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"EXTRA" WORK for Brain Surgeons®

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Bill Dance Casting

by Mike Wood at **HOLLYWOOD OS®**

You open the door and you're greeted by some of Hollywood's greatest stars. Jim Carrey, Russell Crowe, Sally Field, Nicolas Cage – all looking back at you and welcoming you to the world of show business. It may sound like a dream, but this colorful cast of characters is not any producer's latest pet project but rather a culmination of one extras casting company's collectively creative minds. Welcome to *Bill Dance Casting*. These familiar faces line the walls in posters of past projects: *A Beautiful Mind*, *Ed TV*, *Stigmata*, *Leaving Las Vegas*, *The Grinch*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Boys Don't Cry*, and many more.

Just by stepping through the door of *Bill Dance Casting*, one can't help but feel like movie magic happens here. And if you need more of a reminder, just sit down and have a chat with Bill Dance himself.

"You have to grow as an actor. As a person. Learn. Rediscover yourself. This is art reflecting life – even if it is 'just extra work' [as some say]. But there is no 'just.' The background is part of the whole. Without it, something integral is missing. It's not real," Dance explains with great passion.

We're sitting in his office, clean but still cluttered from a year-ago move, discussing what makes this man and this company tick, and what background acting means to him.

"Why not create a character? An emotional moment and emotional connection. Why just go through the motions when you can go through the emotions?" asks Dance. He's a firm believer in what he



L to R : Bill Marinella, Bill Dance & Terence Harris in the lobby of Bill Dance Casting.

does and what 'extras' bring to a scene and to a film's entirety. To Dance, extras aren't 'extras' at all, but an integral part of the filmmaking process.

He has so many tales to tell and re-tell from the trenches of background casting, but one of his favorites remains his days on the Louisiana set of *Steel Magnolias*. The star-studded ensemble cast included Sally Field, Julia Roberts, Dolly Parton and some very specifically picked background actors. The film was shot in the same town the real people the film is based on were from – where it all took place – so Dance did his research to find the locals who knew the real people portrayed by Field, Roberts and others. "This made for highly emotional scenes that were highly effective," he says. "Directors want a slice of life that's real," explains Dance, "I enjoy giving them that."

For the critically acclaimed TV-Movie, *And The Band Played On*, which sought to put a human face on the AIDS epidemic, Dance went to clinics to find truly HIV-positive people to "bring in the realism." Dance pinpoints what he feels is so important to his craft: "Being able to tap into something

that's real so what you're seeing on the screen is real... that's something special. They're not just extras."

Before Ron Howard backed out of *The Alamo*, Dance was in Texas preparing for extras casting. He had 189 names of soldiers from the famous battle and he was in the process of picking a specific extra for every name he had on this list so each background performer "could recreate that person... become that person," explains Dance.

On the lighter side of realistic casting, Dance recalls requiring background actors to audition for background spots on Howard's *The Grinch*. SAG actors were paid the SAG-required quarter check and "everyone just had fun with it," Dance says. "I had the actors come in and prepare a Seussian dialogue all their own, a monologue, or a biography." Imagining the madness, I asked why he would go to so much trouble for background actors in a huge studio movie. "The quality of a Seuss character has to be internal, yet come out in the performance. I had to see that in each person. We contacted Ringling Brothers, Cirque Du Soleil performers, we went all over... across the spectrum. Contortionists, dancers, tight rope walkers... not extras at all, they created themselves as characters." He tells me about the pictures they took of these performers in full make-up and hair, even prosthetics for some. And from the box full of photos he soon shows me, I see just how 'into it' many of these performers got. They looked like they stepped off the colorful pages of Dr. Seuss before arriving at the *Bill Dance* office.

Bill Dance Casting

continued from p. 3

WHO IS BILL DANCE & WHAT IS BILL DANCE CASTING?

Bill Dance Casting can boast itself as a veritable who's who of extras casting directors. Just six small degrees separate Tammy Smith, Sande Alessi, Kristan Berona, Pete Sutton, Stan Landsman and many others in the extras casting community – they all began at *Bill Dance Casting*.

Bill Dance himself is an east coast transplant from a small town in Virginia. He currently lives "quietly" in Toluca Lake and despite what many might perceive of his position, he claims to be a simple person who believes in simple pleasures, "I can be complex, but I try to keep it simple. The real. The now." "If I have one incredible quality," Dance suggests, "I follow through. If I say I'm going to do something, I do it. I say I'll go to your showcase? I will. A play, and I say I'll attend? I will. I go. It's about commitment. This business is about commitment. That's what makes a person stand out. Commitment. I have that and everyone needs to have it."

Bill Dance began his career as a professional dancer in New York and later Los Angeles. He did his undergraduate studies at UCLA as a Theater major and danced his way through productions on stage and screen in numerous TV specials. He kept at it until he was about 26 or 27. "I just didn't want to do it any more. I wanted to act. I wanted to do something that had more emotion to it," he says.

An actor he knew asked if he would be his Stand-in for a movie in which he was working. "I didn't look much like him but I was the right height and sizes and such and that's how it all started." People behind-the-scenes took notice – not of Dance's acting ability but of other abilities. Dance explains that those he met in his early experiences "just knew something about me I didn't know or at least wasn't aware of." What was it? His instincts for casting.

Dance's first casting job was for a TV pilot that never aired called *Moose*. But he says his "real start" came with the Alex Haley and Norman Lear-produced pilot for the short-lived TV series *Palmerstown, USA*.

"This is where I learned how organic casting is. It was in me." And he has been casting projects ever since. I have to ask why.

Dance explains as matter-of-factly as anyone who knows him might expect: "I fell into it, really. I needed a job. Never did I realize I would still be doing it so many

years later – this sort of creative production. But I guess it was just something that was meant to be." Dance pauses and continues, "I like being able to find people and release their potential. I think I see things in people, better in other people than myself." Just like the people who found Bill Dance.

DOES BILL DANCE RECOMMEND BACKGROUND WORK FOR 'REAL' ACTORS?

"For people coming out of Juilliard and what have you, probably not. But for 90%, it's a way of learning the business. There's no real stigma of once you do background work you'll never work as a principal. It's a lot of nonsense," says Dance.

"I think background work can be a launching pad for many. If people pay attention and take in what surrounds them. Just don't walk through life. Breathe it. Extra work is hands-on experience and an excellent way to get their feet wet," he says.

Dance has cast many an actor as a background player who have gone on to bigger roles in different artistic venues. He rattles off a few who come to mind immediately, "The Go-Go's, Paula Abdul, Eva La Rue, even Cindy Margolis who now is all over the place it seems." More recently he cast a background actor who ended up landing a principal and pivotal role in Joel Schumacher's *8MM*.

When the principal casting director has moved onto something else or some other project the extras casting director is still there working and has been known to aid in the principal casting process. Dance has done such duties with recent principal additions to *Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind* and the soon-to-be-released *Phone Booth*. Dance explains that he'll see everyone he thinks is right for a role and then he'll go to the director with his top choices. "I'll say to the director, 'Here's the best of what I have. Who do you want?'"

WHAT MAKES BILL DANCE CASTING STAND OUT?

"If directors need something artistic or unusual, they come to *Bill Dance Casting*. We've built a reputation for that. You need bodies? Call someone else," says Dance. "I think our trademark is realism. I enjoy the real world, real emotions. Everything, everything is based on human emotion. I see that in people."

He admits he feels there are those extras

casting directors who don't do the work and this bothers him. "No one is artistically doing the work. They are just farming it out." I ask him to explain. "I think the trust factor matters in this business," Dance says, "Longevity. I've been at this a long time. We're professional, we're here to do the work. If someone's right for the job they're going to get the job. I like the personal touch. I want people to feel unique even when there are 300 people. I don't think [everyone] does that."

"Everybody wants the quick fix. It's not instant pudding," Dance continues. "We put in the time. There are so many things going on and going into getting a movie made. Everyone involved tries to make it look easy – that's their job. But the trick is, never let them see you sweat. Don't let them see the work. If you do, you've failed."

I ask Bill Dance how he feels about *Calling Services*. "People do what they have to do. Either as a casting director or a background actor. But I feel that sometimes there is a lack of communication when there is a middleman," explains Dance. "The facts, the requirements, what have you, get watered down and that worries me." He concedes, "I guess they can help in certain situations, but even if you have a *Calling Service*, you must be in our files."

ADVICE FOR BACKGROUND ACTORS

"Natural, realism, passion. That's the secret. Accept who you are and use it to bring depth and life to your work – whatever it is. It's a lifelong process," says Dance.

On a more basic level? He smiles and offers, "Stay put. Be stationary. Stay in one place. Keep phone numbers the same as much as possible. We have to be able to find you. We have to keep all this straight and how are we going to do that with so many people coming and going and back and forth?"

Dance also says to ask yourselves: "Are you in it for longevity? Be honest with yourself and the people who hire you. If you're just doing background work to test the waters that's okay too, just make no illusions about what you're doing or why you're doing it."

He's got a lobby full of eager background actors wanting to register as we're talking and it's almost time to begin the orientation. That's right. It's not a cattle call or a cold and impersonal registration process. Bill Dance sits down and speaks to the

Bill Dance Casting

continued from p. 4

gathering group about what he and his fellow casting directors expect from their talent. Dance takes time to answer questions, he is friendly to everyone, and he appears to take a genuine interest in each and every person who is present. The meticulous care he takes in selecting background for a film begins in the *Bill Dance* lobby with the man himself.

While Dance works with the new recruits, I venture into the inner office and spend some time with Terence Harris and Bill Marinella, two main components of the successful *Bill Dance Casting* machine. Gary Davies works out of the Bill Dance offices too, but he is currently working on casting a project independently.

The walls are covered with more framed one-sheets of past projects. Background actors also share the spotlight with the likes of Tom Cruise and others because registration cards are pinned to various cork boards. One such board is for *Seabiscuit* – with extras in appropriate hair and makeup for the 1930's-set piece. Another board posts reliable talent who are willing to work as interns from time to time. "Interns can help us in a temporary situation where we just need to get a job done. It's very cool they can help," says Marinella.

There are piles of papers and pictures of every shape and variety surrounding us as we settle in to talk more about the intricate world of extras casting. Amidst the staring eyes of too many headshots and snapshots and such to count, I talk with Terence Harris and Bill Marinella. Harris met Bill Dance in 1985 through his involvement in the now-defunct, *The Casting Group* and *Atmosphere Casting* (the latter with no affiliation to either of the two current companies with similar names). Harris has been working with Bill Dance, on and off, since that date.

Harris began his extras casting career on the 1983 sitcom *Webster*. Stints on other early-80's shows like *Matlock*, *The A-Team*, *Moonlighting*, and *Cagney & Lacey* led Harris to experiment with extras commercials casting "for a change." He strictly did commercial casting under the *Atmosphere* banner from '87 to '90 to "see a different side of the business."

Harris settled, semi-permanently, into the *Bill Dance* office in 1991 while Dance went off to do extras casting on location for the Cruise/Kidman epic *Far & Away*. "Everyone thought I was Bill Dance. They would hear people call me Terence, those who knew me, and not know what was going on. I

got a kick out of it," remembers Harris.

Harris' roots in extras casting fall along the six degree of separation lines we spoke of earlier. *Axiom's* Rich King was the first guy Terence ever met in the business and both he and Harris have been around it ever since. Terence has also worked with Dixie Webster-Davis and Christopher Gray among others, but says he likes it where he is right now.

"Bill Dance is such a hands-on guy," says Harris, "*Bill Dance [Casting]* is a comfortable place to be because Bill really loves extras casting. In fact he likes extras more than most people, and I enjoy them too, so it's important I think."

"It's a challenging, 24/7 job," admits Harris, "but it has its flexibility. I enjoy the flexibility."



Terence Harris sorts through photos for a music video he is casting.

I prod him for more on why he sticks with extras casting after almost twenty years. "I'm comfortable with background casting, I've been doing it a while now. It is who I am and where I am. I don't need to have my name in lights," explains Harris.

While Dance himself primarily concentrates on features or TV movies, Harris likes the variety other projects can bring to his plate. "I like to do music videos and commercials," he says, "get in, get out, make it happen and it's over." He retells of times he got caught in the midst of mishaps on long-shooting movies. "If you get in a film, and you get stuck in a bad situation you're stuck until it's done. Until that movie's

wrapped. That may take months. Plus, [extras] get a kick out of doing commercials. I'm able to help them get that. They're so appreciative. I like that."

Currently Harris is casting music videos for Enrique Inglesias and Lionel Richie. Today he's looking at photos of model-types or those who THINK they are model types for lead roles in Inglesias' latest song-to-TV music video. I watch him filter through the stacks and stacks of headshots and Zed cards and wonder what all the piles mean. Most of them just mean "no," but the others are separated into categories they MAY fit. The trick is, there's much more to casting than just the photos that lay spread out on the table before us.

Terence tells me the tale of a time when a director chose a principal actor for his

music video without seeing the real, live actor. "I asked the director up front, 'anybody meet this guy or see him face-to-face?'" says Terence. "What I got was, 'we saw his pictures.' Well, I tried to warn them and tell them the danger in that... but..." What unfolds is the all-too-familiar story of how an airbrush and some really friendly lighting did wonders for a particular young actor. "It's not that he was ugly or unattractive," insists Harris, "it's just that photo shoots can cover up things that a real, moving camera will see. Lighting

can never be adjusted for every small move on film. You can hide things in photos that can't be covered up in shooting."

This example only further explains why the standard, color, waist-up, 3"x5" photo is considered the 'headshot' of the background casting community. "Pretty pictures are nice, but real-people photos are what we need," says Harris. The message? Look like your photos because background acting is about realism not glamour. There aren't models lining the aisles of your local *Ralph's* and movies need to look real. Remember, background work requires all types of people with all types of looks. Be what you are.

Bill Dance Casting

continued from p. 5

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Other pet peeves the casters at *Bill Dance* care to share:

Bill Dance: "Background actors who haven't done anything but think they know everything. Everyone's talking, talking. And nobody listens. Nobody wants to really do the work of perfecting one's craft. Everyone is interested in 'me' – themselves. Stop and listen... and learn."

Bill Marinella: "People who say they call just to say 'hi' or whatever, but are really just fishing for work. Or extras who are constantly submitting for the wrong thing. By calling in or doing it on your website [*Hollywood OS*®]. Do it once, they get an 'A' for effort – for trying to get work. But after that, no."

Bill Marinella's efforts as a child actor are what led him to pursue a career in Hollywood as an adult. Before he became the man who chose the extras he was the child who WAS the extra. His first extra work? A student in the 1983 comedy classic *A Christmas Story*.

Marinella drove to Los Angeles from Key West, Florida on New Year's Eve 1995 to begin his new year in a new city with a dream he had held since a child. He arrived in LA ten minutes before midnight ready to take on LA as an adult actor. But once here, the former child actor came to a conclusion: "After I tried [acting] here as an adult. I realized something. I sucked." Woops. (Some random trivia: as a child, Marinella had roles in the Nick Nolte/Jobeth Williams comedy *Teachers* as well the Paul Schrader-directed *The Light Of Day* with Michael J. Fox.)

As a casting director, Marinella admits he likes variety and seeks out projects that interest him. "I go where the work is as an independent when I can," he explains. He's currently helping Sande Alessi on a project and also casting some reality-TV type stuff for *The Playboy Channel*. "There's no nudity for the extras," he promises, "people always ask and think there will be, but it's not."

He entered the behind-the-scenes casting world when luck and experience on the other side of the lens had lost their luster for him. He sent a picture and a letter to current co-caster Terence Harris with the information that they shared a mutual friend. But Harris never responded. Persistent as one's got to be in this biz, Marinella sent another letter and wrote "big" on the outside of the envelope: "FRIEND OF FELICIA!" Harris opened this letter and now, as fate



Bill Dance photographs a new registrant.

and Felicia would have it, these two men share the same office. Terence remembers, "I called him and told him to show up at a 7AM production meeting the next morning if he wanted to do it. To help me. I never thought he'd show. He did."

"At the meeting I was telling the director what I thought he should do," recalls Marinella. "I was just shaking my head thinking, 'who is this guy? I just met him,'" laughs Harris.

I look to Harris. "Do you regret opening that envelope?" I ask with a grin. A short pause. A big smile. "No, No way. We're attached at the hip."

It's at this point that the casting company's so-named-caster himself, Bill Dance, comes in to take pictures of the extras he's just held an orientation with in the lobby. He looks at me and whispers why he likes to take the photos himself, "How people hold themselves is very interesting to me. It tells me a lot about that person. How they use their space."

Bill Dance and his crew are always watching, always casting – even when you don't know it. I wonder if the guy standing against the white wall knows that right now?

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