



The following was written by former Southern Chapter Guidlmaster, Alan Chudnow. It eloquently reflects his philosophy on casting roles in the Guild and serves as our general policy in these matters.

The second part, “An Addendum” addresses some concerns not raised in the “Notes”.

A Few Notes on Casting

by Alan Chudnow

Here are some of the guidelines and ground rules that I use when casting. It might help you to think about these when assessing a character to portray in St. George. The first thing to look at is how valuable is the part that is being cast. While it is true that parts like Countesses or Barons have a tendency to be more prominent and highly visible, the social rank of a character is not a good measure of how theatrically valuable that part is to the entire Guild. It is a common misconception that the higher rank the character is, the more valuable (and easier to play) the character is.

To be sure, there are intrinsically high profile roles. If an audience member knows anything at all about 16th century England they will probably expect to see and hear about certain characters while attending the Faire; characters like the Queen, Lord Leicester, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Sir Francis Drake. Those knowing anything about the Court of Elizabeth I will, likewise, expect to see a certain few characters like Baron Burghley, Sir Christopher Hatton, and Doctor Dee that are well known figures in Elizabeth’s court. They are high profile characters because they are popularly known. They are certainly higher profile than many other, higher ranking persons like, say, the Earl of Bedford or the Countess of Westmoreland.

However, equally important as the relatively few characters that would be missed were they not present, are the vast majority of parts that together create the illusion of the Elizabethan Court. Few customers will know the individual names of those living at that time, but every one knows that a Court is made up of Countesses, Barons, Knights, Ladies, and those who serve them. How then to judge a particular character’s value if the audience won’t care who’s who until they’re told? First, consider the entire composition of the Guild. The cast of St. George should be composed of the same pyramidal proportions as the real Court: a few high ranking Earls and Countesses supported by a larger number of Barons, Baronesses, Knights and Ladies, and all supported by an even larger group of personal retainers and household servants. Ask the question, “Does the ensemble need this character? Where on the pyramid does this character belong and is that the best place to add another role?”

Second, look at the history of the character to see if the most interesting part of the character’s life lends itself to theatrical portrayal. Just as today, each individual living in Elizabeth’s time is interesting in their own way. However, some offer greater theatrical opportunities than others. Try to assess those events in the characters life that are the most interesting and evaluate whether those events can be brought to the Faire stage.

Next, consider your strengths as an actor. Each role demands different skills and it is important to match the actor’s strengths and the role’s demands. Again, this has less to do with the character’s rank than it does with the prominence of the character. A role like Sir Francis Walsingham, though simply a knight, requires a more accomplished actor to be played properly than another character, who may be of higher rank, but is not as prominent on stage.

Another factor I consider when approving a part is whether the actor fits the role? Sir Philip Sydney was known as a tall, handsome, and commanding presence while Lord Burghley is always thought of as more elderly and clerkish. Can the actor credibly play the role?

If it's been determined that the part in question is worth casting and is the correct role for the actor in question, then it's time to look at what part of the character's life should be portrayed. For some characters this is a simple matter of picking out the most important events in the individual's life and centering around that. For others, whose life had several interesting junctures, I'll tend toward that period of the character's life which allows for the most theatrical interaction with other characters who are being portrayed in the Guild. It's always more interesting (and easier) to interact with another actor than to try and center a bit around someone who isn't there.

In the event that the actor auditioning isn't right for the role or, if the role itself is not right for the Guild at the time, then the solution is to try and find a different character for that actor to play. In my experience trying to shoehorn an actor into a role that is not suitable with the expectation that "it can be fixed later", is rarely successful. It's a situation that is usually not satisfying for both the actor and audience.

Finally, the following should be noted. We, as a Guild, strive to portray the Court of Elizabeth I in a fashion that is both believable and theatrically entertaining. As such, it is incumbent upon me to choose those actors and roles which can best achieve that goal. Not every actor is the best choice. Not every role is the best choice. And it may be that not every actor who has worked in the Guild in the past is the best choice to be asked to reprise their role. Each year provides its own mix of people with a wide variety of talent, and every year each actor must be evaluated in light of past performance and current need. It is each actor's ability to portray a valuable character, keep the audience interested, and help fellow actors succeed that make them a valuable member of the Guild deserving of being invited back each year.

An Addendum

The Northern chapter of Guild of St. George, Inc. performs at several different events throughout the year, most of them far-flung in various parts of the state. Due to the expense and time required to travel to these shows and the demands of modern life, not all of our members are able to perform at every one of them.

Since this is the case, it may be necessary for us to allow the double-casting certain roles, especially in cases where the audience may recognize the character as an integral part of the history connected to Elizabeth I. We ask for your understanding and flexibility in these matters. No one performer "owns" a role and we are not obligated to ask anyone previously cast in a role whether or not another performer may play "their" role.

Furthermore, casting priority will be given to regular, active participants; ie: those who regularly attend rehearsals and performances and demonstrate enthusiasm and skill. We are a theatrical troupe which requires regular training in order to maintain our skills and our sense of ensemble. To hold a role "closed" because an inactive member who has played the role in the past may wish to show up at a performance at some point is not fair to those who put in the time and effort.

Members new to the group will be asked to occupy roles of service (grooms, maids, gentleman/woman waiters, etc.) in order to acclimate the performer to the complex world of manners, family alliances and politics which is the court of Elizabeth. It also requires less of a costuming burden and allows the directors to observe the performer's abilities. It is a "training wheel" period which may last a couple of seasons, and tends to eliminate those who have joined the group with the intent of merely wearing "the pretty suit", rather than those with an honest interest in our theatrical aims.

In no way should anyone be led to believe that a servant character is any less important to the ensemble than one of higher station. In order to portray the entire spectrum of people who made up the court, both servant and served need to be present. Many performers find their niche playing these much needed characters and remain in them for the entirety of their time with the group. There are no small characters. The scope of a role is limited only by the imagination and skill of the performer.

In time the directors may decide to cast a performer in a more focal “lead” role, suitable to his/her ability. I urge you to see the notes below, which are posted in the “Members” area of the St. George website. They reflect our general working philosophy on these matters.

In the interests of building our cast, in some cases, we may welcome performers from other troupes who have been used to playing particular roles and allow them to retain them. This is done on a provisional basis while we assess their suitability of the performer for the role.

I hope this clears up our policy and dispels any misconceptions.

Rydell Downward
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