

Lights, Camera, Action! is designed to provide aspiring actors an insider's view of the very competitive industry of background acting. It's intended to give readers a leg up in their quest to "break a leg". Former background casting director of "The Sopranos" gives you a look inside what goes into background casting.

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**A Former Casting Director for *The Sopranos*
Helps Actors Break into the Film Industry**

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CHAPTER 2: WHO WANTS TO DO BACKGROUND WORK?

Quite simply: no one. However, as an actor, you must understand that every actor trying to break into the business starts out as a background actor. You need to start somewhere, right? If you do not have a close relative in the business who is a well-known actor, director, or producer, you, as with most other actors, must start some place. It is equally important to accept the old cliché of crawling before you walk, walking before you run, and running before you win your Oscar.

Most actors who become famous started out in this business accepting background work. It's fun to spot actors in their earliest film work when they were still unknowns. Brad Pitt performed as an extra in *Less Than Zero*, starring Robert Downey Jr. John Turturro appeared in *Raging Bull* as a background extra actor. Did you know that Burt Reynolds was spotted in *Mister Roberts*, while Jack Nicholson was "discovered" in the mailroom of MGM? In addition, Jennifer Lopez started out as a backup dancer for Janet Jackson. *Field of Dreams* saw Ben Affleck and Matt Damon cheering in the stands at Fenway Park long before they hit Oscar gold with *Good Will Hunting*. Bruce Willis toiled as a bartender while trying to get acting work, and began with uncredited appearances in *The First Deadly Sin* and *The Verdict*. His big break finally came when he was chosen from among three thousand hopefuls to co-star with Cybill Shepherd in the television series *Moonlighting*. The list goes on and on, but did you get my point? Whether you realize it or not, background work is very important to any actor's career. This is a hard business, but you need to stay in it if you want to win at it. If this is what you want, then do it. Success can happen at a moment's notice.

When you are on set as a background actor, it is your responsibility to observe the director, listen to the assistant director, and watch the cinematography and how the principal actors block their scenes. Today you are a background extra actor, tomorrow you may be a principal. Let me share with you some of the benefits as to why every actor should do background work.

As an actor doing background work, you are on the set with the director, the producers, the assistant directors, the technical support personnel, and the stars. There you are on the set, you are in it, and you are a part of the entire production. Suddenly, you will hear the voice of the first assistant director: "Quiet on the set!" At that moment, you could hear a pin drop, and then you will hear the director's voice: "Lights! Camera! Action!" Your whole body will tense up and you will get butterflies in your stomach as you listen, watch, and react to what is going on around you. How exciting! You are in the moment of the scene as an actor. Next, you will hear the director say, "Cut!" The first assistant director will then say, "Everyone back to one." At that moment, you let out a sigh of relief and get ready to repeat the process. This time, perhaps, adjusting your own subtle changes to the scene within your own performance.

I could not possibly enumerate how many times when I was an aspiring actor, I found myself standing right next to the principal star of the film, watching them, studying them. Once, when I was working on *Sleepers* as an extra background actor, I went to the lunch line for a bite to eat, turned around to look for my friend, and looked into the eyes of Brad Pitt standing right behind me. Oh my God! I nearly lost it. We looked at one another, and he smiled and said, "Hello." Suddenly, I forgot how to speak the English language; quickly attempting to compose myself, I responded "Hello" in return. The same held true when I was working as an extra background actor on *Nick of Time*, starring Johnny Depp, Courtney Chase, Christopher Walken, Roma Maffia, Peter Strauss, Marsha Mason, Gloria Reuben, and Charles Dutton. That was quite a talented cast. I worked on that film in Los Angeles over the course of three weeks. Johnny and I crossed one

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another's path on set many times. During breaks, we would engage in conversations about the business.

One day Johnny shared with me that he had never really wanted to become an actor. I was shocked! Johnny is a musician and his first love is his music. However, destiny has a way of changing the course of our lives without warning. One day, over a cup of coffee, he went on to share a very interesting story with me. His friend Nicholas Cage had told him about an open audition that was being held at Paramount for a new series called *21 Jump Street*. The role called for a hip young detective. At first, he was apprehensive because he thought, "What the heck do I know about acting?" But he decided to go anyway, and guess what happened? He got the role. On that day, Johnny Depp's life changed forever. If this can happen to him, this can also happen to you.

I had always admired Johnny's work and really felt that he looks deep into his soul to come up with characters that are rare and unique. I felt he really understood the art of acting. I was able to share that thought with him because I observed his work while I was on set as a background extra actor. I was going to graduate from college the following month, so I related stories about my college plays. Johnny was genuinely interested in hearing about them. One day, I asked him what character he felt was most true to himself; his most beloved character, the one he related to most. He said that it was Edward in *Edward Scissorhands*. We spoke about why he felt so close to Edward, and I listened as Johnny continued to elaborate his thoughts and I understood his feelings. Subsequent to our conversation, when I saw the film a second time I could see this raw emotion in his performance.

So, accepting background extra work can be a big opportunity for you as an actor. While you are on set, study the stars, observe their performance, and take what you can from them to embellish your own career. Listen to the way they say their lines and observe their tics and subtle expressions as they give their performance. Upon reflection, you may ask yourself questions like: would I have done the scene that way? Perhaps you learned something. Keep it; take it with you. One day, you

may be able to use a similar phrase in your performance. You can also witness which of the stars are relaxed before their scenes, and who then becomes their character as soon as the lights are on. Conversely, study the ones who are in full character behind the lights and who walk into their scene as their character. When I worked on *Nick of Time*, I observed Christopher Walken jumping in place right before he went on camera. I thought he had to use the men's room but he was really just hyping himself for his scene. On the set of *The Sopranos*, I saw James Gandolfini standing off to the side quietly listening for his cue, coming into character, and suddenly walking into the scene as the strong-willed Tony Soprano. Tony Sirico, who plays Paulie "Walnuts" Gualtieri on *The Sopranos*, would joke around with everyone before he went into his scene. However, once he walked in, he was stone-faced Paulie "Walnuts." Edie Falco was always herself before filming her scenes. As soon as her nails were put on, she became Carmela Soprano. So, there is much to learn on set. It is just like many of the acting classes you attend as an actor, only here, as an extra background actor, it is on-the-job training. You are being paid to watch the brilliance of these stars, who have started out as background actors—just like you. Please keep that in mind, because I cannot emphasize this point enough.

Working as an extra background actor, you can evaluate each department on the set. As in my case, perhaps one day you may decide that working in front of the camera is not something you really want to do any longer. If you are on set working as a background actor, you can evaluate each department that makes up the entire production team. Perhaps you have an interest in directing, producing, writing, set design, wardrobe, casting, or another behind-the-scenes vocation. Working as a background actor allows you to make great contacts should you decide to move into another area of the business. It enables you to witness how the whole film crew operates on a daily basis, as well as listen to the buzz on what is happening around town. As an extra cast member, you are a part of the entire production team. This is an honor. Moreover, never forget, you just might be in the right place at the right time. Suddenly, your life can change forever. As an actor, always be prepared for that "right time."

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As mentioned, an additional benefit for doing extra background work is that most actors can obtain their Screen Actors Guild (SAG) card. There are three ways for a non-union actor to get union vouchers. The most popular way would be for special ability, which means that production needs an actor with a very specific talent, and they cannot find it among the SAG actors. For example, if a non-SAG actor possesses a specific talent and is privileged to be hired for that talent, that actor would receive a SAG voucher for the day. Another way to obtain additional SAG vouchers on set is if a SAG actor does not show up for work, hence, that actor would be listed as a no-show. For example, casting directors are required by SAG to meet a certain number of SAG actors for the day. That number varies on television and film. There are times when emergencies happen and a SAG actor will cancel after midnight for a 5:00 a.m. call time. If the casting director cannot find a SAG replacement at that time, they can “waiver” a non-SAG actor into the SAG spot for the day. If you receive three SAG vouchers, you are eligible to join the Screen Actors Guild. You must save your copy of the voucher, which is called a “waiver,” and present it to SAG when joining. Lastly, you can obtain an additional voucher when you receive an “actor upgrade” as a non-SAG actor. These situations arise daily.

Another benefit for accepting background extra work is to be cast as a “stand-in” for principal actors. A stand-in is someone who resembles the main principal actor in height, weight, body type, and hair color. They can stand-in for the principal for whatever adjustments the lighting team must effect in order to properly shoot the scene. The majority of my first-year stand-ins for *The Sopranos* remained my stand-ins through the fifth season. Many actors feel they may lock themselves into stand-in work and not be considered for anything else. However, it can be rewarding to become friendly with one of the series regulars, as a friend and as a professional. To that extent, when they go onto their next job, their stand-in goes along with them, and the principal can recommend them for a part in the production. Both background work and stand-in work are great steps forward in getting your foot in the door, and can lead to bigger and better opportunities.

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