STRAIGHT OUT OF CENTRAL CASTING

For thousands of EXTRAS, the gibe is real. This showbiz institution is still Hollywood's turnstile, a gateway to the screen since 1926 by JESSE KATZ

ONE OF THE OLDEST RITUALS IN Hollywood renews itself every morning in Burbank, on a dead-end industrial street, halfway between the train station and the municipal recycling plant. It is an institution so mythical, so heavy with metaphor and cliché, that you could be forgiven if you doubted that it was still around—or that it ever existed. At 10:30, for exactly one hour, the doors swing open to 220 South Flower, a charmless two-story warehouse made of concrete slabs and smoked glass. The name on the facade reads like a Johnny Carson punch line.

Eighty years after it was founded by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Central Casting is the largest employment agency in the entertainment industry. It is part launching pad and part safety net, a lark, a dream, a minimum-wage job, a delusion. Central Casting never advertises. Yet for a $25 processing fee, close to 100 people a day, nearly 500 a week, thousands upon thousands every year, line up for the opportunity to register, adding their photos to the agency's seemingly infinite database of shapes and sizes and looks. (Nobody knows for sure how many names are on the Central Casting rolls; whenever someone has tried to count, the computer system has crashed.) Each morning brings more models and bodybuilders, ingenues, mooks, punks, surfers, and gangstas, along with retirees, immigrants, the occasional transient, and assorted exiles from the 9-to-5 world. One day you see a Los Angeles garbageman, still in his orange Sanitation Department uniform. Another day you find yourself staring at a knock-kneed waif in a biker jacket and miniskirt, snapping gum behind her sunglasses. Some are starry-eyed, some merely rudderless. Most have come with something to prove, if only to themselves. "Everyone thinks I'm crazy," says Raquel Giddings, a 28-year-old medical claims adjuster from Brooklyn with the cheekbones of an African queen. In October she quit her job, dumped her boyfriend, and took off for Hollywood. She was at Central Casting within a week. "If I fail, at least I tried," she says. "I've wanted to do this my whole life."

Central Casting is in the business of extras, also known as atmosphere or background actors—and less flatteringly, as body props, set dressing, and spear carriers. These are the uncredited, nonspeaking roles that decorate almost every movie and TV show, from barroom regulars to battleground corpses, the suits of *The West Wing* to the ponytailed swordsmen of *The Last Samurai*. As a labor force, they are essential to the art. They add scale and scope, color and texture. They are the human palette of a celluloid painting. As individuals, they are expendable. There are no qualifications to get in the door. No talent or experience is required. Being an extra is the theatrical equivalent of selling blood: What matters is not you but your type. It is hard to think of a field more superficial—or more democratic. If you fit the description, you can become a paid actor overnight, taking direction from a Spielberg, sharing a stage with the stars of *CSI* or *Desperate Housewives*. "It's like being a kid in a candy store," says Adam Sears, a singer-songwriter from Chicago who registered with Central Casting three years ago. "You're around all these people you admire, people you want to be. You sort of think to yourself, 'I could do that.'" The roster of celebrities who got their start at Central Casting, from Ronald Reagan and Ava Gardner to Brad Pitt and Kelly Clarkson, is long enough to keep the hopeful streaming in. So many are welcomed—Central Casting turns away nobody with proper identification—precisely because so many lose heart.

WHEN THE CENTRAL CASTING BUREAU WAS created on January 25, 1926, Hollywood was in the midst of a gold rush, deluged with romantics and gamblers from every corner of a movie-struck nation. Technology was ushering in an era not just of mass entertainment but of entertainment that required masses to help make it. An estimated 30,000 extras had descended on the city, a mob that swarmed the studios, huddling in outdoor interview yards like refugees, hoping to catch a director's eye. The chaos was exploited by fly-by-night employment agencies and dubious acting schools, which introduced young ladies to the perils of the casting couch. With so many would-be starlets running off to be in pictures, L.A. had become, according to a pulp magazine of the day, the "Port of Missing Girls."

To placate moralists—who were loudly assailing the movie industry's libertine ways, on screen and off—Hollywood agreed to regulate the hiring of extras, establishing a clearinghouse that would be jointly owned by all nine studios. Central Casting soon became a landmark, the Ellis Island for generations of anonymous vaudevillians and cowboys and showgirls. Housed on the third floor of a Louis B. Mayer building at Hollywood and Western, it claimed to be the largest temp agency in the world, filling an average of 800 background parts a day. Its phone number, GArfield-3711, was said to be the busiest, receiving 6,500 calls during a two-hour window every afternoon. Trying to get through was part of an extra's routine, a finger-numbing chore in the age of the rotary dial. There were roughly 16 actors for every job available. The math did not favor a paycheck. "Do you understand figures?" demanded a poster in Central Casting, which often tried to discourage new applicants.

With the decline of the studio system Hollywood lost its incentive to maintain an in-house employment bureau. Central Casting was sold off in 1976 and eventually bought by Entertainment Partners, a payroll and management conglomerate. Other agencies now compete

REGISTRATION HOUR: A hundred extras sign up every day at Central Casting

with it, but Central Casting remains Hollywood's primary source of casual labor, supplying nearly 90 percent of the TV market, according to the company, and as many as half of all features. Its name has also evolved into something of a banality, a writer's device for signaling both idealization and ridicule. Everyone from Osama bin Laden and Manuel Noriega to Tiger Woods and Bill Gates, not to mention George W. Bush, John Kerry, Jack and Jackie Kennedy, John Gotti, Ted Turner, and Secretariat, has been deemed the stuff of Central Casting. "I get an alert from Google every time the term is used," says Franklyn Warren, Central Casting's vice president for television. "Most of the time, it never even refers to us."

To register at Central Casting is to cross an almost mystical threshold, to make the leap from audience to participant. It brings out the vain and the ambitious, the bored and the curious, the unemployable and the desperate. There is always a surge in January, when New Year's resolutions are fresh; another, whenever a reality series comes to an end. Because nobody is recruited, most share an earnestness—a faith that Hollywood will see something in them worth immortalizing, even if only for a second. "I'm not much of an actress," says Joanne-Kristine Lacap, a slender L.A. Fitness clerk with a SWEET & TOXIC T-shirt knotted at her navel. "But everyone always tells me, 'You have that look.'"

The application only takes a few minutes to fill out—no pesky questions about education or job history. What concerns Central Casting is the external: height, weight, eyes, hair, ethnicity. Because some roles depend on an extra's ability to fit into costumes, sizes need to be precise. A measuring tape is passed around. Some pair up with strangers, a suddenly intimate exchange of inseams and waistlines. Others go into contortions trying to do it themselves. "I should have waited until after the holidays," groans a curvy Latina, dismayed by the reading she gets from her hips. Some applicants carry their own portfolios, stocked with glossy, retouched poses. To ensure that extras really look like their picture, Central Casting insists on taking its own photo, a single DMV-style mug shot. "They actually use these pictures?" asks a 22-year-old Valley girl, who has been busily primping. "And here we go, honey," says a Central Casting staffer, snapping the shutter. What applicants are not told is that they are also being filmed, their image broadcast on monitors throughout the Central Casting offices.

Every photo ends up in Central Casting's database, a marvel of computerized profiling. With a click of a mouse, tens of thousands of people can be reduced to stereotypes, defined by nothing more than their physical attributes. For decades the company relied on giant Rolodexes and the institutional memory of its employees. Now every desktop has a monitor with "query parameters" on the screen. The system can search by measurements (neck, chest, dress, sleeve, hat, shoe), by complexion (dark, fair, light, olive, ruddy, tan), by hairstyle (bald, braids, dreadlocks, Mohawk, toupee), and by costume (hippie, dominatrix, Chinese coolie, turban, lederhosen, Santa Claus). It can sort by freckles or tattoos, beards or piercings. It can hunt for jugglers or mimes or midgets or wheelchair users. It can specify nudity (partial, total). It can narrow the field to photogenic body parts (legs, hands, fingers) or to amputees. There is a little bit of the carnival in such cataloging, in digging for, say, an auburn-haired tap dancer with a 48-inch bust and her own nun's habit. There is also a frankness to it that few professions can match. "Most of our people already know what their look is," says Jennifer Bender, vice president of Central Casting's feature division. "They know what they do and they do it well. It's their thing."

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Central Casting has a staff of 54, most of whom are clustered in cubicles behind the receptionist's window, in a fluorescent cavern of exposed beams and ducts. Thirty-five of the employees are casting directors themselves, authorized by production companies to select and hire all of the nonprincipal actors. Shows usually put in their orders to Central Casting after lunch. Central Casting spends the afternoon trying to fill them, often for scenes that shoot the next morning. It is a task requiring equal parts craftsmanship and pragmatism: A casting director must translate a director's vision into living bodies—an ability those in the business call "the casting eye"—and do it on very short notice. "It's like the old country song," says a casting director named Karen Wood. "All the girls get prettier at closing time." If a part calls for a quirky look, the computer system can find a needle in a haystack. It cannot, however, tell whether that » CONTINUED ON PAGE 289

if you need to get going, give it to someone else.'" In the immediate future is *The Road Back*, in which Cooper will play a flag-waving father who convinces his daughter to join the army only to have her commit suicide after serving in Iraq. "It's sort of a contemporary *Coming Home*," he says. Then there's an untitled thriller in which the actor will take a smaller role opposite Annette Bening and Richard Gere. It goes on like this right through the summer of 2007.

While the steady stream of work can do no more than keep Cooper's mind off Jesse's death, he's grateful for the distraction. "It's a lifesaver," he says as he escapes onto an outdoor staircase to light up an American Spirit.

The work also validates Cooper's approach to acting. "I'm in the best position in the world. Here I am allowed to play the lead in a studio film like *Breach*, yet I get these tremendous character parts like I have in *Capote* and *Syriana*. I know actors in far higher positions who don't enjoy this kind of freedom."

Those actors, of course, are also movie stars, which Cooper most decidedly and determinedly is not. At the 2002 Golden Globe ceremony, where he won another Best Supporting Actor award for *Adaptation*, Marianne happened to glance at Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, who were up front together. "As I was walking to the stage, Marianne watched Michael mouth the words 'Who is that?'" Stabbing out his cigarette against a stair, Cooper breaks into deep laughter. As far as he's concerned, Douglas could not have paid him greater praise.

Central Casting

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 101 » actor is available, which means working the phones and hoping to secure a commitment. For the bulk of roles casting directors rely on management agencies, which will suggest actors and guarantee their availability. (One of these firms, Extras Schedule Management, happens to be across the street from Central Casting and charges actors $75 a month for the service.) To scare up fresh faces, the casting directors will also post the job on a hot line and wait for actors to call in. These taped messages are alternately comical and creepy, a glimpse of Hollywood at its most formulaic. When he hosted the morning show on KIIS-FM, Rick Dees used to air the recordings as a gag—until Central Casting ordered him to cease and desist.

"I'm looking for two Caucasian males, in their midtwenties to midthirties, very attractive guys with that Westside, Hollywood, West Hollywood look," a casting director, working on behalf of the ABC sitcom *What About Brian*, recently announced. Another casting director, working on *Invasion*, was a bit more particular: "One Cuban-looking female in very good shape, in her twenties to early thirties. You will be getting into a bathing suit and getting into some water that's cold. They need somebody very fit and very tan, like they're on *Survivor*." To blend in with the preternaturally young and fabulous cast of *The OC*, the call was for "smokin' hot girls" and "Abercrombie & Fitch–type guys." They had to be at least 18 but capable of looking younger—to sidestep child labor laws. "Caucasian only. Extremely hot. Extremely attractive."

In any other corporate environment such prerequisites would be not only boorish but grounds for a lawsuit. In Hollywood discrimination falls under the banner of creativity, the storyteller's prerogative. Someone frozen out of a job today can be in demand tomorrow: Not long ago *Bones* was in the market for an African American woman with a "really down-and-out, blue-collar type of look" and *Without a Trace* needed "a bunch of Japanese-looking women with some really extremely funky, bizarre, hip, wacky, zany hairstyles." Late one afternoon Wood finds herself scrambling to fill an even unlikelier order: ten white-haired Jewish grandparents for a bar mitzvah scene on *The Bernie Mac Show*. "I'm ready to knife myself," says Wood, plugging ages and coiffures into her computer. "People in this business don't have white hair!" She finds a promising septuagenarian; a call reveals that her candidate is recovering from hip-replacement surgery. Another senior phones in. Wood pulls up her picture—blond hair, blue eyes, red lips. "You're too cute," she tells her. As it gets later, Wood casts her net wider, finally scoring some Armenians and Italians, including a married couple from Hemet. In their photo they look frail and bewildered. They would need to be in Studio City at 6 a.m. "Poor little things," Wood says.

Extras tend to be optimists, often imagining the job as a springboard to meatier roles. Sometimes the camera will linger on them, granting a few precious ticks of QLT, or quality lens time. Sometimes the director will even offer a line of dialogue, the extra's jackpot. But extras are not hired to act. They are caricatures, not characters. They function as visual shorthand, delivering coded messages about race and beauty and class and sex. "It's all about what you look like," says Laura Strobl, the company's casting coordinator, "not what you actually are." That is a notion so classically L.A., a perspective that typifies the best and the worst of the city. It is the gospel of reinvention, a rejection of pedigrees and résumés and doctrines. In this town you can put on a mask and call yourself whatever you want. It is, though, also a certain kind of hokum, a celebration of illusion and artifice. By playing to our preconceptions, Hollywood does not just traffic in stereotypes; it constructs and reinforces them. To be straight out of Central Casting is to be both larger and smaller than you really are.

YOU'RE FROM Central Casting, sir?" The security guard at the Warner Bros. lot studies my driver's license. Since anyone can be an extra, I had signed up the week before, submitting my measurements and paying my initiation fee. The only glitch was my hair color—I had marked "brown," but Central Casting saw me as "salt and pepper."

I get my break with *Old Christine*, a sitcom featuring Julia Louis-Dreyfus as a divorced mom. It is a midseason replacement, meaning it will take the spot of someone else's flop. I am told to show up at Stage 5, on a sunny December morning, dressed as if I am headed to a Rolling Stones concert. According to the casting director, who recorded his instructions for us the night before, we are to be "very upscale, affluent, good-looking people...a sophisticated crowd...in very hip, very concert-like attire." I am not sure how many of those criteria I can live up to. I did, however, find a black suede blazer in the back of my closet.

After I clear the metal detector, I am led to the set, a series of false walls and simulated rooms, like the exposed back of a dollhouse. I smell sawdust and fresh paint. I walk around ladders and ropes and curtains and wires. I feel the heat of the stage lights. It is hard not to be impressed by the ingenuity that goes into building such an environment, all the unseen artists and technicians who make Hollywood run. As an extra, you get to buy into the fantasy that you have joined them in the creative process, even if you are there just as

wallpaper. By the 11 a.m. call time there are probably 60 of us on hand—most, like myself, working at nonunion rates. For an eight-hour day, we get $54. Screen Actors Guild members make $122, but there is often less work for them. On a TV show, only the first 20 extras have to be union; in movies, the first 50. How those jobs get dispensed can be contentious. A pair of SAG extras recently sued Central Casting, accusing the agency of soliciting bribes and steering work to favorites. Central Casting, which has denied the claim, makes its money by charging production companies a percentage of each actor's wage.

Our day unfolds as if scripted by the army, a case of hurry up and wait. We spread out in the bleachers, where the studio audience will later be seated. I can tell I am surrounded by pros. They carry blankets and books, portable DVD players and folding chairs. A newlywed catches up on her thank-you notes. We are invited to visit craft services, a bottomless smorgasbord for the crew and cast. We eat, we sit, we watch some rehearsals, then we eat and sit some more. Hours go by this way. Some dude begins snoring.

We are the responsibility of an assistant director named John, who manages to be both harried and droll. He watches over us like a counselor at summer camp. We will not have many opportunities to make a good impression, but there will be no shortage of ways to screw up. We are not to talk when we see a flashing red light. We are not to let our cell phones ring. We are not to wander around—or into a shot. We are not to look directly into the camera. We are not to sidle up to the talent. We are not to go home until excused. When the time comes for our scene, we gather behind some fake auditorium doors. Louis-Dreyfus is just outside, hunting for her nine-year-old son and the ex-husband who took him to see the Stones. Our job is to burst into the lobby, exuberant—albeit silent—fans streaming past a distraught mother. The first time we try, John scolds us. "You have just been to the greatest concert of your entire life," he says, "and you look like you're coming out of a funeral." We storm through the doors again and again, now pumping our fists and mouthing whoops of joy. The whole thing feels almost dreamlike, as if we have been superimposed onto a show that is only vaguely aware of our presence. My path takes me to within a foot or two of the former *Seinfeld* star—Elaine!—and yet I feel that if I make eye contact I will be turned into a pillar of salt. We are not collaborators. She is the franchise, all business in her pancake makeup. My job, by its very nature, is to be overlooked. "You guys were perfect," John tells us. "Let me go on record saying that." We do it about a dozen times. Then we break for lunch.

Given the alternatives, I suppose there are worse ways to make $6.75 an hour. We have been spared heavy lifting, hot sun, irate customers, and stressful deadlines. "It's addictive," says Tom Theis, a journeyman I meet at the Warner Bros. commissary, where once again we eat for free. Theis grew up in La Cañada, the son of a deputy L.A. city attorney. After 15 years as an extra, he has the build and beard of a lumberjack. At 35, he also has a newborn at home and a wife who is on him to find steadier work. "For one, there's the food," says Theis, toying with the last onion ring on his plate. "And you do get to see some really pretty girls. It's not exactly fun. But it's not taxing, either. There's a certain, uh, unreality to it. It's a hard job to give up." What makes it so easy to endure, I find, is just the thing that proves so vexing. I know my role is limited, perhaps even irrelevant, and still I find myself jockeying for better position, trying to seize whatever advantage I can. I have staked out a spot—second through the doors—and I am not about to relinquish it. I allow my pantomime to grow more animated, my mute exclamations to approach a whisper. I sneak closer to Louis-Dreyfus, the object of every camera's desire. I think of the HBO parody *Extras*, of the character played by Ricky Gervais. "What's the point in getting all tarted up like this," he complains, "if I don't even make it into the scene?" We do seven or eight more takes. By the time we wrap at 8:30 p.m., I feel more exhausted than I have a right to be.

I still have no idea if my timing was on, if I made the shot, or if I was edited out. I have no way of knowing if *Old Christine* will survive, if the ax will come before my episode airs. If it is still around, I am not sure how I will know which week marks my acting debut—or if I will even remember to watch. This is an absurd but not insignificant quandary: If an extra does his job but nobody sees or hears him, does he really exist? It is not the sort of thing a hip concert fan can afford to ponder. Tomorrow, a hundred more people will be lined up at Central Casting, ready to take my place. LA