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Hi all,

GREETING:

I don't have much new to report as the last month was largely spent performing in "War and Peace" at the Met and "Once Upon A Time" at The Castle Theater. I had one (sometimes two) performances per day. Now that they are finished I am back in hot pursuit of my next great role! One thing I did do in the midst of performing was to register with a casting director whose sole responsibility is to cast actors in background (or extra) roles for film and television. The other day I went on my first shoot as an extra and I think it is worth mentioning in this HWI as this type of work is such a reviled, yet integral part of many actor's lives.

THIS ISSUE'S HIGHLIGHTS:

- The life and times of the Extra.
- Another chance to hear ZUZU live at the Bitter End on May 16th at 9:30pm
- Arol writing children's musicals

WHAT I HAVE DONE:

ACTING:

Extra! Extra Read All About It!!

I had often seen casting calls in Backstage Magazine announcing registration for new actors with one background casting agency or another, but ignored them thinking (hoping) that I would not need to stoop so low as to do extra work. However, the statistics bear out that close to 85% of actors do not get paid work in any given year and out of those that do, about 70% of them don't make enough (from their acting) to qualify for union health benefits (\$7,500/year in earnings). Extra work is abundant and earns one \$111 for an 8-hour day (plus overtime and extras like "smoke pay" and "wardrobe change").

Thus explains the love/hate relationship that actors have with background work. They need the money and can "work" quite regularly, but it kills their ego knowing they should be on the big or little screen instead of being a blur on the courthouse steps – which is what I was.

I finally broke down and decided to go to orientation/registration for Sylvia Faye Casting – one of the better-known Background Casting agencies. For those who are wondering, it doesn't matter if you have an agent for film or television or stage, you can also register with as many extra casting outfits as you want (agents don't bother with extra work). My orientation for Sylvia Faye took place at a midtown church multi-purpose room. Despite the sanctity of the place, the guy in charge proceeded to condescendingly chew us out (is there any other way?) for all the mistakes we were ABOUT to make based on his experiences with previous/current registrants.

Essentially, the rules are:

#1. DON'T CALL THEM.....EVER!!!

(this is actually rule #1-5. They made this very clear).

#6. IF YOU ARE NOT AVAILABLE FOR THE SHOOT DATE WHEN THEY CALL YOU, SAY SO. DON'T SAY "YES" AND THEN BACKOUT. CANCELLATIONS ARE NOT PERMITTED. PERIOD. YOU DO THAT, YOU'RE OUT.

#7. DON'T PLAN ANYTHING BEFORE OR AFTER THE SHOOT THAT DAY – IT COULD TAKE AS SHORT AS 2 HOURS OR AS LONG AS 24 HOURS. YOU NEVER KNOW.

I left there less than impressed with Sylvia Faye's group and even less impressed with my odds of getting called. There were about 150 people in the church that day and they have new actor registrations two or three times per month.

The first time they called me (about 2 weeks after I registered, which I thought was pretty quick) I didn't have my cell phone turned on and didn't check voicemail until about 1 ½ hours later. While they had already given the shoot to someone else they assured me that I would be called again and that there would be no direct consequences from missing this first call.

About one week later a call came in – this time I called back within ½ hour and spoke to "my rep". The shoot was a two day shoot for "Angels in America", a Mike Nichols directed film based on a Tony Kushner play that is to be aired on HBO as a six part mini-series. It is to star Al Pacino and Meryl Streep. For those not in the know, Mike Nichols is a director of screen and stage, most notably for Neil Simon's "Barefoot in the Park" and Tom Stoppard's "The Real Thing" (stage) and "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?", "The Graduate", "Primary Colors" and "All the Pretty Horses" (screen). He is married to TV news personality Diane Sawyer. In short, he is, as the saying goes, the shit.

My rep asked me if I owned a suit. “uh...yeah” I said. “A few actually. They are gathering dust”. “Good” she said. “Wear one appropriate for winter in the 1980s and bring along another for spring of the same decade”. Well, since most of my suits are timeless classics I figured I was all set.

Then the cloak and dagger business started. I was told to call back on a special number between 9pm-10pm the following evening and a recorded voice would inform me of the address and call time of my mission. At this point I had already chosen to accept it and there was no turning back.

I arrived a bit early for my 7am call time at a place they call the “holding pen” – the area where they stick all the extras. This particular holding pen was located on Broadway and Leonard. As I exited the elevator on the 2nd floor with my change of wardrobe in hand, I surveyed the multitude of extras already assembled. Some were busy chatting away, while others sat quietly reading or contentedly resting their eyes. There was a registration desk where I gave my name and received my SAG voucher to fill out. I found an empty seat at one of the long, school cafeteria-type tables and set about figuring out how to fill in the voucher. After five minutes I had only filled in my name and even then I wasn’t sure if it should be my stage name or my legal name. It was clear that I was very wet behind the ears here. What was my “basic wage rate”? Could I just make up what I thought was befitting an actor of my talent level? I didn’t even know the name of the production company making the film. A young woman sitting next to me took pity and volunteered her assistance. “Is this your first time?” she asked. I felt embarrassed, as if she were asking me an entirely different question in the back seat of a parked dodge on a warm night at make-out point. “Uh...yes.” I said, eyes cast downward. She proceeded to help me fill in the blanks. “production company”: Saraphilms, “Type of call”: extra (“Oh, I knew that one!”), “Basic wage rate”: \$111. “\$111 an hour?” I remarked hopefully. The young woman laughed so hard I thought she might not recover. Through her jovial tears she managed to turn toward the man next to her and inform him “he thought it was \$111/hour” nodding in my direction and barely getting out the last word before a sob of laughter. I felt my cheeks go flush as I sat watching this. Then my natural defense mechanisms took over and I blurted out “Well, I used to work on Wall Street and that is about what we got per hour.” I said by way of explaining my ignorance. She looked unimpressed. Then I checked myself and admonished – “ok Arol, play nice with the other actors”.

While the wage rate turned out to be a disappointing \$111 per an 8 hour day (the kind of hourly wage Kathy Lee Gifford pays her sweat shop kids) I was pleasantly surprised by the food situation. It had been my impression that although there is a Craft Food Service buffet at most shoots, it was for the principal actors and the extras had to brown bag it. Not true. At least not for union extras. In the holding pen there was fresh fruit, coffee, tea, bagels and spreads and hot oven boxes containing ham & egg sandwiches.

Well, believing I was on my own on the nourishment front I had already eaten at home. But this was free food and I am a struggling actor so I grabbed a sandwich, some fruit and a Yoplait yogurt and discretely shoved them into my bag for later consumption. Out at the shooting location there was an even more elaborate food tent with cold cuts and cheeses, various kinds of breads, microwaveable popcorn (yes and a microwave) and a cooler full of soda, juice and water. Now this is more like it! I think I can get into this union thing!

After a short wait it was time to move en masse to the shooting location. As we lined up to exit the building, some members of the production staff checked our wardrobe to determine if it was acceptable for a 1980s businessperson. Like a Caesar determining the fate of a wounded gladiator the thumb went up or down. I received a thumbs up and proceeded to location which was the large concourse in front of the City Hall courthouse.

Now my juices were really starting to flow – I saw all the cameras set up, all the production staff scurrying about looking purposeful. This is what it is all about – lights, camera, action! I caught a glimpse of Mike Nichols' short-cropped white hair in the director's tent and spied the two principal actors for this scene (whom I did not recognize) getting fussed over by the make-up girls (excuse my gender based comment, but in this case they were girls). I started to fantasize about Mike Nichols spying me among the extras and judging that I had a look and talent, upgrading me to a speaking part. I was snapped from this happy daze by a rather robust woman dressed in jeans and work boots with a walkie talkie hanging off her otherwise empty tool belt. She was Jen, Lord of the Extras. As she gathered all forty or so of us around her she explained how the day would likely go and a bit about our environment. "It is in the 1980s in January and you are going to work." She said. No problem there as it was freezing out and could easily have been January. She explained that Mr. Nichols likes to shoot quickly without a lot of breaks and finish early. While that sounded fine to me (in and out with my \$111) several of the group grouched aloud about violations of union policies. Clearly these people don't get enough non-extra acting work to allow them to keep mole hills from becoming mountains. Jen looked exasperated but said nothing. Then she set about getting us in our "first positions". This would be the spot off-camera where each of us would begin each take of the scene until we were given a second first position.....if that, uh, makes any sense.

Although I knew nothing about this movie or what was going on in this scene, from what I could discern the two principals meet on a park bench in the City Hall concourse and exchange about six pages of dialogue before heading off in different directions. The extras are playing business people, secretaries and hot dog vendors in the background moving around and getting themselves to work. I found it interesting that the production company was paying all of us money to recreate what would have been, under normal circumstances, happening with real people. With overcoats on there really wasn't any tell tale signs that it was the 80s anyway. Furthermore some astute extras observed that there was a barricade

in front of the courthouse that was not put up until the 1993 World Trade Center bombing – a dead giveaway. The production staff attempted to cordon off the area as much as was possible, but New Yawkahs will be New Yawkahs and many of them brushed passed the hapless ‘security’ detail saying “I don’t care what you filmin’, I ain’t gonna get my ass canned for bein’ late!” as they continued on through. I felt like I was in some kind of sci-fi film where one cannot tell the cyborgs from the humans.....they live among us! Once I was dispatched by Jen to escort a wayward bystander who had unknowingly wandered into camera shot and was chatting away on his cell phone (not a very 80s thing to do). I swooped in greeting him like a long lost friend and scurried off camera with him. When I told him he was going to be in a movie he was all excited and couldn’t wait to go tell his kids.

During one of the breaks Jen’s assistant Sara told us to make sure there were lines of one or two people at the hot dog vendors at all times during each take, so when I was walking from my first position to point B, I stopped off for a pretzel. I asked the vendor “How much for a pretzel?” “One dallah” he answered. His accent was so convincing I thought “Uh-oh. Is this a real vendor or a cyborg like me?” I started to bring out a one dollar bill from my wallet and for a brief moment we stood locked in a stare – the vendor holding out the pretzel and me holding out my one dollar bill. I didn’t know what to do. Do we make the exchange and square up afterwards? Do I actually buy the darn thing and eat it? Am I supposed to use monopoly money? I wasn’t sure, but I did know that if I didn’t react quickly the scene would look unnatural and Mike Nichols would shout out “Hey, who the heck is the guy taking an hour to buy a gosh darn pretzel!” This even though we were completely out of focus in the background.....if in the shot at all. After a moment the vendor leaned in towards me and asked “are you one of us?” “YES!” I replied relieved. “Then don’t pay me, just take the pretzel and give it back at the end of the take.” Off of my confused look he added “you don’t want to eat these – they are stale prop pretzels.” I took my pretzel and headed off to point B.

Now this pretty much went on all day. Walking back and forth and back and forth – sometimes several times in one take which made it pretty clear that we would not be seen but as blurry figures sloshing about in the background. Otherwise it would look dumb to have the same people walking back & forth.

Well it is human nature, when faced with the monotony of repetitive actions, deemed inconsequential, performed in sub-zero temperatures, to devise some sort of coping mechanism. And this situation, my friends, was no exception. After a while many of the extras began to bond. I had bonded with a guy named Peter. Peter is about 65 years old and has his own advertising agency with big, important clients like American Express. He has only been acting for six months and got into it quite serendipitously when the production team from the Academy Award winning film “A Beautiful Mind” came to the Yale Club (where Peter is President) looking for extras to play the Harvard professors and students during

the scene where Russell Crowe gives a speech there. Peter and some of his Yale disciples were in this scene and in the final scene where Russell Crowe is taken in to the professors' cafeteria by the Nobel Prize rep (played by my acting teacher Austin Pendleton, by the way). Peter said that at one point during a break he found himself sitting next to Russell and they started chatting. It turned out that Russell's father had gone to Peter's high school in Darien, CT as an exchange student from New Zealand (Russell's birthplace) a few years ahead of Peter. Small world. He said Russell couldn't have been more pleasant. After that, Peter had the acting bug and has started taking classes and doing whatever extra work he can find. He has already done enough extra work in six months to get into the Screen Actors' Guild (SAG). You go boy!

So Peter and I made a game of devising ways to position ourselves to get quality camera time. Jen had stopped giving us point Bs and so people were just walking around pretty much wherever they pleased. Peter and I took that as our cue to walk right through the park behind the bench where the two principals were talking – a heretofore unattempted stunt. No one complained until we tried to do it again in the same take. We were gruffly told to go back to the background.

SAG requires a lunch break of at least 30 minutes and so we had some quality time to relax and enjoy the very large food spread that was assembled for us inside a nearby church. There was a salad bar, hot pasta and chicken dishes and an assortment of deserts. We all jostled for position in the line like some kind of artistic charity soup kitchen. I sat across from Peter and Wendy – an attractive 45-year-old divorcee from South Carolina who was friendly enough, but clearly didn't appreciate Peter's and my maverick behavior on set. Then on my left was Paul, a voice over specialist who just started doing on-camera work to supplement his income in these troubled economic times. Lastly, on my right was Frieda, a middle-aged associate at American Express who has been acting all her life on a part-time basis and does it just for a creative release from her corporate job.

After lunch we had to shoot the final scene of the day. It was a short scene with no dialogue where a "steadycam" (a camera attached by a harness to a cameraman so that the camera floats, staying still (or steady) even while the cameraman moves – really quite a cool piece of equipment) follows the lead actor into the subway who is in turn followed by a sinister looking character in all black with a hooded cloak – think the guy from "Scream", but without the mask. As Jen pulled out extras in groups and positioned them around in the background I stood by reading my newspaper. Being an extra had already lost some of its luster for me and I was now hoping to just get finished so my hourly wage rate would be higher – we were approaching hour six. When I was finally called, it was with another extra named Beth. She and I were to be a couple hurrying to the subway off to somewhere or another. We would follow behind the sinister guy and then look back at him as we passed. Interaction with a principal!!! This is what every extra dreams of!! Okay, I wasn't saying any lines, but I would be on camera and, more importantly, in focus! I was ecstatic! Beth had done this a few hundred

times before and therefore took it more in stride. In fact she seemed to be quite chummy with most of the production staff. I made a mental note never to do THAT much extra work. I proceeded to talk to her about who our characters were, how long we had been dating, where we were going, etc., but Beth wasn't into it. She said to me coolly, "Arol, don't forget we are still extras. We don't need to do all that Acting 101 'find your motivation' bullshit." Miffed, I thought "fine then, I'll do character development silently to myself".

This was exciting. We even got to rehearse to get the timing down. While most of the extras were in the background and therefore did not have to rehearse, Beth and I (and Paul and Peter who had also snagged foreground positions) rehearsed three or four times with the "stand-ins" (actors who look somewhat like the principal actors and stand in for them while the camera people figure out what shot they want to get). As a collective we were called the "second team". Gosh, I was now part of a team!! I was no longer just a mere extra like those blurry fools behind me. I was on the second team gosh darnit!!

Finally it was time to shoot. The principals replaced the stand-ins and as the camera crew got ready to shoot I turned to my immediate right to see Mike Nichols giving some last minute direction to the lead character. I could have reached out and touched him – and probably would have if it was not for Beth, already in character, clutching my arm. Then.....

"Quiet on the set!"

"Slate!"

"Speed!"

"Action!"

Steadycam pulls back; Peter crosses in front and disappears down into the subway. Paul follows, then the lead character. Finally the dark angel rounds the corner where he had been watching our hero and heads toward the subway stairs. Cue Beth and I to scamper down the stairs giving the black clothed freak a quick glance and then into darkness.

"Cut! That's a wrap!"

Actually, we took about four takes and then Jen and Sara thanked us and we headed back to the holding pen where we got our vouchers signed. It was exactly an 8 hour day so we got our \$111 plus \$5 for bringing a wardrobe change (even though we didn't use it) and a meal penalty (because they didn't provide dinner for us). As I walked home clutching my voucher receipt and a couple packages of microwaveable popcorn, I thought "man, that was fun. It wasn't acting, but hey, I got paid and it was fun." I hope I don't become jaded like Beth or some of the other extras to doing something that I love.

WRITING:

I am planning (yeah, I have heard that before) to write a one act children's musical for The Castle Theater (where I performed in "Once Upon A Time"). I am considering either a stage musical adaptation of Tony Adams's "Watership Down" or an original story about jungle animals that each use their special abilities to help achieve a common goal (lesson for the kids: everyone is valuable in his/her own way). We'll see if I follow up on this. Time in not in abundance these days.

MUSIC:

ZUZU continues to write more songs and I continue to try to book us in live houses in NYC. We will be playing at The Bitter End again on Thursday, May 16th at 9:30pm. Hope to see you there. Remember to tell the door guy that you are there to hear ZUZU.

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THIS ISSUE'S STATISTICS:

Days since becoming an "actor": 283
Number of Films: 3
Number of TV shows: 0
Number of Theater shows: 4
Number of Subscribers to the Insider: 158
Website Hits: 1,643(www.aroljahns.com).

Mood Meter:

High. I am definitely excited about the fact that I am getting more auditions and getting some callbacks and good feedback on the work that I am doing. This is very positive. However, I am beginning to get impatient that I have not begun to make any real headway in terms of film or television. My agent is doing absolutely nothing for me (it may be time to search for new representation) and only time will tell if my mailing campaign will bear any fruit.

THIS ISSUE'S STATISTICS:

Days since becoming an "actor": 249
Number of Films: 3
Number of TV shows: 0
Number of Theater shows: 4
Number of Subscribers to the Insider: 154
Website Hits: 1,387. (www.aroljahns.com).

Mood Meter:

Still mixed. It is great to be on stage acting and getting paid for it (albeit very little). However, I am starting to get frustrated as I approach one year as an actor (May 28th) with how little I have auditioned for film and television and commercials. Up until now I have been proud of everything I have been doing by rationalizing that I am new to the business and need to scrap and take what parts I

can get. Now I am more confident in my acting ability and am thirsting for more quality roles. Hopefully my acting career coach friend Donna will help make things happen for me with a mailing campaign to casting directors and theater companies.