make the other character laugh or find a moment of intense joy in a memory. This makes the sadness more poignant by contrast.

Failure Mode B: Lack of Presence

Symptom: The actor is clearly reading the lines and waiting for their turn to speak. **Shurtleff Solution:** Apply **Guidepost 7 (Communication)** and **Guidepost 6 (Discoveries)**. The actor must actively listen to see if their

"fight" is working on the other person. They must discover something new in the other person's line that changes their own next line.

Troubleshooting Matrix

Operational Challenge	Potential Cause	Guidepost Correction
Scene feels "stale" or robotic	Over-rehearsal or lack of spontaneity	Guidepost 6 (Discoveries)
No chemistry with the reader	Internalized focus	Guidepost 7 (Communication)
Casting director looks bored	Low stakes / Low energy	Guidepost 8 (Importance)
Character feels two-dimensional	Logical/Literal interpretation	Guidepost 12 (Mystery/Secret)

The Mathematical Model of Dramatic Stakes

While acting is an art, the intensity of a scene can be viewed through a quasi-mathematical lens of **Stakes (S)**, **Obstacle (O)**, and **Action (A)**. Shurtleff's Guidepost 8 essentially serves as a multiplier in the following conceptual formula:

Intensity (I) = (Objective x Stakes) / Resistance

Where:

- Objective: What you want (Guidepost 2).
- Stakes: The cost of failure (Guidepost 8).
- Resistance: The conflict provided by the other character or environment.

By increasing the **Stakes** (Importance), the **Intensity** of the performance increases proportionally, regardless of the volume of the dialogue. This is the technical secret to a "commanding" screen presence.

Integration with Modern Casting Technology

In the era of self-tapes and Zoom auditions, Shurtleff's guideposts are more relevant than ever. The camera demands intimacy and internal life. **Guidepost 10 (Place)** is particularly vital for self-tapes where the actor is often in a blank room. The actor must use their imagination to build the 360-degree environment to avoid the "floating head" syndrome. Furthermore, **Guidepost 12 (Mystery)** is the key to capturing the camera's attention; a secret held in the eyes translates to "screen presence" in a digital format.

Synthesizing the Shurtleff Methodology

Michael Shurtleff's *Audition* remains a cornerstone of acting pedagogy because it provides a pragmatic solution to a psychological problem. By shifting the actor's focus from "Am I doing this right?" to "What am I fighting for?", it eliminates the self-consciousness that kills creativity. The 12 Guideposts are not just a list of suggestions; they are a rigorous technical framework for building a performance that is vibrant, complex, and, most importantly, memorable.

Ultimately, the goal of applying these guideposts is to remove the "acting" and replace it with **authentic human behavior** under high-pressure circumstances. Whether in a Broadway rehearsal hall or a digital self-tape, the principles of relationship, conflict, and mystery serve as the definitive roadmap for the professional actor. By mastering these technical tools, the performer transforms the audition from a terrifying trial into a masterclass in storytelling, ensuring that they don't just show up to the room, but they own it.

Tags: #Michael Shurtleff #Acting Guideposts #Audition Technique #Script Analysis #Casting Tips

