

¡PULSO PULSE!

The Beat Of A Latino In The Entertainment Industry.

By Marco Antonio Rodriguez (Latino Leaders Columnist)

Extra! Extra! Read All About It!

Being an extra in a production can benefit your game in the entertainment industry!

Guilty as charged! For the longest time, I had quite the aversion to taking on “extra” work in television or film. My agent would call to say I had not booked the job, but extras were needed and the casting director and/or client requested me. “They didn’t like you enough to book you as principal, but here are some scraps should you want them.” I quickly decided to circle NO on every “Are you willing to work as an extra?” section of the information forms given at auditions. However, soon I would discover that when in process of building a career and name, particularly in smaller markets, being an extra could provide a beneficial and empowering boost.

In the television and film industry, an extra (also called “background”) is defined as a performer, in film or television, who appears in a nonspeaking capacity, usually in the background (for example, in an audience or busy street scene). War films and epic films often employ background actors in large numbers: some films feature hundreds or even thousands of paid background actors as cast members.

Extra work was how I got initiated into the world of entertainment. Paying my dues, as they say. Hours of: “Shut your trap hole!” or “Get out of my way!” and my personal favorite: “You’re supposed to look scared, not constipated!” Condescending looks from celebrity cast members who were once in the same position, underpaid and overworked assistant directors with a Napoleon complex, scraps of the hard and extra chewy parts of the meat at lunch (extras usually eat last)... Once I felt my dues were paid I saw no need to do it again. EVER. I may not be recurring on a television show or booking every national commercial, but I work steadily and hard to build a name for myself. It takes just five minutes with my mother to wake up and smell the humble pie baking in the oven: “¿Pero qué te crees tú, muchacho?” “Somebody’s gotten a little too big for his pantalones!” “What name exactly have you built, huh?” “¡Nobody knows you!” “Have you paid off your student loans? NO!” “Where is that house you promised?”

When work isn't steady and you are still building a name, taking on extra jobs, especially if it's a union extra (you don't have to be union to do union extra work) is not just a great way to get paid to sit around for hours on end and catch up on reading (Kindles and Nooks unite!) but also build towards getting your union card. It's a way to network with fellow (extra) actors or aspiring actors who may have valuable information or a future project that could be of interest to your career, and it's an opportunity to witness the beasts of show biz at play in their natural habitat: the set.

I discovered colleagues of mine who were booking decent roles in films and commercials, but not quite well known, were gladly taking on extra jobs. They see it as getting paid to learn and carefully network. I say carefully because as an extra, your job is to do as you're told and stay out of the way. There's no quicker way to be escorted off a set then to run after Mark Wahlberg for an autograph while screaming "Marky Mark!" like a nine-year old pageant queen after a sugar binge. Or so I hear... AHM! My colleagues also shared that in right to work states (such as Texas and New Mexico) where union work is scarce, extra work can make the difference. Union extra jobs are an opportunity for members to stay busy and remain eligible to receive basic health insurance (you must make a certain yearly amount to be eligible for the union basic health insurance). And the biggest perk of extra work... Union jobs offer the opportunity for what's called an "upgrade." This means that production has realized they are missing something or someone not previously thought of or planned: a person or persons doing and/or saying something to justify the product and/or scene. That's when they turn to extras in search of a featured or sometimes "principal" upgraded role for a quick fix. I personally got to experience this one.

A casting director noticed I had shaved my head for a supporting role on an episode of a network television show (Hey, I'm a method actor! Actually, they paid extra for the shave.). She was casting an American Airlines national commercial for which I auditioned and not selected. I had clearly circled NO on willing to work as an extra, but they were desperately looking for military looks. I turned it down. She insisted and asked that I do this as a favor. Although reluctant, when a casting director asks for a favor you say YES! The commercial was to be shot at an airport. Cue whiny actor rant: not only was it a long drive from home, parking was a disaster and shooting got started over five hours late! However, I was getting paid to sit around, catch up with fellow actors, watch the crew set up shots and even take several naps!

I was thrown in a group of three men and given the background role of navy seal #3. My navy outfit was so tight I was forced to wear a dancer belt to hide the goods (not the product we're selling, people!). The "Principal" navy guy was to be in front of us. The camera would focus on him and the extra smiley stewardess taking his plane ticket. The rest of us were blurred fillers in the background. This went on for hours. And hours... I noticed the camera was placed on a crane and would go into wider and wider angles as each take progressed. Wide angles meant we, the blurred ones, could possibly be seen which could lead to being upgraded.

The shoot went into overtime (more pay!), and we were given a form to sign in case we were "upgraded" in the editing process. Months went by, I heard nothing. I caught several of the spots on television but never the one with the navy guy and his blurred pals. I continued my mission of circling NO on being an extra. One happy day, I get a check in the mail. It's from the actor's union. CH-CHING! I had been upgraded! Not only had I been upgraded to principal, the residual checks kept on coming for a whole year and a half! A rare occurrence!

In the world of entertainment the word "background" or "extra" is almost anathema. Everyone knows it is a stepping-stone in the business but once it has been climbed no one dares look back and go there again. Taking on extra work seems beneath what you've put in to build somewhat of a name for yourself. But perhaps this theory is somewhat ego based. One must be careful of turning down things based on ego. Depending on the market you are in and how actually known you are (thanks for the reality check, mom.), if the work isn't pouring in and the opportunity presents itself (especially if it's union work) one should consider accepting. Not only are you building towards getting your union card (which, if you're planning to hit markets like Los Angeles and New York, is GOLD), you are also absorbing the show biz machine in all its insane glory. You are (carefully) networking with fellow actors and possibly even crew. You have been given an opportunity to, in most cases, sit around and get paid to not do very much but just be present in what on occasion can be an exciting process. This could turn out to be the break you need. Look at Nicolas Cage. He started as a background actor in the film *Fast Times At Ridgemont High*, and he's Francis Ford Coppola's nephew! My mother summons me now. The baking is complete. I'm off to have my slice of soul-stirring humble pie.