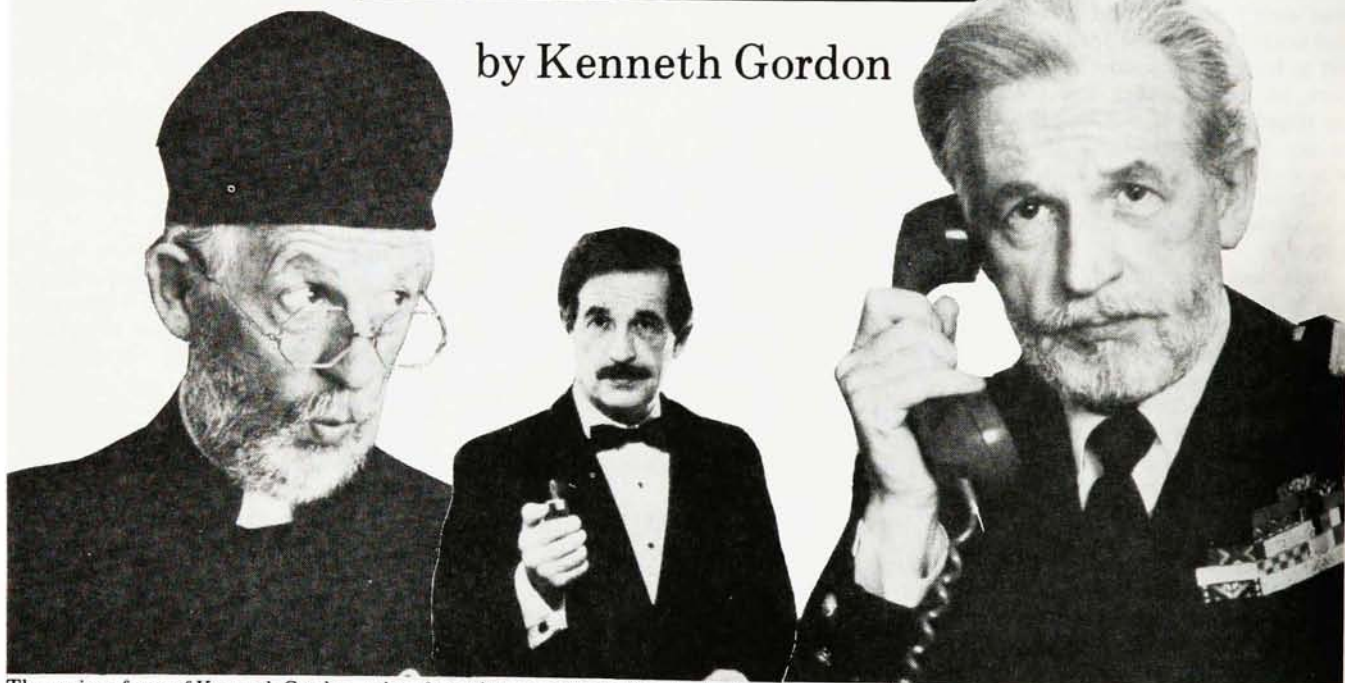


will the real pro screen actors... please stand up!

Kenneth Gordon wrote down the following reflections for the organizers of the Toronto Film Centre's seminar, *The Industry's Approach to Acting*. He distinguishes between the pros and the hangers-on and suggests that producers become more discriminating if they want their money's worth.

by Kenneth Gordon



The various faces of Kenneth Gordon, taken from the promotional flyer he had made as part of his professional equipment.

Can you spot a professional Canadian screen actor? Our fragmented film industry needs a lesson on actors, so this year, more pros should go out and teach! This is far from facetious. Indeed, the ignorance about and disregard for the pro are fundamental gripes in show-biz. And they're the ones which rankle many competent performers. Let's have a closer look.

Screen actors fall into two basic categories. If you're trying harder to penetrate film production, just remember - there's quite a difference between the two! They are simply:

- The career oriented (or career minded)
- The non-career oriented (or non-career minded)

ACTRA (The Association of Canadian TV & Radio Artists) is the nationally recognized professional association of the screen performers. But isn't it ironic that its membership consists mostly (85%) of the non-career oriented? Because

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of this, other members of the film industry can legitimately ask, "Doesn't ACTRA really represent the non-professional person?"

It's a legitimate problem for ACTRA, especially at this time of national show-biz growth. And it demands constructive discussion, now, by the "real" pro performers.

The problem has been that ACTRA lumps all its performers together as "professionals".

A performer must have had a minimum of paid engagements (under ACTRA's jurisdiction) before he or she can officially join the Association. Perhaps the Association could remedy the situation, by now accommodating two categories of actor members. In any case, despite ACTRA's stand (or weakness) there *are* differences between its pros! For this reason, I emphasize the need for our Canadian film industry (and ACTRA is part of it!) to articulate a prime category of screen actors - for the good of the industry.

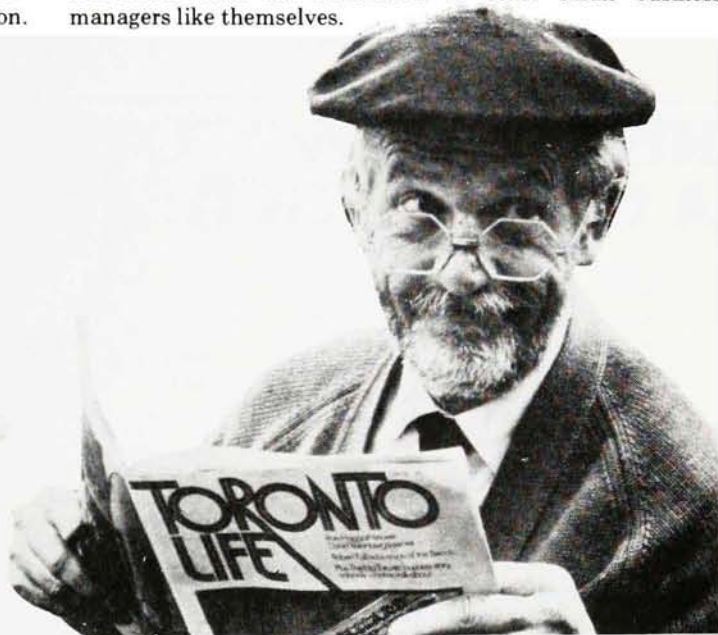
For example, film schools, seminars, panels, workshops, etc., all need lucid counsel on this matter. There should be mutual understanding by all participants. There is no reason

for ambiguity among any who must pay to attend, or those who sit on a panel and perhaps get paid. Speakers should be informed when they'll be addressing the more sophisticated category of screen performer – not the average ACTRA member! It's only fair.

Warning: panelists should gear up their presentation, accordingly, to the "real" pros – or lose the confidence of these actors. A presentation to an uneven mix of actors could resemble the usual hodge-podge found at ACTRA meetings. Few prime artists attend them because they are of little benefit or interest to them. They are already aware of most of the meetings' content.

Should we really seat Canadian actors alongside photographers, directors, publicists? Naturally! Isn't it axiomatic that good, successful, feature films are the result of good, successful, team-work? – a blend of both artistic and business acumen? Certainly! Career-oriented actors are an integral part of that skilled team which includes editors, writers, producers, production managers, etc. To relegate the prime type of performers to the hoi polloi in the acting field shows fuzzy thinking in the industry.

Do we career actors not feel the industry's constant struggle for better quality? Don't we, too, desire a firmer spot for our industry in the international market place? Sometimes it's a battle against stronger, foreign competition.



ACTRA tries to support Canadians in this battle, and with honor. Sometimes it even does it with competence. Screen actors passionately want Canadians to "stick together, benefit together". Hopefully, beyond platitudes, we'll realize the spirit of cooperation. That genuine spirit can, and should, be fostered at every viable film school, seminar, union meeting, ad agency or press conference.

But, in my opinion, it means much better sharing... being more honest than usual... more respectful for the conscientious aspirations and show-biz knowledge of the career actors. If these attitudes aren't evident at learning centers or conventions, much better for the delegates to stay home and read a good book!

Despite apparent under-nourishment within the film industry – be it scarcity of money, lack of mutual team-support or lethargic leadership – career actors feel better than they have for ten years. And there are some reasons: the increased number of film grads, the government's greater awareness of its responsibility to this "resource" industry (through political pressure, if nothing else), the public's

better response to good "Canadian" films (just as it responds to and supports other good films from anywhere), recently announced plans for another film studio complex in the Toronto area, valued at \$2.5 million, etc.

And among these signs of growth, the career screen actors stand resolute. We must have protection for our national film industry! The fishing industry has it! The farming industry has it!

Idealistically, art (including film acting) should have no national borders. We actors well understand this. However, when faced with the rigid barriers set up by foreign nations (e.g. barriers against Canadian actors working in foreign countries), it's just plain stupid and irresponsible for Canada not to have commensurate protection for the actors in our film industry.

But then, only a dodo classifies career screen actors simply as artists. They're obviously business managers as well. What could be clearer? They're self-employed. They run their own business operation. They negotiate, set any fees above minimum union scale, etc. They even hire a good talent agent to help them with some aspects of their business affairs. Furthermore, screen actors belong to an organization (ACTRA) which is (in point of fact!) both an artistic association and an association of other small business managers like themselves.

Unfortunately, the film industry is still a bit foggy about this latter fact of life. It shouldn't be. What's shocking about this ignorance is that the main culprit, among all industry team-members, is ACTRA itself! It's a shame and it's ironic. ACTRA leadership utterly fails in its responsibility (especially to its own members) in not articulating the bi-partisan nature of the professional Canadian actor. Good gravy! What a world of difference it would make to members, and to our national show-biz, if neophytes were "started right" in ACTRA.

The very word "show-biz" elucidates the name of the game. It's composed of two words, "show" and "business". Come on ACTRA and other members of the Canadian film industry! Wake up! Our pro actors have a business nature. It might even be weak in some – but it's vital!

At this point I should state that the real pros know that acting itself, is not necessarily the key to reaching show-biz's most successful echelon. To some degree it also depends on "what happens with whatcha got!" – as is true

in merchandising other services or products. In the long run, though, it's a decided advantage if "whatcha got" is something good. Here are a few things that can affect actors' careers, sometimes:

- o Luck in productions, e.g. the combination of a good part in a good script, with a good director, photographer, editor, etc.
- o Chance meeting, e.g. you, the actor, are on the spot and the idea strikes the engager that he needs a person just like you for the role! You're there – and available!
- o "Who-ya-know", e.g. an agent, director etc. who usually favors you (or you suddenly acquire a smiling, rich film producer as your new father-in-law).
- o Good knowledge of the industry, including politics, people, photo techniques, etc. Good knowledge can help actors impart self-confidence to an engager.
- o Additional skills, e.g. script-writing, directing, stunt work, prize swimming, etc.
- o Timing of a film release, i.e. an actor appears in a film received by the public "at the right time" in world events, or "the right time" for society's new vogues, heroes etc.

- o A charismatic personality liked by the public, e.g. invitations to talk shows, public events, etc.

- o A good press and promotion, e.g. favorable personal publicity via feature stories, interviews, merchandising tie-ins etc.

Earlier, I indicated the quantity of "real" pro screen actors as 15% of ACTRA members. This is the percent which grosses approximately \$4,000 or over, per year, for work done under ACTRA jurisdiction. However, my point is not so much that the specific cut-off point is this dollar figure, per se. Even a veteran could have a bad year and earn less! (Doesn't this sadly reflect the status of professional artists in this country!)

So what, then, is the real criterion of the pros in Canada? It lies in the *degree of commitment that performers have to the film industry*. The essence of this criterion is the actors' application to and preparedness for a full time career.

The attitudes and constructive efforts of the pros reveal that there's a big difference between the two types of Canadian screen actor! And one of them offers a hell of a lot more support to his or her wide-awake team-member in film production! □

HERE'S HOW TO SPOT A CAREER SCREEN ACTOR

Casting screen performers? Most of ACTRA's roster are non-career types. Only about 15% are career oriented. Here's a guide to help you tell the difference. Most "real" pros...

- will spend more money on their career for photos, self-improvement, phone answering services, relevant film workshops, accessories, PR, management services.
- will better organize the business part of being an actor, e.g. have good information and financial records, contacts, expenses, etc.
- will be more conversant with people in the film industry, e.g. directors, assistants, writers, make-up artists, other actors, producers, photographers, etc.
- will be more able to distinguish the difference between equipment on the film set e.g. a "cookie-cutter" from a "barn-door."
- will better understand the problems of the career actor.
- will consider engagers as "their clients", whether or not casting or talent agents are involved. Career actors value them and often maintain contact via phone, direct mail, promotional material, etc.
- will know more about ACTRA contracts, rules and regulations, rates, deductions, etc.
- will be more likely to have served on an ACTRA committee or council or to have joined a film related group e.g. CCFM, Toronto Film Center, CFEG, etc.
- will likely be experienced stage and radio performers.
- will always note sincere, but competent, consideration of the pro shown by any agents, directors, other actors, script people, producers, or gophers.
- will be more knowledgeable about politics affecting their chosen career.
- will observe and also encourage others to observe the best ethical business principles and practices in the industry.
- will be more willing and able to offer career help to their fellow or sister actors.
- will be more willing and qualified to contribute and participate in activities related to our Canadian industry.
- will regularly read more about Canadian show-biz in publications like Cinema Canada, Motion, Canadian Film Editor, Marketing, Trade News North, Financial Post, Variety, daily newspapers, etc.
- will want agents, directors, and producers, to recognize their status and treat them differently from non-career performers.
- will likely be members of the Canadian Actors' Equity Association.
- will have been chosen for more on-camera residual roles in TV commercials.
- will more likely be able to command overscale rates.
- will be more likely to have done narration, voice-overs, radio commercials, and to have an audition tape available at their talent agent.