

**A Review of *Breaking It Down:  
Audition Techniques for Actors of the Global Majority.***

By Nicole Hodges Persley and Monica White Ndounou.

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(hardcover)

Nicole Hodges Persley, associate professor of American Studies and African American Studies at the University of Kansas, and Monica White Ndounou, associate professor of theater at Dartmouth College, dedicated *Breaking It Down: Audition Techniques for Actors of the Global Majority* in loving memory of Cicely Tyson, and that alone is enough encouragement to continue to read it. Like Ms. Tyson, this book is filled with truth and passion. This culturally specific guide offers simple steps that help college-level actors of the global majority navigate the (sometimes) racist territory of auditioning for theatre, television, and film. According to the authors, the purpose of this book is to help actors break it down, bring it, and book it (4).

Persley and Ndounou carefully define phrases that are consistently used throughout this book, including people of the global majority, actors of the global majority, and break it down. People of the Global Majority (PGM) is a collective term that centers black and brown individuals whose histories have often been devalued or ignored. The authors chose this particular term to further emphasize that 80% of the world's population is black, indigenous, and people of color (5). They also regularly use the acronym AGM, which stands for actors of the global majority. The authors fully embrace the Black vernacular in titling this book *Breaking It Down*, or in other words, making it plain (4).

*Breaking It Down* affirms the experiences of AGM who want their stories to be presented with cultural authenticity. This is achieved by decentering European approaches to acting and encouraging AGM to embrace what makes them unique, rather than universalities (4). Because the entertainment industry has been historically dominated by White men, racial stereotyping is prominent in all areas of production, including casting and directing. *Breaking It Down* suggests ways for AGM to be listened to, recognized, respected, and heard in ten inspiring and illuminating chapters. A listing of chapter titles with brief summaries is provided at the end of the introduction. Additionally, the reader will find exercises and journal prompts that help AGM prepare for the audition process at the end of each chapter.

Throughout the book, Persley and Ndounou emphasize the importance of learning how to recognize, negotiate, and ultimately overcome racist tropes and racially insensitive trappings. In the book's introduction, the story of actor Chadwick Boseman expressing his concern over the stereotyping of a Black character on the popular soap opera, *All My Children*, and questioning executives about this character, in hopes to humanize him by providing more depth, is shared. We learn that this questioning results in Boseman being fired from the soap opera. The opening

chapter of the book brings to light the need to center wellness by establishing **and** breaking boundaries; however, chapter two, *Tell The Truth*, makes clear that: “when your acting does not align with the stereotypical expectations, it may limit your ability to book the job” (16). Writers generally create characters based upon their own experiences, which can result in broad stereotypes that have no true connection to authentic racial identification. This is why these authors stress the importance of having personal boundaries and exercising self-care, even if it means passing on a role, in chapter one of the book. AGM are encouraged to always tell the truth, even the hard ones, about themselves, their abilities, and their characters (15).

In chapter three, *Read The Story, Not The Lines*, actors are encouraged to come prepared for auditions by following strategies outlined in this chapter, including understanding the medium, reading character descriptions, reading stage directions, looking to the dialogue of other characters who speak about the character, paying proper attention to punctuation, and knowing the beginning, middle, and end of the story (22). AGM are also advised to understand the importance of observing what the story is telling them. They must identify the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the story (23). Understanding all elements of the world that the character lives in, including environment, attitudes of the people, style of dress, and culture is critical if you want the casting director to give you the job.

In some cases, actors are only given sides, with no knowledge of what the story is about but their job is to be believable at audition time. What the actor has read from the sides has to be clear enough to perform a character having an authentic experience. Just knowing the lines will not give the actor an opportunity to convince the people they are auditioning for. In a two-to-six-minute scene, the actor must know that his or her character must contribute to the storytelling by understanding the situation they are in, living realistically in the character’s mind, and speaking the words from an honest emotional state from the viewpoint of that scene. This process is integral in allowing the audience to understand what the film, play, or television episode is about.

Chapters four to six offer a roadmap that leads the actor to pose probing questions and follow steps that will help develop realistic characters. These chapters highlight the necessity of playing the action, playing punctuation, identifying emotion, and understanding the world within which characters live. Just knowing the lines will not give the actor an opportunity to convince the director or casting director that they are right for the role they are auditioning for. The process that is laid out in these chapters is integral for the actor. Success results: “if you fully embrace the world the writer built...” (20).

Chapter seven titled *Understand the Social and Cultural Context Clues* takes note of the fact that “social and cultural clues are a part of our everyday lives” (46). All cultures have peculiarities that distinguish themselves from other cultures. This includes speech patterns, style of dress, societal attitudes, food choices that have been passed down by generations, dance

movements, as well as temperament. This chapter focuses heavily on worldview and how it shapes identity. Stories are an important part of who we are as people, but worldview shapes how we respond to social and culture clues: “just because you share a racial or class identification with the character does not mean that you understand their cultural experiences, sociohistorical circumstances, and social position” (46). In this chapter, the authors remark that it is important that actors make informed decisions about the work they choose to pursue, clearly distinguishing between their beliefs and the beliefs of their characters (47). Actors must be thorough in their research and investigation of the roles they are being asked to play. According to the writers, this is especially important if AGM are asked to play roles outside of their race/ethnicity (49).

I have witnessed many plays and films that cheat when it comes to historical accuracy. If a film or play is set in the 1800s, and a hip-hop dance number suddenly pops up out of nowhere, the audience gets lost in the storytelling. Because PGM stories are seldom authentically told, even when *we* are the ones who are writing, directing, and producing them, it is up to the actor to research the year of the setting, and to know the political climate of the era the story takes place in. Actors must also research the culture. Who was the President of the United States at that time? What were the top songs of the day? This may not speak to certain people, but the music of the time is reflected in the consciousness of the community. Songs like James Brown’s, *Say It Loud—I’m Black And I’m Proud* resonated in cities all over the United States. It uplifted people, made children stand tall, and the elderly smile in spiritual revelry that times are changing for the better. Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On?* is as timely today as it was in 1971. These are steps in understanding the social and cultural context clues of character development for actors who are Black and of the global majority. We must always be concerned and make ourselves aware of who we are in the world at any given time.

When the actor knows what they are portraying, what they are saying, and why they are saying it, they will strengthen the overall interpretation of the character. The lines will have more meaning when they are spoken because they are delivered with a purpose inside of a fictitious environment that is representative of a real-life experience.

Chapter eight asks the reader to *Face Stereotypes*. By calling attention to stereotypes and how they reveal power dynamics, the authors ask the reader to understand that they have the power to either embrace or reject said stereotype. Power is in the hands of the AGM who can choose to accept a stereotypical role or decline. This chapter pinpoints ways to identify and avoid stereotypes in performance (51). Chapters nine and ten offer useful tips on the self-tape and securing an agent or manger, including technical tips for recording, and a list of materials that must be submitted to agents and managers (59).

*Breaking It Down* is loaded with wonderful advice and historical references that support the actor’s journey in breaking down barriers that stem from racism, sexism, ageism, ableism,

etc. This book encourages AGM to know who they are and what they have to say as an artist. By focusing on obtaining personal self-knowledge, knowing their boundaries, being honest, and knowing all they need to know about the story and who the characters are, AGM learn how to safely create realistic characters for auditions. This book is important for actors because, like the teachings of Stanislavski and other esteemed theater artists of note, it is a guide to discover the fundamentals of creating *human* behavior and learning how to live in character at any given time in the story. This book shines a light on being who you ARE, telling YOUR story regardless of the material, because your success is in revealing the character to your audience to the extent that they can recognize and accept it as truthful. PGM stories are important, and it is necessary that they be told.

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