

THE LIFE OF A MOVIE EXTRA

How To Do It and What To Expect

By Gary Michael Smith

Sound! Action! Cut! Check gate! You too can learn such fancy film industry words. All you have to do is sign up to be an extra. With New Orleans', aka Hollywood South's, blossoming business as a film Mecca, seemingly limitless opportunities for extras have become available. This is in no small part due to the [Motion Pictures Incentives](#) package, which comprises two Senate Bills and two House Bills offering investor and jobs tax credits, as well as a state sales tax waiver.

But while attending such gatherings as the Master Series ® Film and Video Workshops at the Contemporary Arts Center and the [New Orleans Film Industry Meetup Group](#), I've discovered that many who are interested in breaking out into nonspeaking roles have no idea what to expect should they be called to be in a film. In this article I'll walk you through the steps from registering with a casting company to showing up on the set for your close-up—or at least your walk-by or “camera swipe.”

Your First Steps

First, you need to develop a [Hollywood Format Résumé Template](#). This is a standard format used by those hiring actors and extras. It includes your pertinent data regarding work experience and education relevant to the film industry. Naturally, you don't want to include information found in your normal, nonfilm, résumé; keep it focused on your film and video production and acting work only.

Next, you might as well complete a [Motion Picture Extra Profile Sheet](#). Any casting company you solicit is going to need

this information and will have you complete such a form anyway so it can save time if you already have one ready and in hand. Also, you can even print a high-quality digital photo on the back. Even though you'll have your picture on your résumé, printing on the back of the profile sheet gives you an opportunity to present a larger image.

Regarding photos, come casting directors will tell you that head shots are not important, especially if you're in a crowd scene and will be only a dot to the film-goer. But good-quality headshots can be invaluable to casting directors looking to cast you as a “featured extra” where you'll actually be identifiable on the screen. And talent agents will require photos to help them in their job getting you paying work. While you may want to use your own digital camera to take a picture for your résumé and profile sheet, you should also consider using a professional photographer. A photographer knows how to put you in the best light, so to speak.

Once you have a résumé, profile sheet, and picture of yourself it's time to submit it to some casting companies. In New Orleans there are a number of resources listing casting companies—from businesses seemingly unrelated to the film industry to those dedicated specifically to Hollywood South. One good venue for finding casting companies includes the [Office of Film and Video](#) under the Mayor's Office of Economic Development. Also, I've developed a list and have posted to my site at www.ChatgrisPress.com, Film and Video. See the list of [Film Extra Casting Companies](#).

Casting companies don't ask for exclusive agreements so you can send your packet to as many casting directors as you'd like. (Note that I said "casting director" instead of "casting agent." Remember that an agent, such as a talent agent, represents you while a casting director hires you for a job. So, there's really no such thing as a "casting agent.") Just attach a cover letter stating who you are and what you're looking for. Give them an idea of your availability as well; it's difficult enough for a casting company to have to work around those with day jobs, and it's good to give them a heads up initially so they can plan how to use you.

Now, you've come to the waiting stage. You may be called within days of listing with casting companies, or these days could turn into weeks, months, or longer depending on the amount of work available and the aggressiveness of the casting company. You may not even be called at all, depending on the needs of the production company. You can follow up with emails and phone calls if you haven't heard from the casting company, but just understand that these are busy professionals with a job to do; if they haven't contacted you, it could be because they don't need someone with your particular look or experience at the moment. Patience is a virtue.

Wardrobe

As a film extra you probably won't be called for an audition; this is reserved for actors in speaking roles and would be booked through a talent agent if you decide to try out for speaking roles. As a nonspeaking extra, you might simply respond to an "open casting call" that you hear on the news or read in the newspaper. At a casting call, you'll actually meet people from the casting company, who will be set up in a hotel ballroom, shopping mall, or some other public place. When you show up you'll first be asked about your

availability. If they ask that you be available for three days, you need to be honest with your ability to show up; nothing is more frustrating to a casting company, who is working directly for the production company, to have to replace you when you decide you don't want to work for the full number of days to which you committed. And not completing your time may be viewed as being unprofessional on your part.

If you are available for the days of the shoot, you'll be asked to complete a profile sheet. Then a casting person will take your photograph and attach it to the sheet. Finally, you'll be given a wardrobe appointment, which often is scheduled weeks before the actual film shoot. You may also be given information regarding when and where to show up for the actual shoot, but often you are not given this information until you show up for the initial wardrobe fitting.

Another scenario is that a casting company with which you've previously listed calls you to ask if you're available at certain times over a period of dates. If you agree to work in the film, the casting company will give you an initial wardrobe fitting appointment. Whether you will be wearing your own clothes or a costume provided to you, you need to show up at your appointed time and location. Productions run on a schedule, and you don't want to disrupt this. If the film is contemporary, you may be asked to bring your own clothes to the fitting. While it's not really a "fitting" per sé, the wardrobe staff needs to see you in certain attire. As such, you will be told by casting company staff what type and color of clothes to bring to this temporary wardrobe location.

For instance, if you are playing a middle-aged business man or woman you will be asked to bring several suits with light colored or white shirts. (Dark colors and stripes don't look well on camera.) You also

need dress shoes and belts, and whatever else is needed in the scene. If, on the other hand, the film is of a different period you may be provided with vintage clothing. In such a case, the fitting actually is used to size you up for appropriately fitting attire. (This is where your profile sheet comes in handy as well.) The best part about a wardrobe fitting is that since it is your time that you're expending, you normally are paid a set fee for the fitting.

Another skill that you may gain is the ability to undress in front of a total stranger of the opposite sex. While men and women have separate dressing areas, as a man you may find women wardrobe specialists coming in and out of the fitting areas. This is not so they can get a free thrill; they need to work quickly and with multiple extras simultaneously and it's simply for efficient for them to monitor the fittings. If you're shy about this, simply ask that they wait until you are dressed, although this may slow the fitting process a bit. In time, you won't care who's in the fitting area; it's just part of the job.

At the wardrobe fitting, a production assistant (PA) will give you some information on the shoot. Such info may include location, a map with driving instructions, and an information sheet. This last sheet will give you information on what and *what not* to do as an extra. It'll include such requests as: show up on time, don't bring a camera to photograph the movie stars, and don't speak with the stars nor ask for autographs.

While this may seem like common sense, it's surprising how many extras are inconsiderate enough to break the rules. What you need to remember as a film extra is that everyone with whom you're working is a professional. Just as you wouldn't want someone interrupting you while you are busy at your job, actors don't need you breaking their concentration while they are

getting into character and memorizing lines so you can get them to sign a photograph or your autograph book. Remember, you have moved from fan to colleague now so you should respect their craft and act as a professional.

On the Job

When you arrive on the set you will be asked to fill out your daily voucher with all information except the ending time. You'll hang on to this voucher since you'll have to complete it and turn it in at the end of the shooting day. Then, you'll probably be provided with breakfast since you'll be working anywhere from 8 hours on up. After breakfast you may be instructed to go through wardrobe, hair, and makeup. If you're in a crowd scene you can expect this step to take hours, so bring a good book. If it's a smaller scene, the process will be quicker but there still may be a line, and consequently, a wait.

Wardrobe will be the same people who sized you earlier, but now they have moved to a location closer to the set, and will most likely be positioned near the hair and makeup experts. Once you're done with wardrobe, hair, and makeup you'll be sent to an extra's holding area. Here, again, your book will come in handy. Eventually, an assistant director (AD) will communicate via a headset to a PA that such and such extras are needed. The PA then will handpick the required extras and send them to the AD on the set. The AD will tell you exactly what you are to do and when. You should pay close attention to these instructions, as you're now about to be on camera.

Understand that PAs and ADs are on tight schedules and, consequently, may be under much stress. As such, they may not have the time for niceties such as "please" and "thank you." If they seem brusque or

curt, don't take it personally. They have a job to do in only a limited amount of time and are under direction from the filmmakers. Do what they ask and do it quickly, and by no means argue with them or offer advice; save this for when you're the AD, scriptwriter, or director.

Also, since you may end up with a lot of time on your hands, don't spend it chit-chatting with the PAs. There's a reason they are wearing earphones—they're working. Consequently, don't be insulted if they seem to ignore you if you ask them a question or try to speak with them; they probably are listening to instructions from an AD.

The actual on-camera time may be brief, but the number of takes may be many. For instance, the scene may call for you to walk across a room in the background while the actors recite their lines in front of the camera. Depending on how many variations the director wants, you may find that you are walking across that room 15 times before that scene is finished. Then, if you are going to be used again for another scene, you may have to stand around while a new scene is set up or you may have to move to a new location.

You may even be asked to change clothes to be in a different scene. For instance, you could be playing a janitor in one scene, then be sent to on-set wardrobe to change into a businessman's suit. Or, you may be sent back to the extras holding area to await being called for another scene—or not. In the worst-case scenario, you could end up waiting around all day in the extra's holding area, or even taken to the set to stand around, only to be returned to the holding area and never be used for that shooting day. It's all up to the director at this point, but you'll still be paid for the number of hours you are present.

It's important, however, to be visible. While you might be quite bored sitting around in the extra's holding area for hours

on end, it's still important that you are there. You never know when the PA will suddenly appear and, at the request of an AD, hand-pick a number of extras to go to the set. So don't go wandering off or hanging out somewhere other than where you are told to wait. You don't want to miss your opportunity. And besides, you're being paid to be available.

In the End

When you're finally done with the morning scenes, you may not know it. You might be sent back to the extra's holding area only to remain there until the next meal, which will probably be a late lunch around 1 or 2 P.M. Then, after the meal, everyone returns to the holding area to hang out and wait some more. If you are easily bored, you want to bring with you plenty to keep you busy. Or if you're like me you'll meet as many other extras as possible. It's great networking, collecting email addresses, and staying in touch, which also could lead to other jobs.

Once the shooting day is over, the PA will ask that you form a line to return any wardrobe articles that don't belong to you and to hand in your extra's voucher so they can record the ending time. You'll be given a receipt and sent on your way, usually with instructions regarding your reporting time the next day. If, however, you won't appear until another day or later in the film, you may not be given the details until a few days before the next shoot. Don't press the PA for information; you'll be told what you need to know when you need to know it.

Within a couple of weeks you'll begin to receive the fruits of your labor. These will come in the form of a single check for every day you worked and one for the wardrobe fitting as well. You may even be paid \$10 or so if the hair folks have to cut or trim your hair. Hang on to a copy of these checks as you may need them for proof one day that

you were in the film, which may be a requirement for union membership.

And there you have it: The life of an extra in a nutshell! Just remember to create and maintain the appropriate paperwork, list with casting companies, and do as they ask once you are hired. With any luck, you'll be called for future work!

Gary Michael Smith is a writer, editor, publisher, and educator in New Orleans. He has worked as a casting assistant as well as an extra in numerous films and enjoys helping others break into the field. He can be reached at www.ChatgrisPress.com.