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### Memoirs of a Hollywood South Film Extra

By Gary Michael Smith

Its like being a soldierlong stretches of severe boredom punctuated with inte excitement. Nonetheless, the life of a movie extra can be exhilarating on so many always kept the thoughts conveyed in this article in my head (and you may feel stayed there), Ive decided to reveal some of the more memorable moments in my career as a film extra.

My profession as an unknown background star began back in 1994 when courtroom observer in the made-for-TV movie pilot Sweet Justice, which starre Melissa Gilbert, Ronny Cox, and Cicely Tyson. One of my first memorable experi Mr. Cox came onto the set for the first time and made a point to personally shak the extras, which left a positive lasting impression with all of us peons. Well no starring him.

On another instance, however, one overly ambitious extra was reprimanded Cicely Tyson on the set. After walking up to her and blathering on about how r work, she thanked him politely, then excused herself. Seconds later a DA or PA r and told him in no uncertain terms that he SHOULD NOT approach Ms. Tyson nc to her for the rest of the film.

While this may seem the epitome of prima donnaish, extras need to understar are much more demanding than the extras, the latter of which for the most part cc around or, if were lucky, walking around. Actors have to memorize lines and get in all we have to do is remember to not look at the camera. And real actors dont ne fawning all over them. PAs even tell us to avert our eyes if an actor happens to because they probably are just staring out into space while focusing on their chara

As extras, we also are availed the opportunity to see actors dark sides. Inde and I once walked through a stairwell doorway to find bad girl Melissa Gilbert ꞑ cigarette although wed all been told to smoke outside the building. We shaved while tching, but she only grimaced sarcastically and told us "so turn me in." reaching out for help.

But while Gilbert seemed to be having a bad day, her intense concentration was sitting only feet away from where she was reading the script while hair and r with her. During the primping Gilbert neither blinked nor budged; only her eyes i page.

A month later I had moved a rung up the extra ladder to play a law partner in Jak loveable Gerald McRaney, Poppy Montgomery who now stars on Without a Scoggins of Lonesome Dove and Dallas fame. I was chosen for this part not bec savvy but because I look like a lawyer and, more importantly the casting director lik

Officer-of-the-court looks and expensive suits aside, my role here consist water in a champagne glass to McRaney as it was announced that he was now a the law firm. Because of this promotion, we were given the day off to play touch fo Square, which had been hosed down the day before. With not a rat in sight I gc field chasing others with a football, but not before having to change clothes on a the women extras were filling the only available dressing trailer.

These two made-for-TV pilots were my only reprieve for another 10 years fro of a technical writer. Then, I got the itch again and listed with a casting company v the Jerry Bruckheimer-directed, Disney-distributed film Glory Road. I called the in given to me and was told by an automated voice to show up at a certain place

which happened to be now. Coincidentally, I drove up at the same time as the cast had just flown in from L.A. ("Los Angeles," for those of us in the know) so I held supplies inside the dusty and deserted casting office-to-be.

Once situated she asked what she could do for me.

"Well, I'm here to sign up as an extra," I told her.

"Really? An extra? You have to be the Assistant Head Coach, you have to!" she

This was okay with me, but why the excitement. What I learned a few months being cast for what is called a *featured extra* is a big deal. When you see someone in a role, you grab them. So now I had a role where I was not going to be subject to bleachers in Lakefront Arena, shining as only a dot on the silver screen. No, I was a table from star Josh Lucas.

I had images of passing Lucas or Bruckheimer on the set, nonchalantly say the coolest voice. But the closest I got was blocking a shot as we were walking off the set. It was strange that so many fake reporters and fake photographers were snapping pictures and noticed that poor Josh was walking right behind me when it was the other way around. CUT!

Still, the irony of me playing a basketball coach was lost on all until I told my friend I played the coach that I've never actually watched an entire basketball game from. Okay, I've never watched more than a few seconds to be honest. Consequently, for a half, I was the outsider between takes, and rightfully so. I wasn't in the jock crowd until the second or third day we were all bonding as a team of players and actors. Coach of basketball, and since my MFA work is in TV Video and Film Production, I taught in the industry.

I once again reveled in the life of the extra, this time meeting thousands of others on set. I overheard side conversations that consisted of "Mary, I haven't seen you since shooting!" Or the woman who told me that she lived in 1966 and remembered the beehive hairdo she now had for the film and she missed it.

But it wasn't all fun and games. During one scene one of my boys (a Kansas player played by a real Australian private club player) finished a lay-up (new term I learned) and began to run back down court. Unfortunately, he was running quite a bit of a rickshaw camera behind him and he smacked knee first into the lens. He hobbled and I called a PA for the medic since the Aussie was swelling and bleeding. The accident was inevitable since these players were not used to having bulky cameras on their way.

On another day, one cheerleader, the cutest one with the most expressive face on court, and the set, in tears. Seems she had become ill and was going to have to be replaced for the rest of the three-day scene. And within seconds a replacement cheerleader was in.

As fate often has it, the bad is balanced with good. On the same day an extra from her agent announcing that she'd just been cast in a speaking role as a regular on the film. Must have been tough continuing her 16-hour days as a silent dot in the stands for the film. But professionals finish the job.

A set is not without humor, however, at the expense of the director. While waiting for lights to be set and Coke cans and chip bags to be hidden, a big crash sounded from the fake TV cameraman's camera lens fell off and bounced on the wood floor. The cameraman beside him reached over to help since a few thousand spectators, camera now glaring up at them, but he had forgotten to lock down his camera, which sent him with yet another loud CLUNK. A director's assistant yelled "What now!" and equipment was restored.

Perhaps one of the most unusual things that happened to me on a production was as both extra and casting assistant. After being cast as Assistant Head Coach, I arrived on set with the casting director running around, putting out fires, and trying to organize a chaotic environment. I told her that I was from New Orleans and could help out if necessary.

"Yeah? I need someone to run this casting office while I'm in ten other places."

I told her to sign me up and she was dumbfounded. It doesn't get any better than that. I explained my role. She spent the next 15 minutes teaching me terms like "c" for "casting" and explaining my role:

Like a Chihuahua on speed she tells me "First, you match up those who want an available role listed on the skins but not yet checked off. Then you ask if they will do long days for little pay over a stretch of time. (Who wouldn't?) If yes, you call them and tell them whom you've cast so they can check the role off their corresponding skin wardrobe to schedule a fitting. Then you tell the person when and where to appear."

what to bring, how much they'll be paid for the job, and what to do and not do on set. Intimidating? A bit. Molecular genetics? Not really. It probably was more accounting folks who constantly asked me, "Now wait, you're on both cast *and* crew end of the day. I'd cast dozens of spectators and a few cameramen, journalists, and more. The next day I was asked to set up an entirely new office in a plush meeting room in Metairie. It was tough closing down the dank and smelly warehouse office, those memories.

A month or so after *Glory Road* I was again called by the casting company, I was a co-worker of Queen Latifa and LL Cool J in a remake of the 1950s film *Last Holiday*. I was as professional yet as approachable as possible, and the entire shoot went off without a hitch. However, in one scene I'm following the directions of an extra walking directly into the camera, stopping only inches away from the lens. I'd try to do the impossibility of the logistics that the AD had outlined but it was only met by him with "try it and see." The cameraman and his assistants stopped in their tracks, and I peered around the eyepiece and calmly smiled at me as if to say, "Where ya going? You knew that this would end up on the multi-CD collection of 'Extras Outtakes.'"

But even with such screw-ups as an extra you can even be upgraded to a better role. It hasn't actually happened to me yet, I've heard grand stories of those who were initially background extras but were upgraded to actual speaking roles. I'm still waiting for that. I have, however, read for a speaking role, which, if I get it will have me in a scene in *All the Kings Men*.

I'll even have something to talk to him about: his dogs. While waiting in the trailer the other day off set of *Kings Men*, a white Cadillac pulled up to Laws trailer, which was about 100 feet from our holding area. The driver gets out, then Laws' new fiancée, Susan Law. But while the other two go in the trailer Law is left standing by the open door beckoning someone to exit.

It looked pretty rude to me, motioning abruptly as if he were calling dogs. As it was; two small dogs of unknown breed hopped out of the car and immediately ran. Poor Jude was then left to his own devices to wrangle his pups, both of which then ran the full length under the trailer. "Hey Jude, need some help with those dogs," is what I said. "No-Name Extra Helps World's Sexiest Man Chase Dogs" would have made a great headline. Eventually, he captured the pair and took them in the trailer.

Fun and games aside, accidents do happen. While not as much trauma to me as to Australian basketball player who blocked the camera with his knee, I too was injured. Indeed, my arms were wrecked with crippling pain after spending all day jumping up and down at the extras holding area while sitting around, waiting for my background role.

Yes pain and injury are a possibility. But injury to the ego can be just as devastating. I show up on the set of the Lindsay Lohan film *Lady Luck* cast as none other than "Businessman." I guess I should expect as much since a) I'm middle-aged and b) I'm older than 19-year-old star Lohan and probably most of the other cast as well.

One good aspect of film work, however, is the exercise, which I don't need as much as sedentary work as a writer, editor, publisher, and university instructor. Moreover, being in the industry has made me more aware of the importance of taking care of myself. My diet has been replaced with a vitamin tooth as I now drink a couple glasses of apple juice every morning. I even have a new pilates DVD and mat to help get back the weight I traded in years ago for the keg. When I'm done, my molten steel stomach will melt once again.

All in all, working as an extra is riveting and inspiring. While I may never be as sought after as Jude Law, I do cherish my experiences and new acquaintances. Each day on set is a new adventure, with long stretches of severe boredom punctuated with intense excitement.



*Gary Michael Smith is a writer, editor, publisher, and author from New Orleans. He has worked as an extra in numerous films and TV shows. He enjoys helping others break into the field. He can be contacted at <http://www.chatgrispress.com/>.*

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