A Reel Good Time

An Honors Thesis (THEAT 433)

by

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Abstract

Like many industries in today’s society, the Entertainment industry is extremely competitive. It often seems as though the chances of achieving success as an actor are a million to one. However, there are many ways that an actor can increase his or her chance of success. One very important way to increase an actor’s chance of success is to create a demo reel of the actor’s work. I have created both a reel of my stage and screen work, and a New York Times-style article discussing why my reel is exceptional.

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Why This Reel?

In the twenty-first century, it is hard to imagine a world without technology to assist us in every day life, as well as our careers. Modern technology, along with the Internet and the media, has become a prominent part of the working world. The entertainment industry is no exception to this trend. Industry professionals often use technology to communicate, negotiate, and even hire working actors. In today’s world, much of the casting process involves technology in some way. This could be as simple as filming an audition on location, recording an audition to send to a casting director or agent for an audition, or even auditions via Skype. Technology makes it possible for a casting director to see an actor’s audition, regardless of whether or not the actor and the casting director are in the same city, or even the same country (Kelly 2012).

When seeking new talent to represent, cast, etc. casting directors, and more importantly, agents often view acting reels of potential talent in order to decide whether or not they should hire them. Max Ghezzi, author of Killer Demo Reels, says “There are occasions when producers and directors use demo reels as tiebreakers. Camera presence, personality, command, style, attitude, consistency, versatility, and experience in front of the camera are all scrutinized, until one actor comes out the winner” (Tamzoke 2010). Therefore, for an actor, a reel is extremely important, especially when working in multiple locations and mediums, as it allows an industry professional to see a compellation of your best work without having to arrange a
meeting to see you in person. Casting director Mark Sikes is quoted saying "Not having [a current demo reel] absolutely decreases an actor's chances of getting hired. It looks like you've never worked in film or television. And what better way to see how an actor looks on film than to see their reel?" (Derrick 2013). A reel is an easy way for actors to land both jobs and representation. According to Backstage.com, "Your demo reel is your commercial. With it, you hope to convince the viewers that you, the featured product, are the one they should spend their money on."

A reel should feature an actor's best work, as well as provide variety with multiple genres and mediums, as to keep the viewer engaged and entertainment throughout the entirety of the reel. It should feature outstanding performances of the best material available to the actor at the time, and should create the desire to see more of the actor's work. "The chief purpose of a demo reel, besides displaying raw talent, is creating an emotional response that encourages the producer to hire you. Since you only get one chance to make a first impression, make sure it's the best you've got" (Tamzoke 2010).

A first impression is key to launching a professional relationship, especially in the entertainment industry. Therefore, it is important that an actor's reel must be high quality and stand out from other actor's reels that are simply standard. What should an ideal demo reel feature? Casting director Gary Zuckerbrod says "You don't want to have a drawn-out opening...The best demo reel...starts with your name and goes immediately into a scene. Casting agents use the demo reel to identify what qualities the actor has." The reel should also start with the actor's strongest scene,
as to capture the casting director’s attention. Oftentimes, one outstanding opening scene is enough to get the actor noticed by a casting director. The reel should feature between two and five scenes of various length for about three minutes total. There should also be clear juxtaposition between all scenes in both acting style, and material. Reels should be fast-paced, allowing multiple scenes to be featured without dragging or dwelling for too long on one scene or style (Tamzoke 2010).

The scenes should not only feature the actor’s best work, but should also give the viewer a clear idea of who the actor is. Joe Gressis of Secret Handshake Entertainment in Hollywood, CA states that “Every actor’s reel should contain scenes that clearly identify the actor. There should never be any confusion as to whose reel we are watching” (Tamzoke 2010).

An ideal reel would embody all of the aspects, with expert editing to add a flare of personality to make the actor appeal to the viewer as someone that they would enjoy working with on whatever project they are working on. One reel that does all this and more is the reel of actor Liz Bancroft. This reel would be applicable for almost any project, and truly give the viewer a taste of who Liz is as both an actor and a collaborator. The qualities that make this reel exceptional include the outstanding material featured in the scenes of the reel, the juxtaposition of style and medium, the featured production photos, the addition of modeling material, and the precise and effective editing.

High-quality material is very important when showcasing an actor’s best work. Even the most outstanding actor would not showcase their talent effectively when performing poor material. Therefore, to create the best first impression
possible, a reel should feature high-quality material from outstanding plays, musicals, etc. written by notable, high-quality writers. The material should also fit the styles and characters that the actor performs best. For example, a 22-year-old actress should not be featured performing a scene from an August Wilson play, playing a 60-year-old African-American man. The material would clearly not be a good fit for the actor, and therefore would not showcase them in the best way possible. The quality and fit of the material featured in a reel is key to the overall quality of the reel.

The material featured in Liz Bancroft's reel is a great example of high quality, actor-appropriate material for a reel. The reel features a variety of notable scenes and songs that showcase her talent in an effective way.

The first scene featured is the opening scene from Rabbit Hole, a well-known play by playwright David Lindsay-Abaire. Liz plays Izzy, a comedic, 20-something character who is described as irresponsible but good-hearted (Lindsay-Abaire). The material is perfect for Liz's type, as it is contemporary, notable, and comedic, a strength of Liz's. A strong comedic scene like this is a perfect opening for Liz's reel. The next scene featured is a song from Legally Blonde: the Musical, a contemporary comedic pop-musical that is perfect to showcase Liz's singing style. Because the song is dramatic, yet it comes from a comedic musical, this song showcases the versatility of Liz's acting skills, as well as her vocal talent. This is also an appropriate character for Liz. She plays Elle Woods, a Harvard Law student who is smart, yet notorious for being Barbie-like- the perfect role for Liz! After the song, "Legally Blonde", Liz is featured playing a soldier's girlfriend in Ryan Handy's Independent
does her reel feature both comedy and drama, it also features both on-stage and screen acting, as well as straight scenes, meaning scenes or plays without songs, and solo songs. Her reel features juxtaposition on three levels, making her reel stand out above other actors of her age, and opening her up to a wider selection of appropriate jobs and auditions. It also showcases her ability to adapt to a variety of characters as well as multiple mediums. This is a very marketable quality in an actor, and is something that casting directors and agents notice when seeking new talent (Kelly 2012).

Liz’s reel not only features three different types of juxtaposition, the structure of the reel makes the contrast the most effective it can be. Because the reel opens with a comedic scene, to create an effective contrast, the next scene features both dramatic acting and solo singing. As the song concludes, the next transition is into a dramatic on-screen scene. While in this case, both scenes are dramatic, this is still effective juxtaposition because it is a contrast of mediums, as well as a transition from singing to straight-acting. However, because these two transitions were both dramatic, the most effective way to continue the juxtaposition is for the next transition to feature both comedy and song, which is exactly what is showcased in the next scene. To conclude the scenes, the reel transitions from a comedic song to a dramatic scene, making the final scene transition another effective contrast, giving the reel the most effective juxtaposition overall.

Another unique and effective element of Liz’s reel is the fact that it features production photos from productions that are not featured in the reel (usually for legal reasons). This is a great addition to the reel because of the fact that not all
elements of a resume can be present in a reel because of both the time and the legal limitations.

When looking at a resume, agents and casting directors see a long list of projects that the actor has been a part of. However, in a reel, they only get to see parts of five projects or performances, at most. While a reel features the actor's best work, and the juxtaposition creates an overall showcase of the actor's talents, this can be somewhat limiting in being able to see the true range of an actor's skill set, especially when it comes to big, high-production musicals that are often not recorded. Although the comedic elements of Liz's reel showcase Liz's talent for extreme comedic character acting, it is harder to simply imagine her as a leading big-musical character actress. This is where the production photos featured in Liz's reel play a valuable role.

The productions from which the photos featured in her reel were taken include Ball State University's *Guys and Dolls*, in which Liz played the leading role of Adelaide, Ball State's *Evil Dead: the Musical*, in which Liz played the comedic and character supporting role of Shelly, Fairfield Theatre's *Hairspray*, in which Liz played Amber Von Tussle, Weathervane Playhouse's *The Wedding Singer*, in which Liz played a featured ensemble role as well as understudied the role of Linda (as stated on her resume), and Muncie Civic Theatre's *Legally Blonde: the Musical*, in which Brooke played fitness instructor Brooke Wyndham (an important role in showcasing Liz as she is a group fitness instructor outside of acting).

All of these roles not only represent a unique skill, that may not be fully showcased in the scenes featured in the reel, but they also show that Liz is a
desirable artist to work with. For example, almost all of the shows from which the production photos are taken, require a tremendous large amount of people. This shows viewers that Liz can be a successful collaborator in a large group. It also showcases Liz's dance ability, which is not showcased in the scenes featured in the reel. Again, almost all of the shows featured in the production photo are huge dance shows. By showing viewers snapshots of dance numbers featured in dance shows, she is showcasing her otherwise unknown dance ability. If viewers were watching her reel while reading her resume, as most entertainment industry professionals do, these photos also serve as a reminder that Liz is someone that you would want to continue to work with, as many of the productions showcased in the photos are from venues where she was rehired multiple times, and directors who cast her multiple times as well. This shows that people enjoy working with Liz, and seize the opportunity to work with her again. These are all qualities that are true of Liz, but would not be showcased without the presence of the production photos.

Adding production photos to a reel is a unique and effective way to communicate additional skills, qualities, and experience without taking up very much time. Their presence will make Liz’s reel stand out among other actor’s reels, and could perhaps be the perfect element to win the “tie-breaker” that Ghezzi was referring to in the casting process. They are another reason that Liz Bancroft’s reel is exceptional.

Another unique element that is featured in Liz’s reel is the presence of modeling footage and photos. Many actresses such as Cameron Diaz or Blake Lively, both of whom share many qualities in their work with Liz’s work, got their start in
modeling. And many current actresses such as Hayden Panettiere and Emma Stone continue to make a living modeling in commercials (IMDB). Therefore, having modeling experience is an additional advantage that Liz has over other actresses her age.

Even the modeling material featured in Liz's reel has elements of juxtaposition. The material includes photos from both various photo shoots and fashion shows that Liz has previously done, as well as snapshots from a 2009 Fashion Show in Cincinnati, OH. The material is compiled into alternating clips of each element to create contrast and excitement for the viewer. The material also features both commercial modeling and high fashion modeling, which are the fashion categories that are comparable to comedy and drama in acting.

Since most Television and Film actors start out working in commercials, modeling experience is a big advantage, as many models work in commercials as well, and are often represented by the same agent. For an entry-level actor like Liz, modeling experience can be the key to gaining representation in the industry, and may also lead to additional representation in the fashion industry. Therefore, featuring modeling material is another unique element that makes Liz's reel stand out from other actors' her age.

All of these elements are qualities that make Liz's reel exceptional. However, all of these elements would be far less effective without proper editing. The editing has a significant effect on the success of a reel. "A bad video editor can ruin your demo reel and hurt your chances of getting acting work" says Derrick from ReelsforActors.com. A reel is only as effective as its editing allows it to be, regardless
of the quality of material or any other exceptional features it may contain.

Liz Bancroft's reel is editing in a concise yet exciting way that makes it extremely effective. Because of the juxtaposition structure that is featured, the transitions are smooth, but engaging. They create an effect that makes three minutes feel like thirty seconds, making the viewer more likely to watch the entire reel. This increases the chances that the viewer will see a larger variety of skills, and therefore will be more intrigued, and eager to see more.

Another effective element of the editing in Liz Bancroft's reel is the fact that each of the scenes photos, and footage are labeled with the title of the piece, and the part that Liz is playing. This essentially acts as a slate, or an introduction in an audition setting (Kelly 2012). It also makes it easier to correspond with a resume, and connect which project is being showcased at what time. It also reminds the viewer of the quality of the material being performed in each scene, so they are not distracted thinking, “What was the name of the play this scene is from?”, and they can simply focus on Liz’s performance.

In addition to the labeling of each scene that is featured, another important element is the clear contact information that appears in the reel. Without the contact information for the actor being showcased, a reel is virtually ineffective because if the viewer likes the actor’s work, but has no way to reach them, they will not get the job or the representation and the reel become useless. Likewise, if the contact information is not clear- if it is small or hidden as a caption, or simply pops in during the middle of the reel, only to disappear virtually immediately- it may as well not be there, because industry professionals often do not have time to search for
information (Kelly 2012). Liz's reel displays her contact information clearly and for a concise yet effective amount of time, at both the beginning and the end of her reel, making it easy and convenient for the viewer to see and access.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Liz's reel that is captured in the editing is her personality. Casting directors, and especially agents, need to get a sense of who you are and what you do for your reel, so that they know how to place you in the projects that are available to them. Therefore, showcasing who you are is key when developing a reel. If you do not show the viewer who you are, they will not know what to do with you, regardless of whether or not they like your work (Kelly 2012). Through the editing, the reel establishes, a positive, fun, exciting mood, which captures Liz's personality, and makes her work appealing to viewers. Viewers not only see her work, but also what she's like to work with.

A good reel is key to an actor's career, and an exceptional reel is what truly gets an actor the job or the representation. Liz Bancroft's reel is a great example of what an exceptional reel contains, how it should be structured, and how a reel can showcase everything you need to know about an actor and their work.
Artifact

Reel Can Be Found at:

http://youtu.be/o5lAzVnzDO8
Works Cited


