# VOICES FROM THE ATTIC

Audition Character Guide

**For actors:** You are not expected to look the age of your character. We are looking for actors who can create age, time period, relationships and emotional truth through voice, posture, movement and characterization. Historical costumes, hair and makeup will help establish the different eras.

## 1995 - The Discovery

### NATE

**1995 | Male | Playing age: 30s | Very large role | approx. 115 lines**

A curator for the New York State Museum and the central character of the play. Nate begins as a professional doing a job, but the suitcases gradually become personal to him. The audience watches him move from curiosity to a determination that the people represented by the suitcases will not simply disappear.

**Acting challenge:** Strong storyteller; intelligent, natural and emotionally controlled. Excellent memorization and concentration are important. Nate should not begin overly sentimental - the change needs somewhere to go.

**Costume direction:** Mid-1990s professional/casual: khakis or trousers, button-down shirt, practical shoes, perhaps rolled sleeves.

**Great fit for:** Best for an actor who wants a major dramatic role and enjoys subtle emotional progression.

### BARBARA

**1995 | Female | Playing age: 50s-60s | Major role | approx. 54 lines**

A longtime Willard employee who has worked there for 32 years. Practical, warm and quietly perceptive, Barbara carries decades of memories of the institution. She often understands what Nate is feeling before he does.

**Acting challenge:** Grounded and mature, with excellent listening skills. Much of Barbara's effectiveness comes from reactions and stillness rather than big emotion.

**Costume direction:** Simple 1990s workplace clothing: slacks, blouse, cardigan or sweater and comfortable shoes.

**Great fit for:** Best for an actor who excels at quiet humor, reactions and understated emotional acting.

### LIZ

**1995 | Female | Playing age: 30s-40s | Major role | approx. 58 lines**

Handles logistics during Willard's closure. Liz is capable, quick and wry. She brings some lighter energy to the present-day scenes, but she is more sentimental than she initially lets everyone see.

**Acting challenge:** Strong timing, confidence and personality. Needs good chemistry with Nate and Barbara and the ability to shift naturally from humor into sincerity.

**Costume direction:** 1990s office/work clothing: trousers, blouse or sweater, practical shoes; a clipboard or folder may help establish her job.

**Great fit for:** Best for an actor who likes witty characters but also wants genuine dramatic material.

## 1898-1911 - The People Behind the Suitcases

### MARY WARK

**1903 | Female | Adult | Featured dramatic role | approx. 26 lines**

Harold's wife. Mary has withdrawn almost completely from the people around her and speaks very little except when something threatens the belongings she has carefully packed. Her silence is part of the role, not an absence of acting.

**Acting challenge:** Extremely expressive without overacting. Comfortable with silence and able to make small movements, looks and reactions meaningful.

**Costume direction:** Modest working-class 1903 clothing: long skirt, high-neck blouse, cardigan or shawl, sturdy shoes; simple period hair.

**Great fit for:** An actor who loves serious character work and can hold an audience without speaking.

## HAROLD WARK

**1903 | Male | Adult | Featured role | approx. 31 lines**

Mary's husband and a logger. Plainspoken, hardworking and deeply devoted to Mary. He is not sending her away because he does not want her; he has reached the painful point where he no longer knows how to help.

**Acting challenge:** Tenderness without melodrama. Harold's strength, exhaustion, love and helplessness need to exist at the same time.

**Costume direction:** Working-class 1903: work trousers, suspenders, simple shirt, boots and possibly worn outerwear.

**Great fit for:** An actor who wants an emotional role centered on relationships and difficult choices.

## CATHERINE

**1903 | Female | Adult | Supporting role | approx. 15 lines**

Mary's sister. Catherine is talkative, anxious and loving. Silence makes her uncomfortable, so she fills it - but underneath all those words is fear for her sister.

**Acting challenge:** Energetic and expressive with strong conversational timing. She should feel loving rather than merely 'talkative.'

**Costume direction:** Modest early-1900s dress or skirt and blouse, with a coat or hat where appropriate.

**Great fit for:** An actor who wants a smaller role with personality and clear choices.

## THOMAS NORTON

**1898-1899 | Male | Young adult | Major dramatic role | approx. 66 lines**

A Spanish-American War veteran. Before the war Thomas is witty, affectionate and deeply in love with Eleanor. Afterward, he is haunted and desperately searching for control. The audience must still recognize the same man underneath the change.

**Acting challenge:** One of the show's biggest transformations. Requires dramatic range without relying on stereotypes or cliches about trauma.

**Costume direction:** Late-1890s civilian/travel clothing at first; period military or returning-veteran influences later. Trousers, shirt, vest or jacket and period outerwear.

**Great fit for:** An actor who wants a substantial dramatic challenge and enjoys building a visible transformation.

## ELEANOR (COOPER) NORTON

**1898-1899 | Female | Young adult | Major role | approx. 48 lines**

Thomas's wife, training to become a nurse. Eleanor is playful, intelligent and steady. Before Thomas leaves, their relationship has warmth and teasing. After his return, she tries to reach the man she loves without pretending everything is fine.

**Acting challenge:** A strong scene partner with warmth, humor and emotional depth. Eleanor should never become simply 'the worried wife.'

**Costume direction:** Late-1890s skirt and blouse or dress, practical rather than wealthy; details may subtly suggest her nursing ambitions.

**Great fit for:** An actor who likes relationship-driven acting and wants both lighter and emotionally difficult scenes.

## AUGUST BAUER

**1911 | Male | Playing age: 73 | Featured character role | approx. 10 lines**

A German immigrant and retired carpenter/furniture maker who has suffered a stroke. He speaks little English and finds himself in a place where few people understand him. He is a skilled craftsman, a proud father and a man suddenly losing control over his own life.

**Acting challenge:** Strong physical acting. Must communicate through gesture, expression and limited dialogue, with careful work on German pronunciation and age movement. August must never become a caricature.

**Costume direction:** 1911 working man's clothing: trousers, suspenders or vest, simple shirt, worn jacket and sturdy shoes.

**Great fit for:** An actor who loves transformation, physical characterization and making a memorable role from few lines.

## ONNA

**1911 | Female | Adult | Supporting/featured role | approx. 18 lines**

August's daughter. Devoted, practical and protective, she tries to help her father navigate a system and language he does not understand - without fully realizing that he is also trying to protect her.

**Acting challenge:** Warm, grounded and emotionally available, with believable father/daughter chemistry.

**Costume direction:** Practical 1911 dress or skirt and blouse, coat or hat; modest working-family clothing.

**Great fit for:** An actor who wants a smaller but emotionally meaningful role.

## ATTENDANT

**1911 | Any gender | Supporting role | approx. 14 lines**

A Willard staff member dealing with August and Onna. The Attendant is not a villain; the character is trying to be kind while working within institutional rules and a significant language barrier.

**Acting challenge:** Subtext and restraint. The interesting tension is a person who may mean well while participating in a system that removes another person's control.

**Costume direction:** Simple early-1900s institutional staff clothing.

**Great fit for:** A character actor who wants a manageable role with more complexity than the line count suggests.

## NURSE

**1903 | Any gender | Small character role | approx. 7 lines**

The staff member who admits Mary to Willard. Brisk and procedural, but not cruel. What is life-changing for Mary and Harold is, for the Nurse, part of the institution's routine.

**Acting challenge:** Clear characterization in a short amount of stage time; professional efficiency without becoming cold or villainous.

**Costume direction:** Early-1900s nursing/institutional attire, historically suggested rather than elaborate.

**Great fit for:** An actor who wants a smaller speaking role and enjoys creating a distinct character quickly.

## ADMINISTRATOR

**Historical institutional world | Any gender | Small supporting role**

A representative of the institution and its rules. Professional and matter-of-fact rather than sinister.

**Acting challenge:** Strong presence, clear voice, authority and restraint.

**Costume direction:** Conservative period institutional/business clothing appropriate to the scene.

**Great fit for:** An actor who can enter and immediately establish authority.

## ORDERLY

**Historical institutional world | Any gender | Small supporting role**

A Willard staff member whose physical presence helps establish the reality of institutional life.

**Acting challenge:** Physical storytelling and restraint. Presence is more important than playing the character as threatening.

**Costume direction:** Simple period institutional work clothing or uniform.

**Great fit for:** An actor who wants a smaller role but enjoys movement and stage presence.

## CONDUCTOR

**1898 | Any gender | 1 line | May be doubled or offstage**

A very small role connected with Thomas's departure. This line can be covered by another actor or crew member and does not need to be cast as a stand-alone role.

**Acting challenge:** Clear vocal characterization in a single moment.

**Costume direction:** Period railway suggestion if visible; otherwise may be an offstage voice.

**Great fit for:** An actor already playing another smaller role.

## ENSEMBLE

**Any gender | Flexible number | Appears across the story**

The Ensemble is much more than 'people who move suitcases.' Ensemble actors help create the physical world of the play, assist with suitcase movement and packing, support transitions, and can become the visual representation of the hundreds of lives behind the collection.

**Acting challenge:** Strong movement, focus, discipline, facial expression and stillness. Ensemble actors must understand that being silent or motionless onstage is still acting.

**Costume direction:** Neutral, muted base clothing that can live beside both time periods without pulling focus. Individual period touches may be added for visual storytelling.

**Great fit for:** Actors who enjoy physical theatre, visual storytelling and creating powerful stage pictures.

## Doubling & Multiple Roles

Depending on the number of students who audition, actors may be cast in **two or more roles**. Supporting actors may also appear as members of the Ensemble. Because the play moves between 1898-1911 and 1995, doubling can work especially well: costume pieces, posture, voice and physical characterization can make the same actor appear to be completely different people.

| Actor track | Possible roles | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| Nate | Nate only | Too large and central to double. |
| Barbara | Barbara only | A major part of the 1995 spine; best kept separate. |
| Liz | Liz only | Major present-day role; best kept separate. |
| Thomas | Thomas only | Large role with a major emotional transformation. |
| Mary | Mary only | Her visual identity and suitcase are too important to blur. |
| Harold / August | Harold + August | Excellent contrast in age, physicality, voice and personality. |
| Catherine / Onna | Catherine + Onna | Strong doubling possibility; two very different family relationships. |
| Eleanor | Eleanor only if cast size allows | Could double if necessary, but her role is substantial enough to keep separate. |
| Attendant / Administrator | Attendant + Administrator | Natural character-role doubling. |
| Nurse / Orderly | Nurse + Orderly | Easy to distinguish through costume, voice and physicality. |
| Conductor | Any smaller-role actor | Only one line; can also be an offstage voice. |
| Ensemble | Smaller-role actors as needed | Supporting actors can join the Ensemble whenever they are not playing a named role. |

## Possible Smaller-Cast Tracks

**Actor A:** Harold / August
**Actor B:** Catherine / Onna / Ensemble
**Actor C:** Attendant / Administrator / Ensemble
**Actor D:** Nurse / Orderly / Conductor / Ensemble

## A Note About Role Size

There are no unimportant roles in this production. Nate carries the greatest memorization burden; Thomas has one of the largest transformations; Mary has relatively few lines but requires exceptionally strong silent acting; August is a physical character challenge; Barbara and Liz require excellent listening and chemistry; and the Ensemble helps create the visual images that hold the entire production together.

Students should audition for the **show**, not only for one specific role. You may indicate roles you are especially interested in, but final casting will be based on what creates the strongest overall company. An actor cast in a smaller named role may receive additional characters and/or Ensemble work.