

Confessions of an extra

They can't make a movie without us — so why, oh why do we not get the respect to which we are entitled? It is a fact that extras, those unacclaimed mortals you see in every film released, those oh so very important adjuncts to the finished product, are never given the credit they deserve. But never mind, we console ourselves: just let the cheques keep coming in.

Pin money I call it, after I've done my stint with the likes of Sophia Loren, Liza Minelli, George C. Scott, Geneviève Bujold, Angie Dickenson, Donald Sutherland, the late David Niven, and others.

I am a grandmother yet I have been in some 40 films now. It is a great way to add to my fixed income. Hardly a film is made which does not require someone in a cocktail party or restaurant scene. Sometimes the scripts calls for the girl in the lead to bring her lover home to meet Maw and Paw — even granny too.

Funerals are big for extras. In the script someone is always killed somewhere along the line — ergo, funerals. On one such occasion — fortunately a comedy flick — one of the extras fell into the grave as we stood around watching a make-believe coffin being lowered. We were asked to peer sadly into the cavity but this extra turned her ankle on a stone and, plop, into the grave she went. She was pulled out weeping, but it seemed so bizzare that we couldn't help laughing, possibly the first time that cemetery had echoed with laughter. Since it was a comedy, the scene was kept in and shown on screens across the land.

In another funeral scene I set out to show everyone what a great actress I was. Wearing a black hat, veil, black dress, crossing myself devoutly and weeping real tears, I watched as the coffin was lowered. I was congratulating myself on a great effort until the director tapped me on the shoulder and said "Cut the comedy. You are only here to



• Riches to rags, the extra's fate:



Nettie Harris in contrasting roles

make sure that gangster is buried. You hate him." So much for my great scene, but why, oh why can't they ever tell us beforehand? We extras never get to see the script.

If a film is being shot in the rain, or out of doors on a freezing day, wardrobe girls will bring out raincoats and sweaters, but even then the waiting-around can still be uncomfortable. On the other hand, many scenes are so easy that it seems a crime to get paid for them. A street scene, for instance. Wouldn't a city street look unnatural and barren if there were no people walking around? So extras are hired to walk around. Simple.

Say there's a concert. Sometimes hundreds of extras are needed to sit around in a theatre and clap hands on-cue. Not hard to do at all. I was in one such scene with Mickey Rooney who had been flown from New York to Montreal to appear in the film. The film itself never

appeared. I don't think it ever was released, a fate suffered by many.

But with the many films being shot in Montreal and Toronto, the rush to get into the movies has become a stampede. Recently I answered an "extras needed" call on a shoot. At nine o'clock in the morning, there was already a line of young and old folks four deep that stretched solidly along two city blocks. Many had been standing in line since six o'clock in the morning. I beat a hasty retreat.

Extras do not need to be in *Actra* although this writer is. They do, however need a work permit. Unscrupulous agents (and there are some) will obtain work permits for their sisters, cousins, uncles, aunts, children and grandmothers. With the whole family in as "extras" you can garner quite a windfall. Supposedly, Canadian films must cast the first 25 extras from *Actra* ranks but this rule is seldom adhered to. Small

wonder that many of us sometimes feel like left-overs. The ranks are getting tougher and tougher to break through, experienced or not.

Yet who can resist a call? Who can resist the excitement of make-up, wardrobes, hair-stylists, crew members, cameras, all focussed on you as a member of the cast, even if the part is minuscule?

And then the director calls, "Silence please."

"Cut." The light wasn't right. Silence please. "Cut." Wrong angle. Silence please (and now you can hear a pin drop). "Cut." A passing truck ruined the sound. Silence please. Good, it is a take. It will be in the can.

At home that night I tell my daughter, "I'm in the can."

"No surprise" says she, laughing. "Isn't that where you usually are?"

Nettie Harris •

LETTERS

Queen's to examine the operations of the Broadcast Fund, and additionally of Telefilm, to undertake precisely the kind of scrutiny of our operations which has been so badly lacking, particularly from the academic community.

I further stated that, given most of the information is within the computer, we could break out on a statistical basis, any particular analysis they so wished.

6. On several occasions, both as Executive Director and as Head of the Broadcast Fund, I have spoken publicly on many issues concerning the future of

film and television in Canada. On each of those occasions, I have taken the trouble to provide and prepare a text, in order that people can clearly understand the positions and the thinking of this organization.

Again, no effort was made to obtain any of these statements, or public texts.

7. I now find myself prisoner to a circumstance which is mightily disagreeable: words and attitudes have been put for my attribution, which are clearly not my own.

Conclusions and extrapolations have been made, which reflect no intellectual scrutiny or analysis.

Thus, to rebut this document will

give it a credence and authority which it does not deserve.

Cinema Canada in printing this piece is circulating views that are not my own nor that of Telefilm, employing facts that are simply wrong or incomplete, and arriving at conclusions which are perverse, all under the guise of scholarly dispassion.

Peter Pearson,
Executive Director,
Telefilm Canada,
Montreal

Grierson correction

In the January 1986 issue of *Cinema Canada*, Tom Waugh erroneously reported in his article about the 1985 Grierson Documentary Seminar that I was president of the Ontario Film Association. Juliette Gillespie was and is president of the Association. I was co-ordinator of Grierson Documentary Seminar in 1985, and will, in all probability, co-ordinate the Seminar in 1986.

Christine J. Boulby
co-ordinator,
Grierson Documentary Seminar.