

Mastering the Shurtleff Methodology: A Technical Guide to the Twelve Guideposts for Professional Actors

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In the professional landscape of performing arts, the audition process is often misunderstood as a mere talent showcase. However, as defined by Michael Shurtleff in his seminal work, **Audition**, the process is a rigorous technical exercise in character architecture and emotional availability. Shurtleff, a legendary casting director for icons such as Bob Fosse and David Merrick, transformed the audition from a passive reading into an active, high-stakes performance. This article provides a comprehensive technical breakdown of Shurtleff's **Twelve Guideposts**, offering a structural framework for actors to achieve what auditors truly seek: a full, uninhibited experience of the actor's identity and capabilities within the confines of a scene.

The Theoretical Framework of the Shurtleff Audition Method

The core philosophy of Shurtleff's method rests on the premise that an audition is not a search for the "correct" interpretation of a role, but rather a search for a compelling human experience. For the technical writer and the serious performer, this shifts the focus from **result-oriented acting** to **process-oriented execution**. The "Twelve Guideposts" serve as a system of inquiry that an actor applies to a script to generate immediate, visceral life on stage or screen.

Mechanistically, the Shurtleff method operates on the principle of **Emotional Momentum**. An audition scene typically lacks the context of a full rehearsal period; therefore, the actor must manufacture a history and a future within seconds. This is achieved through the systematic application of specific psychological triggers designed to bypass the actor's natural hesitation and intellectualization.

Technical Analysis: The Twelve Guideposts

The following sections break down each guidepost into its functional components, providing the analytical tools necessary for deep script immersion.

1. Relationship: Where is the Love?

In Shurtleff's system, **Relationship** is not a static state (e.g., "she is my mother") but an active investigation of how one character feels about another. The technical question is: "Where is the love?" This does not necessarily imply romantic love, but rather the essential human connection that makes the interaction significant. Even in scenes of hatred, there must be a foundational attachment or desire for the other person to change, which creates the friction necessary for drama.

2. Conflict: What Am I Fighting For?

Drama is defined by **Conflict**. Shurtleff posits that every scene involves a character wanting something and facing an obstacle to getting it. To apply this guidepost, the actor must identify an **Active Verb**. Instead of "feeling sad," the actor must "fight for forgiveness" or "strive for dominance." The intensity of the scene is directly proportional to the resistance encountered.

3. The Moment Before: The Ignition Point

Technically, no scene starts at zero. Every character enters a scene from a previous event that has already set their

emotional state in motion. The **Moment Before** provides the necessary inertia to carry the actor through the first lines of the script without a "warm-up" period. It is the tactical decision of what happened five seconds before the first line was spoken.

4. Humor: The Relief from Pain

Humor is not about being funny or telling jokes. In Shurtleff's framework, humor is a **survival mechanism**. It is the way human beings cope with unbearable situations. By finding the humor in a dark or dramatic scene, the actor adds a layer of reality that makes the performance more human and less stereotypical.

5. Opposites: The Duality of Behavior

Human psychology is rarely linear. Whatever the actor decides is true about a character, the opposite is also true. If a character is being cruel, they are also likely feeling vulnerable. If they are being brave, they are also likely terrified. Applying the guidepost of **Opposites** prevents one-dimensional performances and creates the "texture" that casting directors look for.

6. Discoveries: The Freshness Factor

A common error in auditions is "playing the ending." The actor must treat every moment as a **Discovery**. Nothing is known until it happens. This requires the actor to be hyper-present, reacting to the reader or the environment as if for the first time, regardless of how many times they have rehearsed the lines.

7. Communication and Competition

Acting is a two-way street. **Communication** is the physical and emotional act of sending a message and ensuring it is received. **Competition** is the inherent struggle between characters to win the scene. The actor must ask: "Am I winning?" and adjust their tactics accordingly.

8. Importance: Raising the Stakes

In an audition, nothing should be casual. **Importance** is the technical elevation of the scene's stakes. The actor must treat the situation as a matter of life and death. If the stakes are low, the audience's interest is low. The performer must find a way to make the outcome of the scene vital to their character's survival.

9. Find the Mystery: The Unspoken Element

Great acting involves keeping secrets. **Find the Mystery** encourages the actor to avoid explaining everything to the audience. By maintaining an internal secret or an unexpressed thought, the actor creates an allure that draws the auditor in, making them wonder what is happening beneath the surface.

10. Game Playing and Role Playing

In life, we wear different masks depending on who we are with. This is **Game Playing**. In a scene, the character may be "playing" a professional, a victim, or a hero. Recognizing the specific "game" being played allows the actor to shift their behavior realistically as the social context changes.

11. Transitions: The Shift in Tactics

A scene is a series of beats. **Transitions** are the technical pivot points where one tactic fails and another begins. Identifying these shifts prevents a performance from becoming a "monotone" of emotion and allows for dynamic variety.

12. Vulnerability: The Risk of Being Hurt

The final guidepost, **Vulnerability**, is the willingness to be open and exposed. It is the quality that makes an audience care about a character. Technically, this involves dropping the defensive shields that actors (and people)

often use to protect themselves, allowing the character's true needs to be seen.

The Mathematical Model of Performance Energy

To quantify the effectiveness of an audition piece, we can utilize a conceptual model of **Performance Energy (Pe)**. This model integrates the core components of the Shurtleff method into a functional equation:

$$Pe = S(I + O) / D$$

Where:

- S (Stakes): The perceived importance of the outcome (Guidepost 8).
- I (Intention): The strength of the character's objective (Guidepost 2).
- O (Opposites): The complexity of internal conflict (Guidepost 5).
- D (Distance): The emotional or physical gap between the character and their goal.

A high **Pe** value indicates a dynamic and engaging audition. If **Stakes (S)** are near zero, the entire performance fails to resonate, regardless of the quality of the other variables.

Comparison & Evaluation: Shurtleff vs. Other Methodologies

The Shurtleff method is unique in its focus on the specific constraints of the **audition room** rather than long-form rehearsal. Below is a comparison with other major acting frameworks.

Methodology	Primary Focus	Key Tool	Audition Suitability
Shurtleff	The immediate experience	Twelve Guideposts	Very High (Designed for it)
Stanislavski	Psychological Realism	The "Magic If" / Objectives	High (Foundational)
Meisner	Relational Spontaneity	Repetition / Living Truthfully	Medium (Requires partner sync)
Adler	Imagination & Circumstance	Script Analysis / Epic Scale	High (For character depth)

Unifying Text and Music: Applying Guideposts to Musical Theatre

For musical theatre performers, the application of Shurtleff's guideposts is essential for bridging the gap between spoken dialogue and song. A common technical failure in musical auditions is the "stop-and-start" phenomenon, where the character's journey pauses while the song is performed. To avoid this, the actor must apply the guideposts directly to the lyrics.

- **Technical Integration:** Treat the transition into music as a Transition (Guidepost 11) driven by an increase in Importance (Guidepost 8). The character sings because speaking is no longer sufficient to express the intensity of the Conflict (Guidepost 2).
- **The Moment Before the Song:** The orchestra's vamp or the first few notes of the piano must be treated as the Moment Before (Guidepost 3). The emotion should be fully formed before the first note is sung.
- **Discoveries in Lyrics:** Every line of a song is a new thought. The actor must find Discoveries (Guidepost 6) in the repetitive structure of a chorus to ensure the performance remains dynamic.

Practical Implementation: A Step-by-Step Audition Workflow

Implementing the Shurtleff method requires a systematic approach to script analysis. The following workflow should be utilized upon receiving "sides" (audition excerpts).

1. **Rapid Analysis:** Read the scene once for plot. Read it a second time specifically looking for the Relationship (Guidepost 1). Ask: "Who is this person to me and why do I love/need them?"
2. **Conflict Identification:** Define your Active Verb. Are you fighting to win back a lover? To humiliate an enemy? To gain an ally?
3. **Stake Elevation:** Artificially increase the Importance (Guidepost 8). If the scene is about a lost wallet, play it as if it contains your last cent and your identity papers.
4. **Opposite Search:** Find the moment where you can play the exact opposite of your primary emotion. If you are angry, find the one line where you are desperately seeking approval.
5. **The Moment Before Construction:** Physicalize the moment before. If you enter a room, know exactly what you were doing 10 seconds ago. Were you running? Crying? Waiting in the cold? Use that physical state.
6. **Discovery Marking:** Highlight 3-4 places in the script where your character learns something new or changes their mind. These are your Transitions (Guidepost 11).

Case Studies: Troubleshooting Common Audition Failure Modes

Even with a strong theoretical understanding, technical errors occur in the high-pressure environment of the casting office. Below are common failure modes and their Shurtleff-based solutions.

Failure Mode A: The "Flat" Performance

Symptom: The actor is technically proficient and memorized, but the performance feels sterile or uninteresting.

Solution: Apply **Guidepost 4 (Humor)** and **Guidepost 5 (Opposites)**. Flatness usually occurs when an actor plays only one "color." Introducing humor or a contradictory emotion adds the necessary frequency of emotional shifts to engage the auditor.

Failure Mode B: Lack of Connection

Symptom: The actor is focused inward, ignoring the reader.**Solution:** Focus on **Guidepost 7 (Communication and Competition)**. The actor must make it their primary goal to change the reader. If the reader doesn't change, the actor hasn't "won" the scene. This forces the focus outward.

Failure Mode C: Low Energy Start

Symptom: The first few lines are tentative; the actor only finds their rhythm halfway through.**Solution:** Strengthen **Guidepost 3 (The Moment Before)**. Ensure the "ignition" happens before the first word is uttered. The energy level must be at 100% from the first millisecond.

Comparison Table: Guidepost Priorities Based on Scene Type

Scene Type	Primary Guidepost	Secondary Guidepost	Technical Goal
Romantic/Intimate	Relationship (Love)	Vulnerability	Emotional Connection
High-Stakes Drama	Importance	Conflict	Tension Creation
Comedy	Humor (Survival)	Opposites	Pacing & Surprise
Action/Thriller	Competition	The Moment Before	Physical Urgency

Broad Implications for Modern Performance Theory

The enduring relevance of Michael Shurtleff’s **Twelve Guideposts** lies in their adaptability. While originally written for theatre, these principles are equally applicable to film, television, and even voice-over work. In a digital age where self-tapes have become the norm, the technical requirement to be "immediately alive" on camera is more critical than ever. The Guideposts provide a repeatable, algorithmic approach to creativity, ensuring that the actor is never "guessing" what a casting director wants, but is instead providing a structured, high-stakes human experience.

Ultimately, Shurtleff’s methodology is about the courage to be human in an artificial environment. By mastering the technical workflows of Relationship, Conflict, and Importance, the performer transcends the "audition" and enters the realm of storytelling. This system ensures that every reading is a full experience of who the actor is and what they can do—which is the only thing a casting director truly needs to see.

Tags: #Michael Shurtleff #Twelve Guideposts #Acting Techniques #Audition Preparation #Script Analysis

