

Stepping out of my comfort zone in an audition

One brave writer confronts her fear of performing and dances her heart out in an audition for *Stepping Out*.



BERNARD WEIL / TORONTO STAR

As part of a project to try new things for a year, Melanie Chambers auditions by reading in front of Sandra Burley, co-producer, Brenda Darling, director, Elizabeth Verwey, producer and Liz Best, assistant director, at Ralph Thornton Centre.

By: Melanie Chambers Special to the Star, Published on Tue Jan 05 2016

In front of a four-woman panel who decide whether I will make the cut, I set down my audition application and step back. I'm reminded of actress Jennifer Beals in the movie *Flashdance* getting ready to dance for her life.

"I feel like throwing up," I say.

One lady looks up and smiles.

I'm reading for the part of Sylvia in *Stepping Out*, a play from Toronto's Alumnae Theatre. It's one of only a few theatre houses that accepts non-unionized amateurs into auditions.

At 43, this is my first formal audition. It's my year of trying new things, to challenge myself and escape my comfort zone. It's on my list. So, here we go.

The day before I received one page of the script; I asked for advice from anyone I know who has acted. "Memorize as much as you can so it leaves the rest of your energy to act," says my dad. Yesterday I had it nailed.

This morning I was ready, fantasizing about being "discovered," starting a new Hollywood life, becoming famous, wearing ball gowns on the red carpet. But standing in front of these ladies, I'm so anxious I can't look up. I'm looking at the sheet, my hands gripping the paper like a lifeline.

My counterpart reads her line. Taking my cue, I jump into character and take a deep breath.

“Sometimes I look at my Terry and I think what are you doing with this person but then again I think to myself, ‘Sylv, bearing in mind the gaping holes in your own personality, you are a very lucky girl.’ I must have a pee, I’m. . . bursting.”

For some reason, I add a Newfie accent to the word bursting (I am a Newfoundlander who’s lost her accent). I hear someone from the panel laugh.

“Can you read it again? This time, remember that you aren’t happy with your husband, you don’t love him. . . you’re also lusting after your friend’s new boyfriend,” Brenda Darling, the play’s director, and the woman who looked up at me.

I want so much to become Sylvia. I go back to a time when I was consumed with self-doubt: aha! My twenties. I was tree planting after graduating and living in a van. I remember the angst of feeling unfulfilled, imagining I had no potential.

Breathe. Read slowly. Remember my dad’s words: “You’re a natural.”

Round two. By now the paper is all wrinkled from my tight grip.

With my last phrase, I finally lift my eyes. “I’m bursting!”

“Thank you, Melanie.” That’s my signal to exit.

The music begins and the four of us follow the instructor — was it right or left toe tap first? Heel then toe? A 5-year-old could understand this but suddenly my legs are heavy. Dad’s words return: “You’re a natural. . . You’re a natural.”

Eventually, I relax. Straightening my shoulders and back, lifting my chin, I let the music take over. Soon I’m shuffling and tapping to the beat.

Again, it ends too quickly. By the time I get it, I hear, “Thank you everyone for coming.”

My body and brain are buzzing. I have that feeling when you’ve been up all night, talking to someone and falling in love. I’m wired and excited.

I don’t get the part, which I discover in an email, but I’m told I have good instincts and that, given time, I might be a convincing Sylvia. “But don’t be so nervous,” Darling writes.

I’ve “acted” in many contexts during my life: professor, instructor, guide, solo traveller and each of these gives me a little high: getting attention, making people laugh, making meaningful connections.

But being in the hot seat for only two minutes reawakened a desire only partially filled in these life roles. Performing is all at once and it’s exhilarating.

Melanie Chambers is spending her 43rd year trying new things. She will share some of them with readers in this occasional series.

