

Understanding the Camera and Crew: Essentials for On-Set Success

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Recently while on location for a film, a talented actor, acting coach, and friend gave me two important pointers for success on the set or on location: know the camera and respect the crew.

"These two tips," he assured me, "will give you a good perspective on the overall filmmaking process, while helping you have fun."

While playing a Navy Commander in "Faith of My Fathers," the cameraman told me to "find the lens." It took me a moment to figure out that he was trying to ensure the best possible shot for the particular scene. These instructions also had the dual benefit of guaranteeing that I got good screen time. Had he not forcefully,

but politely, yelled this across the set to me, half of my face would have been blocked by a stairway baluster pole, and the other half by the person standing in front of me.

You'll soon understand that just because the camera is at a distance from you, it doesn't mean that you're out of focus or that it's a long shot. You may be in perfect focus for the shot, and the camera operator may be using the camera's zoom. Just be sure to check out camera positioning and actor blocking before you hear the crucial "Action!" or "Background!" commands. You don't want to get caught staring at the camera during the actual take. This looks bad for you, as well as for the entire production. Also, once on the set, if you find you have questions pertinent to your job as an actor or extra, find an AD—1st or 2nd AD will do. These directors are the people responsible for setting up the scenes and

directing the talent's movements.

Aretha Franklin had the right idea with her song, and as a general rule, it's always good to respect everyone on the set or location. It is the hair and makeup crew's job to make sure that the shine is powdered off your face and that your hair is just right for the scene, but if you break their concentration by talking to them while they are applying their craft, they will not be able to do their job well. You wouldn't want someone bothering you while you were doing your job. And don't argue with the Property (props) folks about wanting a different briefcase or blazer. They know what they're doing and don't need your advice.

The same goes for the production team. Their camera angles are designed to exact a particular look for each individual take, but the wrong angle can be unflattering—or worse, it can hide you completely. Remember the

cameraman who cued me to "find the lens?" Had he not instructed me, I would not have been seen at all in this film since it was my only scene.

So how do you "respect the crew?" First, you pay attention to them and do what they are doing. Ask questions if you're confused about the blocking or what you've been asked to do. And be as nice, or nicer, to them as you would anyone. Directors, assistant directors, camera operators, et al., are professionals and are under a great deal of stress. As such, they may not always have the time to speak to you in loving and caring tones. That's not their job anyway—they're tasked with getting the best production completed in the least amount of time and as close to budget as possible. ■

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