

In the Trenches Again

Pilot season can be like a war in which there are no clear enemies.

by Rachel Zients

The following pilot season war stories are true. Only certain names have been changed to protect the innocent.

When Catherine came to L.A., she was close to 20. Now closer to 30, with five pilot seasons behind her and one looming, she looked at me and said, "This conversation is going to depress me."

Pilot season is that time of year when the networks commission a sample—a pilot—of a proposed television show that will give the networks a better idea about ordering a whole bunch of them—a series. And, if the old adage is true that working in Hollywood is like going to war, then pilot season is Hollywood's biggest battle.

If pilot season were a pilot, the pitch might go like this: "OK, so once a year there are all these jobs that could lead to fame and fortune. Producers are down to the wire, willing to see anyone—the film actress, the nobody, the comeback, their nephew. These plucky kids come from all over, traipsing across the country, sleeping on couches, leaving their lives for a few months every year. It'll be great, see, because there's always a story to tell and everyone's story is different!"

Catherine's story is simple. She arrived in L.A. only a few days before pilot season was to begin. Committed to her craft, she was wise enough to do her homework. She made calls. She took some meetings. What she got mostly was, "It's great to meet you, call again after pilot season." Aware that plopping down blindly in town might not get her any auditions, she still hoped something magical might happen. It didn't.

Unfazed, she did what she was supposed to do. She worked hard. She met people. She made sure that whatever the coming year brought it would propel her to a better position for the next year's pilot season. Having done well during the episodic season, she now had a manager and had signed with a small agency. She felt she was in a good place. But it turned out the agent wasn't in a good place—personal problems led to a downsizing of the client list, which included her—and the manager was now unwilling to develop her alone. Another pilot season came and went, as did a few more.

Recalling those five years, her pretty face grew pained as she explained that having never been out for a pilot makes her feel horrible—like a peon, like a failure. What is it about pilot season that can eliminate all sense of worth and pride in other accomplishments?

"The lure of pilot season is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow," she explained. "Pilot season contains an implied promise. There's a potential for ongoing work."

She's not hopeful about the coming pilot season because she's older and she's stopped pursuing it as rigorously, not because she gave up but just because life happened. She brightened briefly, thinking of *The West Wing's* Alison Janney. "She kept plugging away," she said. "But can I wait that long to hit?"

Worth the Wait

"Your whole life is changing!" That's what a head of network casting told Sophie right after her network test. She also told her she'd been a really big fan of Sophie's ever since Chicago.

Sophie's never lived in Chicago.

"I have friends who'd rather have an abortion or go to rehab than test for a pilot. It's just terrifying," Sophie said. "You're in such close proximity to your competition, and sometimes they play mind games with you." Testing—the highest level of pilot season's pyramid, just below getting the part—means a room filled with 30 to 40 hopefuls and, she reported, "They make you sign a contract before you even go in. They want the right to refuse you."

Sophie came to L.A. after working and struggling for about 10 years as an actress. "Unless you're already established, it's stupid to go out. Besides, I couldn't even drive." But she got a play that brought her out here, and it had "a lot of fancy-pants people in it." So she got seen and got in for pilot season. She has now gotten a pilot every year. They've gone to series.

The network casting head was right: Her whole life has changed. But it didn't change after that audition. She remembers thinking, "Please don't say that I'm your first choice until it's official." She went home without even enough money to order a pizza. She called her agents—no word. She woke up the next morning and had to go to some "silly" mass commercial audition—still no word.

She didn't get it. She also didn't get another show, even though she "kicked ass and it couldn't have gone better," because her agents told her she didn't "work the room."

But, she said encouragingly, "It gets easier." When she did finally book a show, even though her \$15,000 turned out to be only \$3,750 after taxes and commissions, and she was "still broke, in debt, and hysterical," she said, "It was amazing!"

Ana Ortiz was also elated when she booked her first pilot, *Miriam Teitelbaum: Homicide*, a one-hour dramedy for the USA network that didn't get picked up. "I was so happy. It was a wonderful experience."

Her first pilot season, though, she categorized as "ridiculous." Her agents kept telling her there was nothing for Latin women—so she suggested, because she is half Irish, that they send her out for non-Latina roles. They weren't aggressive enough for her, and that's "necessary when you're just starting out." By the next year, she had different representation that "really believed in me," she had done a play that got her a part on *NYPD Blue*, and the NAACP had made a stink about network whitewashing. Latina parts opened up, and casting directors were more willing to see her.

Ana has experienced waiting almost a month to hear back after her first audition—assuming she was "not in the running, totally out of it"—as well as the hurry of going home and changing the same day to return for callback.

"The fear is what holds you back," said Ortiz. "When I put too much pressure on it, it never really works well. The moment I walk in, I have a way of psyching myself up. I read Judy Garland's biography, and she would stand in the wings and look out at the audience and say, 'Fuck 'em, over and over.' By the time Ortiz goes in the room, she is "totally electrified and on fire." Also, "the character was confident and cocky, so I could bring that."

It's a good thing, too, because she got lost on the way to her network test for *Kristin*, a mid-season replacement. She was late and thought she had totally blown it, but she chose to use

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Pilot War Stories

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that energy and just went for it. She found out she got it that day. She signed a contract as a series regular for seven episodes. She's been in 12 out of 13.

The Lists Are Life

The walls were so thin, and Karen could hear that the girl in the room was making them laugh. "I'm not funny," she thought. "I don't know what she's doing, but I know I can't do it!" Karen was in the midst of her first pilot season, and she was "entrenched in hell."

Now Karen is an experienced actor and auditioner, but at the time she had really been through only one full pilot season because she was always off on location working. Because of the good work she had done during those times, her first pilot season found her hurrying to four or five auditions in a day. "This sounds so actor-y, but it feels like Lucy-in-the-chocolate-factory episode. You can't really do the job you want to do. The process is so rushed. I can't imagine having the time to hit it every time."

She learned a lesson when she went back for a show after her feedback. "They'd never seen anything more extraordinary in their lives. Go back and do the same thing." She said that in the original audition she'd been "as emotional as a dial tone," but in the callback she "pushed, which is cardinal sin No. 55 of acting. It went swimmingly badly."

There is a feeling of validation when you do get cast. That's how Giselle felt when she got her pilot. "It took a good two years to at least at this point be comfortable. Everybody fucks up. I have the confidence now to say, 'Can I start over?' That's something I never would have done when I first started."

Giselle is the first one to talk about one of pilot season's dirty little secrets:

lists. She explained that casting directors all have lists of network-approved actors—those who have guest starred and have TV recognition. Casting directors will have no problem passing these actors along to the next level. So, in Giselle's opinion, if you're not on the list, you're not going to get a pilot.

"God, I hope that's not true," Ortiz said, even though she has done two pilots. Robert Peters, who has been making a living as an actor for about eight years and has done two pilots, has never heard of lists, either. If they do, Catherine reasoned, all the more important that you do good work that gets noticed during the year leading up to pilot season.

Sophie broke it down even more, explaining there are three lists: top people who need a show, supporting people who've been on shows, and everyone else who is "list-worthy."

Giselle said the only reason she was lucky enough to book a pilot was because it was for cable, knowing she probably wasn't on the list when she started. She now suggests: "Go in as you. It's not about acting. It's about typing—if you fit what they're looking for. Also, I know never to enter the waiting room—too much pressure, too many cute girls."

Indeed, lowering the pressure and getting a little perspective is a good idea at this hectic time.

"There is life after pilot season," says Julia Buchwald of Don Buchwald and Associates, a talent agency with offices in New York and Los Angeles. "The most harmful thing an actor can do is put too much pressure on the whole thing." She doesn't advocate crashing an audition either—that can be very harmful and won't be tolerated. But she does appreciate gumption. "I'm not saying go down to Dublin's with a pen and paper and find out what everyone else went in for, but if you hear about something, look into it."

"Always be prepared," she advised. "An audition could happen at any time.

Keep auditioning skills, especially cold-auditioning skills, tight. Keep looking good and fresh. You may find out at 7:30 at night that you have to go in at 9 a.m. the next day. Keep fresh. Have faith in yourself. It's a fast process. Don't take feedback too seriously, because of the abundance of people being seen. Also, if you get up to bat and test, it could be four or five times."

She also advised working on working the room. She said this doesn't necessarily mean being overly charming; it could mean adapting to the situation and being gracious and quiet. She also offered a little more hope for the less connected: "If it gets down to the wire, they'll see anyone." Also, she still believes talent and experience win out. "Except for the smaller and younger roles that are more about look than training, an actor needs *weight*—needs to be able to carry a show." And that comes from establishing a career over the years.

"Everybody I know has struggled," said Hal. Hal has written for seven different sitcoms, and is about to start casting his own show. He and his partner are about to become show runners—the bosses. Hal is very pro-actor, having worked long and hard himself. "You've got to come in with all your guns blazing," he suggested. "You can't control everything. You've got to make it as good as you can, give yourself your best shot."

Casting will be tough, he admitted, but it should be fun. "With all due respect, we know these characters, these voices," Hal said. "We're looking for those who want to inhabit them and learn—actors who are open and willing to listen to us, to hang out and talk about it."

Hal said they are looking for unknowns—those who are "off the beaten path"—challenging all the theories about "lists," and giving the Catherines and everyone else who may be questioning their paths a push to keep going. Like Hal said, everybody has struggled.



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