

Extra-Ordinarily Fundamental

Being an extra can be a great life—or a steppingstone—for an actor.

Before many Hollywood somebodies were anybody, they were extras. In 1987 a fresh-faced actor from Missouri, one Brad Pitt, was an extra in *Less Than Zero*, starring Robert Downey Jr. *Field of Dreams* saw Ben Affleck and Matt Damon cheering in the crowd at Fenway Park long before they earned Oscar gold for *Good Will Hunting*. Even Cuban President Fidel Castro, as a young man in 1946, was an extra for *Holiday in Mexico*.

On July 5, Back Stage West spent the day with On Location Casting owner Tina Kerr and more than 300 extras on the set of *Cougar Club*, a new film starring Carrie Fisher (*Star Wars II*), *Smallville*, *Family Guy*) and Kaley Cuoco (*Charmed*, *8 Simple Rules*). According to Kerr—whose 80-plus casting credits include *Coach Carter*, *Anger Management*, *13 Going on 30*, *Pearl Harbor*, *The Waterboy*, and *Titanic*, as well as this year's *Freedom Writers* and *Gridiron Gang*—in the background, no one is just a background actor. "A lot of the older people do it for socialization, [and] the younger people come because they want to be famous," she says. "They all want to be movie stars."

Anyone can be a movie star—for a few seconds. Extras, or "background actors," work in nearly every film, television program, and commercial made in the industry. Their images are often blurry or out of focus as they cross the camera or fill out a crowd scene, but for many future Oscar winners—or even a Cuban dictator—background work can lay a foundation for a career.

The typical way to get started working in the background is by registering with an extras casting company, to be kept on file or to be submitted for a particular project. Burbank's Central Casting is the largest extras casting company, but Kerr advises that if a person seriously wants to work in the industry, it's best to also submit pictures to the smaller companies. "I prefer snapshots or a Polaroid, because anybody can go and have hair and make-up done and get a professional picture, and then they show up at my check-in table and look nothing at all like that person or character," she says.

Registration fees, if any, are usually around \$25 and cover the company's operational costs, including picture submissions to directors. All submissions should include the actor's contact information, union status, skills such as musical or athletic ability, and vehicle information. Back-

ground actors should know their height, weight, measurements (not dress sizes), and shoe size. Men should also know their inseam and neck measurement.

Kerr says that because the roles don't have lines, having "the look" is most the important thing background casting directors are interested in. Dressing the part is crucial for all background actors to not only book the part but also to work steadily. "You don't need to spend a lot of money. Just be versatile," she says, noting that actors interested in investing in their career should "definitely have upscale clothing, a business-professional upscale look. It's always hard to find people who have that look, and it's easier to dress you down than it is to dress you up. Have at least one good suit, business attire, and [for women] maybe even a fancy party dress. Have that ability [to look the part], and from there you can go anywhere."

Actor Jonathan Conrad hopes that working in the background will lead to opportunities in the spotlight. "[On set] you meet amazing directors and work with really good actors. Let's just say you're sitting with Tom Hanks: You guys could have a conversation [while] you're just sitting waiting for the scene to start. You can ask advice if you're ballsy," says the 23-year-old Conrad.

He isn't alone. Model and actor Christopher Alexander, 24, a native of Lansing, Mich., came to Hollywood looking for on-set experience. "I did background on one film, [and] I was there pretty much every day, and it opened up an opportunity for me to meet with some of the producers," he says. "I think it's a good way to introduce you to the business, [and it] gives me insight on what goes on."

Orange County real estate agent Scott Craig says background has given him a chance at a new career. "I wanted to see what this was like. I love the industry," he says. "I'm going to make a go of it now. I'd like to get more into infomercials because I've been public-speaking for quite a few years, [and] it's more along the corporate lines where I came from."



PHOTOS BY NICOLE PORTER



Christopher Alexander and Sayuri Meackawa on the set of *Cougar Club*; Tina Kerr, below



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Road to Stardom?

Actors Ro Johnson of Madrid, Spain, and Sayuri Meackawa of Osaka, Japan, are proof positive that Hollywood's film and television industry attracts people from all over the world. Like many young people, Johnson sees background as a steppingstone to further her professional career. "I'd like to work my way up. It seems like there's a system where you put in your time as a background actor and then eventually you climb the rungs of the ladder to a smaller part," she notes.

Meackawa, a college student, was an actor in her native country and hopes to use the experience to learn more about the film industry. "I love acting. I used to act in Japan, [but, for the United States] I have a strong accent," she says. "I

started acting when I was a kid and will continue forever."

Nonunion actors such as Meackawa must join the Screen Actors Guild to be eligible for larger parts in television and film. Union status also has the added benefit of a higher base rate of \$118 for eight hours versus the nonunion rate of \$54. According to SAG eligibility guidelines, actors must have had either three days of union-covered employment as a background actor or have one day of principal work to qualify for Guild membership. For every project, SAG reserves 45 film and 15 television background spots for Guild members.

According to Kerr, there are only two good ways a nonunion actor can get union vouchers. "The good reasons are special ability [and] we couldn't find a SAG member to do it, or a SAG person didn't show up," she says. "Be hungry, assertive, but not aggressive. And [become] familiar with the casting person and be respectful. So many times when I have vouchers to give, I'll remember somebody who was always there [and] always did what was asked of them. The worst thing to do if you're nonunion is to call up and say, 'Well, I'll only do it if I can get a voucher.' In my mind that makes me say, 'You will never get a voucher,' because you're not willing to work as a nonunion person—[which] you are—and you come in with these demands. It makes it hard for me to bypass people who are willing to put in the effort."

As jobs go, background acting is pretty laid-back, but unprofessional behavior can run an otherwise interesting experience. "It takes a lot to be kicked off set, but having a bad attitude is a start. If you come here complaining and it gets to a certain point, it's enough," says Kerr. "Being abusive, overly aggressive, not following directions. I'm really patient and really tolerant. I try to be really accommodating with people, but there's a certain point where if you push things a little too far you have to expect to be sent home."

Real-life experience can pay in spades for background actors. Gregg Houser, who was in the Navy for 20 years and is now a retired lawyer, was bumped up from background to a recurring supporting role on the CBS drama *NCIS* due to his military experience. "I think it had to do with military and the attitude," says Houser. "I'm retired. It's something to get me out rather than sitting watching the boob tube."

Houser isn't the only one to get such a bump. On the set of her most recent film, Kerr explains that speaking lines for background are reality, not just a Hollywood urban myth. "A lot of the people that I have cast do end up getting upgraded, just because a lot of the stuff that I do is really hands-on," says Kerr. "In *Freedom Writers* we picked a group of 25 students in extensive auditions just to get these kids who didn't have lines at all, but my director wanted to know that if the opportunity presented itself and he felt like saying, 'Hey, you, say this,' we had put together a group of people who could do that. So it's not just sending bodies; it's creating the atmosphere."

All in a Day's (Hard) Work

Background isn't just for future ingenues and fledgling producers; everyone can get into the act. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the film *The Pursuit of Happiness*, starring Will Smith, enlisted 200 homeless and poor people as extras to star in a skid row scene. Renée Stella Hertzberg says background has been her opportunity to get out and rub elbows with celebrities. Recently she was a featured extra in New Line Cinema's *Mr. Woodcock*, starring Susan Sarandon. "Seeing her up close was just wonderful. She's lovely. I go see almost everything she's in," says Hertzberg.

Searching for the spotlight can be daunting, but it's not impossible. Kerr offers this advice to anyone chasing Hollywood dreams: "Don't let anybody tell you that you can't be 'it' or can't do whatever it is that you want to do. Just be willing to work really hard and not give up. So many people come in and give up before anything has really happened because they expect it to happen so fast. Do your research; knock on as many doors as you possibly can. Even if it gets slammed in your face, keep that person as a contact and try again in a couple weeks. Keep your contact list big, and don't be afraid to ask people for help." <