

Designing a Monologue Database

Rebecca Moffit, April 15, 2021

Summary

Searching for monologues is a time-consuming endeavor that leaves underprivileged and underrepresented actors at a disadvantage during auditions. I propose alternative metadata and cataloging practices that would facilitate the finding and accessing of suitable materials for actors at all career levels and ultimately create a more equitable casting process.

Introduction

Monologues – uninterrupted speeches given by a single character in a theatrical work – are the equivalent of an actor’s cover letter when auditioning for a production, a talent agency, or a drama school. They allow casting directors and audition panels to see the range of an actor’s emotional and physical range, and ultimately decide if they fulfill a specific type of role. Finding the perfect monologue that showcases an actor’s abilities in a specific audition situation can make or break one’s career; unfortunately, this process requires hours of reading through dozens of plays, putting actors who don’t have the necessary time and resources at a disadvantage. While libraries can provide access to copies of plays and monologue anthologies, librarians do not have the resources to help actors identify materials that fit their individual abilities.

Because of the level of specificity required by actors to identify and select audition materials, the best solution would be to create a comprehensive monologue database. Through extensive metadata creation and robust filters, actors would be able to identify pieces that reflect their own abilities and fulfill the requirements of each audition situation. Plays and monologue anthologies in which pieces appear will be linked to OCLC WorldCat, allowing actors to find copies in their nearest library. Finally, the database will be a free resource for actors at any career level, providing a more equitable starting point for newcomers and underrepresented actors in the industry.

Using existing monologue finding aids and internet resources, I will describe current monologue cataloging practices and why it is not optimized to assist actors with their search. I will explain what kinds of metadata should be recorded for each monologue in an actor-centered design. Finally, I will imagine how a comprehensive database might be created to allow actors to

find, tag, and save their favorite monologues, interact with a community of their peers, and access recent works while respecting copyright restrictions.

Background

David Kahn, a Professor of Theater Arts, wrote, “The relationship between libraries and theatres is as problematic as it is crucial. Artists, coming from a world that is sometimes non-intellectual, even anti-intellectual, are often neither familiar nor comfortable with the structure of library resources.”¹ Unsurprisingly, there’s not an abundance of academic research about how actors find audition materials. In 2009, Ann Medaille published a study of how practicing theatre professionals – actors, directors, choreographers, technicians, and designers – gather information and inspiration for their work, taking a broad view of the research requirements of working professionals. While this study did not look specifically at the needs of those who were trying to obtain employment, it mentioned that 89% of artists learn about job opportunities through friends or people they’ve worked with,² demonstrating the importance of networking within the field. Without an established network of peers, actors might have a more difficult time breaking into the profession.

More recently, Julia Furay published a study looking at the resources available in university library research guides, which seemed to vary depending on each institution. She notes: “Few guides included extensive lists of plays in the library collection, and even fewer linked to specific plays available online through library databases. Such a list (perhaps sorted chronologically or by genre) may be of help for students looking for plays to read.”³ This is

¹ Kahn, David. “Performing by the Book: Library Resources for Theatre Artists.” In *The Reference Librarian*, (The Haworth Press Inc.) No. 47, 1994, pp. 167-180. (p. 178-9)

² Medaille, Ann. “Creativity and craft: the information-seeking behavior of theatre artists.” *Journal of Documentation*. Vol 66 No 3 2010 pp. 327-347 (p.339-40)

³ Furay, Julia. “Performance review: online research guides for theater students.” *Reference Services Review*. Vol 46 No 1, 2018, pp 91-109. (p.105)

particularly important because of the “sometimes counterintuitive locations of playscripts in both the Dewey and Library of Congress classification systems” (Furay, 100). The UCLA Arts Library has worked to minimize the confusion by having a designated “Selected Plays & Monologues” section separate from the rest of the stacks; however, these works are still shelved by their LC call numbers, which makes it difficult for a casual browser to find works without using a catalog.

An internet database of monologues is not a new idea; a quick internet search yields several websites that claim to have hundreds of monologues suitable for auditions. Unfortunately, most of the websites appear to have been anonymous personal projects⁴ that were abandoned, as they have not been updated in several years. Furthermore, many feature monologues that aren’t suitable for auditions, like transcriptions of movie screenplays⁵ and public domain works that are described as “contemporary.”⁶ Some larger industry websites like Backstage⁷ and StageAgent⁸ have their own monologue search engines, but these are limited in scope, content, and search capabilities. While each of these websites had the right idea, each one was developed in isolation with its own set of categories, meaning they cannot be easily integrated into one large system. For a comprehensive monologue database to work, it will require a standard set of metadata and support from the theatre community as a whole, from the playwrights and publishers to the actors themselves.

⁴ Monologue Search. <https://www.monologuesearch.com>. Accessed April 15, 2021. [Copyright 2013-2021; last updated in 2014 according to Twitter history.]

⁵ The Monologue Database. <https://www.monologuedb.com>. Accessed April 15, 2021. [Last updated in 2013, according to Twitter history.]

⁶ Monologue Archive. <https://www.monologuearchive.com>. Accessed April 15, 2021. [Copyright 2005 – 2021.]

⁷ The Monologuer | Backstage. <https://www.backstage.com/monologues>. Accessed April 15, 2021.

⁸ Monologues from Plays | StageAgent. <https://stageagent.com/monologues>. Accessed April 15, 2021.

Current Criteria for Finding Materials

Industry professionals recommend having several monologues memorized at any given time so that actors are prepared for any combination of contemporary, classical, comedic, and dramatic roles.⁹ Ideally, the monologue will match the tone of the production being auditioned for, thereby making it easier for casting directors to visualize the actor within a given role. There are dozens of articles in the trade magazine *Backstage* that offer general guidelines on length (less than two minutes), content (use active language), and many other aspects.

Several articles emphasized that “reading plays on a daily, consistent basis is virtually the only way to discover effective monologues.”¹⁰ However, this solution is unfeasible for people who don’t live near a bookstore with a large selection of recently produced plays, let alone afford to purchase them. To make the search for suitable materials easier, monologue anthologies collect and organize speeches according to specific criteria (see Table 1 below) so that actors can more quickly identify which pieces could be right for them. Lawrence Harbison, the former head of New Play Acquisitions for Samuel French, Inc.,¹¹ has edited over 100 anthologies of monologues, scenes, and one-act plays, organized by genre, gender, age and length; these collections are often published by year so as to include the most recent works. Each monologue includes metadata about the character who is speaking, a brief synopsis of the play, and a short note explaining the context for the piece. However, even with all this information, it still takes time to read through all of the pieces to find out what they are actually about and whether or not they are appropriate for a specific audition.

⁹ Townsend, Clista. “46 Monologues That Are Perfect for College Auditions.” *Backstage*. June 27, 2019.

<https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/professor-monologue-suggestions-strategy-college-audition-68461/>

¹⁰ Jacobs, Leonard. “Making Monologues Matter: Choosing the Right Material for your Audition.” *Backstage*. Nov 15-2002-Nov 21, 2002; 43, 46; Performing Arts Periodicals Database pg. 24.

¹¹ Lawrence Harbison | Times Square Chronicles. <https://t2online.com/author/lawrence-harbison/> Accessed April 15, 2021.

The following table shows all the metadata currently used to categorize monologues:

Category*	Gender
Classical	Male
Contemporary	Female
Genre*	Age
Comedic	Child/Teen
Dramatic	Young Adult
Length	Adult
Less than one minute	Older Adult
One to two minutes	Ethnicity (if specified)
More than two minutes	
*Also known as: Type, Style, Period, Tone, etc.	

Table 1: Current metadata used to classify monologues

Most of these terms are taken from a publisher’s statement, which in itself is based on a play’s *dramatis personae* page. While these terms have been used for decades for printed anthologies, they are not entirely sufficient for a comprehensive database.

The first issue is the lack of a standardized vocabulary for what to call the “types” of monologues. I’ve called them Category and Genre here, but they are interchangeably called Type, Style, Period, and Tone in other contexts. Often, they are referred to as “classical/contemporary” and “comedic/dramatic,” but this turns them into false binaries. “classical” is easy to define (e.g. Shakespeare, Greek writers, works written in verse, etc.), “contemporary” can mean a variety of things. When audition notices call for “contemporary” monologues, they usually want to hear pieces that are recent or modern; however, many monologue collections consider “contemporary” to mean anything that isn’t “classical,” thereby making putting 21st century pieces in the same category as 20th century and even late 19th century works. Not all of these works would be appropriate for a “contemporary” audition, which can be confusing for beginning actors tasked with finding their own monologues.

Similar to how the “contemporary” label covers a long time period, the “male” and “female” labels encompass a wide variety of gender identities. Even if a character has a gendered name, depending on the content of the monologue, an actor of any gender could perform that piece in an audition; for example, while there aren’t a lot of female roles in Shakespeare, many of the masculine-named roles (particularly in the History plays) could be played by female actors without it being gimmicky. Additionally, these labels don’t help non-binary actors narrow down their search, as they have to look through both male and female monologue collections to find pieces that fit their abilities.

Finally, there’s an implicit whiteness within monologue anthologies that comes from the “othering” of ethnicities. General monologue anthologies will note if a character is of a particular ethnicity, but this label is only used for non-white pieces, which might lead actors of color to the false conclusion that the rest of the monologues are “white” by default. There are monologue anthologies specifically for Black, Latinx, and Asian actors, which help raise awareness of those roles, but actors of color should not feel limited by roles that have a specific ethnicity. At a time when musicals like “Hamilton,” “Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812,” and “Hadestown” are casting people of color in leading roles, actors should feel empowered to seek a wider array of monologues.

Amended Criteria for Monologue Searches

Considering the issues listed above, the following table shows some of the changes I would propose before building a comprehensive database:

Category*	Gender
Classical [Pre 19th-c., verse]	Male
Public Domain Contemporary*	Female
Contemporary [Past 100 years/copyrighted]	<i>Gender Neutral*</i>
Genre*	Age

Comedic	Child/Teen
<i>Serio-comedic</i>	Young Adult
Dramatic	Adult
Length	Older Adult
Less than one minute	<i>Unspecified</i>
One to two minutes	Ethnicity
More than two minutes	<i>Default: "any"</i>
Intended Audience/Mature Content	
Theme/Subject Matter	*Official terms TBD

Table 2: Updated metadata for reclassifying monologues

Much of the changes here serve to disrupt the false binaries imposed by the current categories. After deciding on “official” terms for category and genre, more descriptors can be added to better describe the content; in this case, “Public Domain Contemporary” can be used to separate non-verse plays in the public domain from the more recent “Contemporary” works that are still under copyright. “Gender Neutral” can be used in addition to the traditional “male/female” description in order to denote pieces that don’t rely on gender for context. If a specific ethnicity is not included in the play’s *dramatis personae*, the Ethnicity label will have a default value of “any.”

There are two additional search criteria that I would add to this list, based on two of the existing monologue databases that I looked into. MonologueSearch.com has an option to filter plays by “Rating” (i.e. “Suitable for all ages” or “Contains Adult Content”).¹² This is a useful feature that allows actors to narrow down their search to pieces that are appropriate to perform in front of potential coworkers or admissions committees that might take offense to strong language. Finally, Backstage’s “Monologuer” allows users to search for monologues by theme or subject matter (e.g. Aging, Humor, Rejection, etc.) which is helpful for establishing what a particular piece is about before deciding to read the entire thing.

¹² Play Filters | Monologue Search. <http://www.monologuesearch.com/search-characters>. Accessed April 15, 2021

Imagining the Interface

With Duarte and Belarde-Lewis's methodology of "imagining," we can "create figurative and literal spaces for the work of building, analyzing, and experimenting"¹³ with a different type of knowledge organization – that of actors. A practical monologue database needs to be organized by the speeches within a play rather than the play itself; in essence, this is the inverse of a library catalog. Monologue-seeking actors are looking for character types and speech content before considering the play as a whole.

Each monologue in the database would require a unique identifier to make them findable within different editions of plays and anthologies. In auditions, actors verbally “slate” for casting panels by announcing the character, act, and scene of a play to identify the piece they will be performing; however, this combination of attributes might not work for every play, so we would need to develop a different system to ensure no identifier is repeated.

However, it must be acknowledged that adding monologues to the database will take a lot of work; it is probably a leading reason why most of the existing online databases have been abandoned. Each entry will need a full set of metadata, a brief play synopsis, context for the excerpted speech, and – if it's in the public domain – the text of the monologue itself. For plays that are under copyright, the entry will include either the first line of the monologue or the first 100 characters so that users can identify the beginning of the speech; the entry will then link to WorldCat to see if a library nearby has a copy of the play or anthology that has the monologue in it. At some point, digital editions of plays could be marked up with XML schema to streamline the process of identifying and uploading works, but this requires further investigation.

¹³ Marisa Elena Duarte & Miranda Belarde-Lewis (2015) *Imagining: Creating Spaces for Indigenous Ontologies*, *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 53:5-6, 677-702, DOI: 10.1080/01639374.2015.1018396

Putting aside the technicality of adding content to the database, we can imagine how users could interact with the database should everything work perfectly. Actors would be able to save monologues to personal lists, add tags describing their themes and subject matter, and discover which monologues are the most popular (thereby letting them know those piece might be overused). Actors could have a space to talk about their craft amongst themselves, and develop an online network of peers that can suggest useful materials for each other. Above all, the database should be a free resource so that students, beginning actors, and those without resources can access it at any stage of their career; instead, the website will be supported through grants, donations, and patrons, like any theatre company (or Wikipedia). User data would never be sold to third-party advertisers; users should feel safe using the database and recommending it to their fellow actors.

Conclusion

Acting is a notoriously difficult profession to break into. Even with the best preparation, it seems as though having the right connections is key to getting one's foot in the door. It can be especially difficult for actors who don't see themselves represented on stage and screen, and will therefore have a more challenging time convincing casting directors that they can carry a story.

A comprehensive monologue database would be an asset to the acting community at any level. By opening up the search criteria to include non-binary terms, actors entering the industry would have a greater chance of finding pieces that better reflect themselves and what they hope to bring to the stage. By remaining a free resource, the database would encourage people who wouldn't normally have the time and resources to devote to searching for materials to give acting a chance. Ultimately, my hope is that the database allows actors, producers, and eventually

audiences, to look beyond traditional casting practices and discover the possibilities for new stories to be told.

References

- Apodaca, Jackie. "A Professor's 4 Tips for Preparing a Monologue." *Backstage*. December 11, 2020. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/tips-preparing-monologues-48793/>
- Duarte, Marisa Elena & Miranda Belarde-Lewis. "Imagining: Creating Spaces for Indigenous Ontologies." *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 53:5-6, 2015, pp 677-702. DOI: 10.1080/01639374.2015.1018396
- Furay, Julia. "Performance review: online research guides for theater students." *Reference Services Review*. Vol 46 No 1, 2018, pp 91-109. (p.105)
- Jacobs, Leonard. "Making Monologues Matter: Choosing the Right Material for your Audition." *Back Stage*. Nov 15-2002-Nov 21, 2002; 43, 46; Performing Arts Periodicals Database pg. 24.
- Kahn, David. "Performing by the Book: Library Resources for Theatre Artists." In *The Reference Librarian*, (The Haworth Press Inc.) No. 47, 1994, pp. 167-180. (p. 178-9)
- "Lawrence Harbison | Times Square Chronicles." <https://t2online.com/author/lawrence-harbison>. Accessed April 15, 2021.
- McDonagh, Luke. Plays, Performances and Power Struggles – Examining Copyright's 'Integrity' in the Field of Theatre." *The Modern Law Review*. July 2014, Vol 77. No. 4 (July 2014) pp. 533-562.
- Medaille, Ann. "Creativity and craft: the information-seeking behavior of theatre artists." *Journal of Documentation*. Vol 66 No 3 2010 pp. 327-347.
- "Monologue Archive." <https://www.monologuearchive.com>. Accessed April 15, 2021.
- "The Monologue Database." <https://www.monologuedb.com>. Accessed April 15, 2021.
- "Monologue Search." <https://www.monologuesearch.com>. Accessed April 15, 2021.
- "The Monologuer | Backstage." <https://www.backstage.com/monologues>. Accessed April 15, 2021
- "Monologues from Plays | StageAgent." <https://stageagent.com/monologues>. Accessed April 15, 2021
- O'Neill, Tyler. "The Actor's Guide to Performing a Monologue." *Backstage*. March 16, 2017. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/need-know-delivering-next-monologue-5067/>
- Townsend, Clista. "46 Monologues That Are Perfect for College Auditions." *Backstage*. June 27, 2019. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/professor-monologue-suggestions-strategy-college-audtion-68461/>