

## **Earn money as a film actor**

### **Geriatrics can Generate Income As Actors**

*By Gary Michael Smith*

It's hard enough in today's economy to remain employed for any duration-especially if you work in a dynamic field such as information technology. But if you've already paid your dues and have relinquished the 9 to 5 for perpetual R&R, you may eventually decide to create an additional revenue stream while staving off creeping boredom. Face it: sitting on a porch swing, listening to the harmony of crickets, while a gentle breeze caresses the look of monotony on your face, may not entertain you indefinitely. Instead, you may choose to entertain others-in the movies!

### **Where are the Movie Jobs?**

Depending on where you live you may have a goldmine of supplemental income in your own backyard. For instance, locations from Seattle to Miami and New York to San Diego, and points in between, serve as venues for feature films, made-for-TV movies, TV mini-series, videos, and local and national television commercials. While most productions are shot in areas able to provide needed services and optimal shooting vistas, many smaller towns and communities serve a purpose as well.

No matter where you live, your environment could act as the setting for a major motion picture. But how do you find out about such productions? That's the easy part. When a production company has decided on a location, a casting director is hired to find local actors and background extras. This individual or company contacts radio, TV, and print media to get the word out about open casting calls.

At a casting call you'll be eyed up and down to see if you're right for the part, which could range from a restaurant patron sitting at a table next to the star to a dot in a crowd scene. Either way, you'll be paid the same for doing little to nothing other than breathing. Casting companies, for the most part, are hired to fill scenes with warm bodies, unless, of course, you're playing a decedent, which is called for occasionally.

In any event, the casting director will explain such specifics to you regarding what they have in mind for your role in the production, how many hours you'll have to work, where you'll spend those hours, and how much you'll be compensated for your time. If you agree to the terms you'll be given a wardrobe appointment, which often is a week or so before the actual shoot, and you'll also learn when and where the actual shoot will occur. Occasionally, however, you may not learn this information until during or soon after your wardrobe appointment.

### **How Do You Find Casting Companies?**

If, on the other hand, you live in an area that you know is ripe with production work but haven't seen anything advertised, you'll want to contact casting companies directly. You can look in your local telephone directory under "casting directors," "film casting," or some such listing. However, your best bet is to contact your state film commission.

Such a list can be found in the *Film Commission Directory*  
<http://ryder.00movies.com/pages/filmcommissions.html>.

Once you communicate with someone at your film commission office, ask them for contact information for casting companies in your area. Also, inquire about any local or municipal film commissions as some cities set up their own organizations.

## **Paperwork**

As with any job, there are a few pieces of paperwork that you'll be asked to provide-both when applying for work as an extra and once hired for a role.

## **When Applying**

Once you either contact a casting company or appear at an open casting call, you'll be asked to fill out a profile sheet. This paperwork asks for contact information as well as availability. It also has spaces for clothing sizes, which are used by the wardrobe department. To save you and the casting company time, you can prepare such paperwork in the form of a personal profile sheet and a Hollywood format resume.

The profile sheet includes all information that you'll have to provide to the casting company anyway, and the resume will give additional information on your background and prior experience, if any. One or both can include a "headshot," which is a head-and-shoulders photo of you. When you attend an open casting call you will be photographed anyway, and this Polaroid picture will be attached to the profile sheet. So you might as well develop your own profile sheet in advance and have someone take a nice digital photo of you at your best to apply to your profile sheet and resume.

The resume gives any experience you have as an extra or actor. But if you have no experience you may include certain skills that can come in handy on the set. Can you do impressions, speak with an accent or in another language, or simulate mechanical sounds? Do you have a particular skill such as sword fencing, or do you have an uncanny resemblance to someone famous. All this information goes on the resume.

## **Once Hired**

Once you're hired as a film extra, you'll be asked to provide two forms of identification such as a driver's license, social security card, and/or a passport. Then you'll be asked to complete the proper income tax paperwork as well as an extra's voucher for each day you work. In some cases, you'll even be paid to appear at a wardrobe fitting and also if the hair and makeup people have to cut your hair. (Where else are you paid to have your hair cut?)

While the tax information is completed only once and filed, you'll have to complete a voucher every day you work. This is turned in at the end of the daily shoot, and each voucher results in an individual check based on your daily rate.

## **Tips for Getting Hired**

While you'll either be hired or you won't-based on the needs of the production company and casting director as well as your particular look-here are some tips for increasing your chances.

### **Be Easy To Work With**

Someone once said, "Be the easiest person in the cast to get along with." This statement goes a long way-especially with a nonspeaking, background extra. You don't want to be the cause of any trouble; in fact, you want to be the least troublesome person around. Crew and other cast members may already have their hands full with up-and-coming prima donnas as well as those already established in their field. Someone who actually does what they're told when they're told without complaint can be a commodity. Practice such courtesy-both when applying and while working-and you'll be called back.

### **Be Available**

Casting directors and their assistants have much to do in a little time frame. Consequently, expeditiousness and the ability to confirm that you're available are of paramount importance. If you are asked to appear on a certain day at a certain time, be honest with your ability to do so. If there is any doubt, say so, but understand that this could hurt your chances of being hired.

Casting staff needs immediate confirmation so they can check this role off the casting "skins," or roster of roles to be filled. It's worse to agree to appear, then not show up than to state up front that you can't work as specified. Just understand that not being available to work numerous times may cause your name to be removed from the list of potential extras in future productions

Try to work your schedule around the production; don't expect them to work around your schedule. There are plenty other extras that may be available, so if you're currently being called try your best to be accessible.

### **Don't Be Too Picky**

You may be asked to play a role or appear in a scene that isn't particularly glamorous. But the more willing you are to work-even if only the back of your head or your kneecaps appears on screen-the more work you'll get. And don't worry that you're being miscast; if your face is to appear (called a "featured extra"), it's because the casting director believes that you are right for the role.

### **Working for Free**

You may find yourself involved in an independent production, with no distribution and little to no budget. Naturally, as an extra you probably won't be offered payment and are simply asked to be in the film for art's sake. While you may want to limit how many of such productions you agree to work, keep in mind that such work could lead to actual speaking roles. With small budgets, production companies may not be able to afford

standard speaking wages so this might be your opportunity to shine. And some productions may offer a form of delayed compensation whereby you'll be paid based on money the film generates in the future.

## **What to Expect Once on the Set**

For many, the worst part about being an extra is the call time, which often is early in the morning. But if you're already used to getting up early enough to be somewhere for 5 or 6 a.m., this won't be an issue. In some cases, you won't be required to be on the set until later in the day, but shooting days normally are long-anywhere from 8 to 12 hours and sometimes longer. Here is what you can expect once you're "on location."

### **Meals**

The first thing that should greet you on the set is breakfast. This will include a meal that usually is provided by a specialty film caterer. While the cuisine normally is excellent, understand that sometimes extras are subjected to local caterers who may or may not have much experience in dishing out to large groups. It's pretty much a crapshoot, but be optimistic.

After breakfast you'll probably get a "second meal." This lunch may be later than you're used to, around 2 p.m. if not earlier. But it probably will be the last meal for the shooting day. Throughout the day, however, various and sundry snacks will be available through a vendor known as "craft services."

### **Wardrobe**

After breakfast, you'll head straight to wardrobe. These will be the same folks who outfitted you earlier; they've now moved their inventory to an on-set location. They'll ensure that you either receive the clothes they assigned to you or that you've brought with you the clothing they requested. You'll get dressed in the assigned area and head to the next stations-hair and makeup.

### **Hair and Makeup**

Once dressed in your film extra best, you'll go through the hair and makeup stations. Here, you'll be primed for your part. For instance, if your hair needs to be styled for the role-to include trimming-this will be done. And if you're going to be on camera at any close range, the makeup experts will powder your shine. The makeup staff also remains on the set to touch up periodically. And a continuity expert will take frequent snapshots of you and the others to ensure you look the same from scene to scene.

## **What to Bring with You**

After you've had breakfast and have been through wardrobe, hair, and makeup, next comes the waiting. You'll be directed to an extras holding area where you'll wait until you're called. You'll be told early on to bring reading materials, and you'll see why-often you'll have to wait for hours on end before being used. And depending on the whims of the director, you may not even be used, but this is rare.

This is a good time to meet others-to see why they do this work of the silent stars. You'll find a certain camaraderie among extras that is like no other. Some argue on cell phones with spouses who just don't understand why their significant other puts in so much time for so little money. Others use the time to network and make new friends. Yet others read.

## **Working with Production Assistants**

While you're in the extras holding area you'll notice people roaming around with curly wires dangling from earphones. These are the production assistants (PAs) hired by the casting company. Their job is to herd you from your holding area to the set when it's your turn. Initially, they may greet you as you arrive in the morning and may give you preliminary instructions regarding some do's and don'ts on the set. Then, they'll just seemingly float about until pulling you out of the crowd and hauling you off to new and wonderful places.

## **Working with Assistant Directors**

These new places will include the movie set. The PAs get instructions from assistant directors (ADs) to bring in so many extras of such and such gender and maybe a certain age range. So the PAs take you to the set and hand you over to the ADs, who are the ones working with the director. The ADs will tell you what to do, where to do it, and how they want it done. They may give you some direction, but normally it'll be minimal. "Just walk across the room when the actor says (fill in the blank)." Or, "Sit here and pretend you're eating."

One thing you will be told is not to talk. Even if you're supposed to look like you're talking you'll often be told to pantomime. Movie audio equipment is extremely sensitive, and you'll learn new skills that also include walking on your toes to avoid footstep sounds.

## **Average Length of Time on a Set**

Your time on the set will vary. While a scene may take only 15 seconds to shoot, it may be shot 15 times-but only at one angle. The director then may require another 15 takes at another angle, complete with an hour or so while the gaffers reposition lighting equipment and the grips move props and cameras. Depending on how many scenes are shot and how many times, you could find yourself on the actual set for anywhere from one to several hours. Then, it's back to the holding area for more hours of waiting.

## Reap the Benefits

While you'll be given no benefits per se as an extra, your pay will be minimal-as in minimum wage. Most movie extras don't do it for the money but rather for the excitement of meeting new and interesting people as well as the potential for something bigger-like a speaking role. But you will be paid nonetheless at anywhere from \$50 to \$75 per day (depending on the production budget) plus overtime for hours over 8. And the more work you do, the more checks you have stacking up. There's also the chance that you'll be upgraded to a speaking role. It could just be "Excuse me" or "Hey, watch it, buddy!"- whatever the director feels is appropriate. The good news is that you may be moved from \$50 a day to several hundred dollars a day if upgraded.

Indeed, appearing as a movie extra is an exciting and memorable experience. You'll develop a new network of friends and colleagues, and you'll learn a new trade-all while making a few bucks on the side.

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You will want to purchase Gary's book, *Movie Extra 101- Your Shortcut to Stardom*. Read more about it and purchase here. See Gary's page in the Internet Movie Database for his acting and casting credits. Jaimie