

FEATURE

On-Set Etiquette

The golden rule is being polite—even when they're not polite to you.

by Rachel Zients

As actors we are schooled in dance, Chekhov, Scorsese, diction. We are trained in all aspects of the performing arts. So, hopefully, when opportunity comes a knockin' we can say, "Yeah, I can do that. Easy." What we are not privy to during all the Shakespearean training, archery lessons, and seminars on how to get an agent is how to behave when we actually get a job.

Those who come from the theatre know to always acknowledge the stage manager's "15 minutes" with a "Thank you," to never utter the title of the Scottish play, and to never whistle within the confines of the theatre. But what special if not eccentric rules exist on a film or TV set? What is on-set etiquette?

"We all know we couldn't do anything without the actor," said Adam Reed, an experienced first and second assistant director, and now a director. That being said, Reed also recognizes that those actors who know the ropes are more likely to shine on a set. "You're always being observed. Someone's watching. It's really hard to get away with anything," he added. So, basically, it's to an actor's benefit to know how a set runs and who its players are, especially a beginning actor who most likely is working as a background player looking to move up.

A set, from a feature to a music video to a commercial, union or non-union, is run by certain rules. And within a set, each department is its own little world. "That's the only reason it works," Reed said. "There are different specific jobs that have boundaries and are heading toward the same goal. The best thing to do is sit back and observe. That's how you're going to learn the most." And, he added, "Stay out of the way."

Chain of Command

There is a specific hierarchy on set, which Reed breaks down as: producer, director, production manager, production coordinator, first assistant director, second assistant director, second second, and production assistants. Then there are the grips, the gaffers, and the camera department, all of which have their own formula—from the key to the best boy to the director of photography. Again, each little world has its own rules and its own players. As actors, we've seen this illustrated in the treatment of a principal, a dayplayer, and a background actor. And for those who've been background, they know it's better to be one of the others.

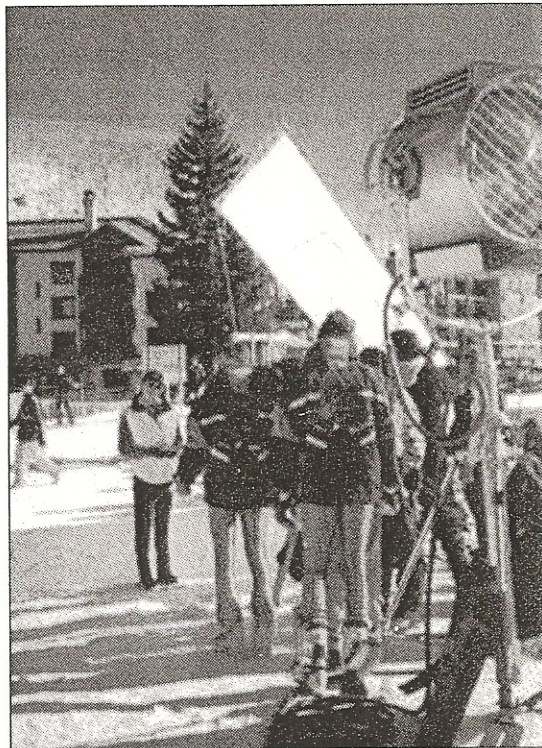
Crew hierarchy is no different. Like the background player who hopes someday to be the star or at least the guest star, according to Reed, "everybody on a set is aspiring to something else." Therefore, be nice to everyone. "Don't piss off the gaffer. He may light you poorly." Or more productively, that nice guy you were very respectful to at the crafts service table may remember you in six months when he is finally directing that script he's been working on for the last three years, and he may cast you. "The industry is really tiny," Reed said. "Reputation is huge, and 75 percent of jobs are on referral. Prima donna behavior is never rewarded. The crew will talk badly of you."

From Reed's point of view, as one who is in charge of picking and placing the background players, he needs people he can control. "Others aren't going to be as apt to take direction." And Reed himself has cast people in his own projects that he's met while he was "A.D.ing" and they were "backgrounding." Asked about the most outrageous or silliest thing he's seen an actor do on a set, he said, "There are so many to choose from. The most outrageous I guess would be girls overtly flirting with the director. They will probably never be asked back again.

"It comes down to tact. It's a balancing of egos, to get what you want as quickly as you can. But it's a fine line between being involved and knowing when to mind your own business."

No Mystery

I tell him the story about when, a few years ago, I had gone down



Lights! Camera! Behave!

to Central Casting to earn some extra money and was immediately cast, because of my then Winona-short haircut, as a tomboy/murder suspect in an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*. I was in a bunch of one-on-one scenes, my character's name was listed on the shot sheet, and I was specifically cast for my look, but I still knew I would get only background pay, because every time I was given instruction it was, "Remember, just mouth the dialogue." They could get away with paying me significantly less if they never gave me a line. I was experienced enough to know I was being screwed, but I was still too green to know what to do about it. After talking to Reed, I realized if I'd known the hierarchy, instead of pouting and complaining to the A.D. as I did, and who quite rudely cut me just as I was about to eat my meal and literally made me put down my tray, I could have gone to the production manager and explained the situation, or even to SAG.

But you learn. You learn the silly names different shots have. You learn when to make a stink and when to sit quietly reading your book while waiting to be called. You learn that after a while craft service makes you fat. You learn about the key and the best boys. You learn Teamsters are kind of fun.

You learn that all the different departments, though separate, seem to know what everyone else is doing. You learn not to sit in certain chairs. You learn that charm and a little luck may get you bumped up. You learn to always say "Thank you" if someone is catering to your needs in any way. And you learn not to take any of it for granted, because everyone in every department has worked hard to get there and will keep working hard to stay there.

I remember my astonishment on another job when a fellow backgrounder who seemed to be rather buddy-buddy with everyone slipped away from the set for an audition for an hour or two, professing, "No one will notice." I was livid thinking he was right and that I would sit there properly following the rules, and that possibly because of his buddy-buddy status he would be rewarded and I would be forgotten. But I remember Reed saying, "It's really hard to get away with anything," and I smile, because I realize Reed's right. I ended up in that movie, and my fellow backgrounder did not. I was respectful. He wasn't.

One needs to be able to apply his or her many, varied skills as an actor in the work environment, and that means understanding that work environment. "Actors who have free time should be a production assistant," Reed concluded. In addition to the on-set vocabulary of martini shot, key grip, please, bottled water, and thank you, and within the realm of set etiquette, the most important lesson of all—as important as anything Strasberg or Adler could have shown us—is this, according to Reed, our very own Miss Manners: "Late is a four letter word."