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"EXTRA" WORK for Brain Surgeons®

The Authority In Extras Casting Information™ Quarter Three Magazine, 2003

## Monica Cooper Casting

Casting Director & Producer  
Extraordinaire

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by Mike Wood at Hollywood OS®

The line wraps around two city blocks and then some. The sun is high in the summer sky and the heat lends sweat and frustration to the faces of thousands of waiting extras. The background actors in line are getting anxious and restless after hours of waiting – and then suddenly – past them, strides a tiny, singular young woman with way too much pep in her step considering the heat and the waiting. She passes the masses, struts to the front of the line (apparently unaware of their scowls) and introduces herself to the phalanx of burly crossed arms at the door.

The scenario plays out something like this:

YOUNG WOMAN: "Hi, I'm here to audition for Monica Cooper. My agent said I would be just perfect for this movie and told me I had an appointment to audition for Monica at 2:30."

PHALANX OF ARMS: Chuckles. Then silence.

Monica Cooper remembers with a hearty, infectious laugh that this bold young woman looked (and we quote) "mighty white" set against the sea of African-American faces waiting in line at this open call for the feature film... *Panther*.

It turns out the naive and brazen young woman was really just misinformed – totally misled, in fact. Lily-white and barely-eighteen, our very own Angela Bertolino, was told by a Sunset Strip Casting Scammer du jour that she was "just perfect" for a part as a member of the 60's black-power party The Black Panthers. Oops.

Needless to say, Angela wasn't cast as a Panther in the picture. But an amused Cooper admired her resolve, her gumption and her guts to cut through a line of potential-Panthers and gave the then-newbie her first behind-the-scenes assignment on a feature film.

After the film wrapped, Cooper encouraged Bertolino to keep in touch for future work. A stubborn Bertolino purposely tossed her only contact's number in the trash and vowed to make it on her own in the entertainment industry, "not wanting to ride on anyone's coattails to get there."

It wouldn't be until a couple of years later that these two women would cross paths again – the fate of careers and friendships work in mysterious ways. Angela was indeed making it on her own, living in Los Angeles and researching a very early edition of "EXTRA" WORK for *Brain Surgeons*. She faxed an information form off to M.R. Cooper Casting – not initially making the connection that the M.R. wasn't really a mister at all, but rather the very "Ms. Monica Cooper" whom she had met several years earlier.

And let's get that out of the way right now. M.R. Cooper = Monica Renee Cooper. Female. Extras Casting Director (*Spike Lee's Sucker Free City*). Principal Casting Director (*Doggy Fizzle* starring Snoop Dogg). Producer (*Mind Games*). Film Festival founder (Bahamas World Film Festival). Filmmakers' Society founder

(One World Film and Television Society). And non-stop-working WOMAN (inspiration in all of the above!). And the industry is taking serious notice.



"Oh, good for him. I love that!"  
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actors, directors  
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For any one who has hopes and dreams of conquering Hollywood and making it happen for themselves, Monica is a prime example of what hard work, dedication, and determination can accomplish. With so many hopefuls talking about doing this and becoming that, Monica takes action and gets the job done. Cooper is no longer simply an extras Casting Director – she is a force to be reckoned with.

So many actors who know of her by name only assume Monica's a mister because of her initials and she usually gets a kick out of it: "Then they might meet me, and they have no idea what to expect. Especially since they expect me to be sixty because I've been doing this for so long. That can be fun."

I can attest there is no sixty year old man in

sight at Cooper's home base casting and production headquarters. At this moment, the woman of the hour is running off with files in one direction, then quickly returning to offer me a drink... and then she's off again. She leaves me in her once-spacious garage-turned-office to fend for myself. And left to my own devices, I explore the inner-wakings of Ms. Monica Cooper's professional world and I'm almost immediately overwhelmed.

Where do we start? The walls with one-sheets of past casting projects? The photo collage from the feature film where she not only cast the extras and the principals, but played behind the scenes as a producer? Or should we venture into a discussion about the expansive wall maps of the Bahamas prominently featuring Nassau & Paradise Island that are not here to serve simply as escapist fantasies but are hung for work-related activities?

The movie posters of past projects include *Friday*, *Players Club*, *Tales From The Hood*, *Gridlock'd*, *Posse*, and the new feature film Cooper recently produced called *Mind Games*. There are the standard wall calendars, phones, a fax machine, a copy machine, and then stacks upon stacks of screenplays and VHS tapes labeled and categorized in their respective movie or movie star-wannabe mountains. And pictures. Let's talk about the pictures. They're everywhere. They monopolize the rest of whatever little real estate is left in this very busy room.

Monica laughs. "I know, I know, I know," she admits, "But I promise I know where everything is and what is what." What is what? Her clarification comes, "what pile is for what purpose." I'm thinking of a quiz, but she's going to beat me to the punch by diving into a boxful of headshots and extra registration cards I've brought over from the *Extras Casting Guild* where registration for Monica Cooper Casting & Associates is held.

She picks up random pictures from the top of the pile and points in all sorts of directions at once, as if I'm supposed to follow her flailing arms and fingers to find the pictures' appropriate and respective homes. Monica digs back into the box and sifts through it with interest. She finds a DVD from a man whose name she recognizes, "Oh, good for him. I love that!" The success of actors, directors or people she has known or helped get their start is a special perk Monica relishes in. "If I have some part in that – in any part of that," she says pointing at the box art, "c'mon, how cool is that?"

The DVD gets placed on the desk next to other similar items. Some of these videos and DVD's (for the more technologically inclined or current) are actors' reels and others are submissions for the inaugural Bahamas World Film Festival, of which the ever-busy Ms. Cooper is the founder (but more on that later). Many of the actor submissions were for MTV's *Doggy Fizzle* where Cooper cast the background, principals and many, many Under-5's. "There were so many tapes... so many. I laughed. Some were great..." she trails off and I wait for the

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finisher, "...and lots more weren't so great."

At press time MTV had yet to make a decision if the sketch comedy show would be picked up for future installments. And would Cooper cast it again if it were to be renewed? "It would all have to be about the timing," she admits, "I have lots happening right now."

Yes, she does. It looks as though her next casting endeavor will likely be the Bahamas-set *After The Sunset* starring Pierce Brosnan and Woody Harrelson. It begins on the island in October and will come to LA in December.



and being called upon to cast for what she refers to as "the black niche market." But with television programming for African-American audiences slowly but surely becoming "more mainstream and less niche," she says, so, too, does the casting.

*Central Casting* asked Cooper to join them some seven years ago and the independent caster balked. "They were certainly nice enough, but why I am going to go there and work for them when I'm working for myself doing the very same thing and I have control over it?" She re-treads her assistantship on *Posse*, and reminds me of why she always wants to be able to "control [her] creativity."

And of priority in those other things "happening" at the moment is... *Make It Happen Entertainment*, a production company she started just a couple of years ago. The scripts mentioned earlier that take up residence in the casting office are for Cooper the producer. She is actively seeking scripts to develop through this aptly coined production company: "It's all about making it happen. And you have to, have to, have to make it happen for yourself."

If you thought Cooper was a busy casting diva before, just tag on these other titles (film festival founder, producer) and you can imagine how hard it was to even schedule this interview. So let's recap: in a nutshell, the garage-turned-casting office at Cooper's residence doubles as a production office, which triples as the US headquarters for the Bahamas One World Film Festival. Wow.

## breathe & simmer

But, let's go back to the beginning for a moment, shall we? To get a feel of where Cooper came from and how she came to be in the position (excuse me, positions) she is now, we go back east - south and east to be exact - to North Carolina. Cooper began as an actor herself, struggling to find acting gigs before she got fed up and decided to start a business of her own to promote herself and other actor-friends.

"We were all struggling to find work - work that paid something - so I knew I had to make it happen," remembers Cooper using the phrase that has become so much her own. So she decided to take on the role of manager and soon realized it was with this, she found herself more at home. "I liked being able to help people, and seeing it happen firsthand," she says.

Soon thereafter, by sheer chance, a friend of hers had a commercial that needed a local Casting Director. Her experience as a manager made her feel ready. "If not now, when?" she remembers thinking, "so, now I was a Casting Director," recalls Cooper, and she was hooked. "I knew that was the part of the creative process where I was supposed to be."

"I make sure the extras know they are working for me and how they act towards me or on any set gets back to me. It reflects on me. And that will always affect how they are treated or if they're put to work in the future."

She interned on local projects, then landed a coveted position as principal casting assistant on the LA-based shoot of the feature film *Posse*. Cooper pauses in her retelling, shakes her head, laughs, then manages to find the words: "I will truly never forget that experience. I wouldn't change it for the world." And what exactly does that mean Ms. elusive-Cooper? She laughs again. "It was one of those, you know you're glad you did it, glad you had it, but then you're glad when it's over experiences? Yeah. That." And as testament, Cooper has worked as an independent Casting Director ever since.

It wasn't until 1992 that Cooper made the big, permanent move to California to pursue casting full-time where she very quickly found herself the extras Casting Director on *Panther*.

## extras casting

The *Panther* experience led to work as extras Casting Director for TV shows like *Moesha*, *The Parkers*, *The Steve Harvey Show* and other "specialized casting" she says with a wink. She's proud of catering to

She freely admits that she doesn't think *Central Casting's* "monopoly" is necessarily fair. "They have even moved in on the black niche market, because shows like *Eve* or *Wanda At Large* might have come my way, but the studio (in this case, Warner Brothers) has a long-standing deal with *Entertainment Partners* (parent company of *Central*) and we [she and other independents] just can't break in. And that's tough if [casting] is their livelihood. I mean how are other independent extras Casting Directors supposed to survive?" queries Cooper.

Cooper is proud of her company's extensive resumé and admits that, "I just can't pass up good projects. I love doing good, special projects." (This could explain why she was so swamped over the summer with projects to cast!) Monica makes "special" reference to Spike Lee's recent Showtime original *Sucker-Free City* (which could turn into a regular series for the cable network). How does she get these great gigs? "I've established myself enough now that productions know they can trust me. My personality, professionalism, everything. There are no surprises," she says.

"Extras know what to expect too. Or they should," she says with a faux glare. "If they've ever worked for me, on *Moesha* or Snoop's project [*Doggy Fizzle*] or whatever, they know what to expect. I make sure the extras know they are working for me and how they act towards me or on any set gets back to me. It reflects on me. And that will always affect how they are treated or if they're put to work in the future," she says.

Her friend and longtime casting colleague Keno Deary is still her trusted comrade in the extras casting trenches and she calls him "unbelievable and invaluable" and can't imagine the casting process without his help.

"Putting people to work is one of the best parts of any of my jobs... I love that," she beams. While she admits that she is not actively pursuing projects to cast right now, offers do come her way and she does not rule them out (ie. *After The Sunset*). And while she finds it unfortunate that she cannot take on all that she is offered, she

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wants to only give her best to everything she does. "Look at this way," she offers, "in TV things can change so quickly. So unfortunately I can't be the hands-on Casting Director I need to be, or want to be for those situations. But movies are more open. They are definitely more flexible and if I take on another project right now with all these other [ventures] it would have to have a flexibility to it where I would know long in advance what I need day to day."

She wants an addendum to her extras casting comments: "But background casting is how I got started. Out here in California anyway. So I will always do it. Always. I just can't oversee it as much as I would like right now, as much as I used to, because of everything else I'm doing."

## sag vouchers

"Oh, child please!"

These are the first words from her mouth, when I bring up the oft-discussed, much-maligned topic about the oh-so-sought-after items.

Monica Cooper has heard it all. Every excuse, every plea, every kiss-up compliment. But the irony of the matter is that Ms. Cooper admits to being a Casting Director very willing to offer these coveted gems freely – with a catch. Who gets 'em?: "...extras too perfect for the part or actors that show me they've earned it by working hard and putting in the work to deserve to be SAG." These may seem like stern words to some, but one must remember that Cooper started as an actress herself, is a true ally to actors, and also full-heartedly believes in her motto – make it happen, "and make it happen for yourself," she says.

"Besides," says Cooper, ready for the next topic, "Keno has the best stories [about SAG vouchers] and I'll just ruin them."

Keno summarizes: "They cried, begged, and stole for them."

Keno Deary began as an extra himself and later worked with Monica as her on-set extras coordinator, so he has seen the situation from both sides of the casting coin.

"I would ask them 'why do you need it?' and they would say 'I need an agent.' Well, if any agent really wants you and thinks you'll work and make him money, a SAG card isn't going to matter," explains Deary.

I ask for a favorite story and he's got many. "There was this one guy who just stole a voucher, outright, from under the chair. I saw him do it and let him get away with it. All day. Let him think he got away with it. I even signed him out at the end of the day, just to see how far he would go with it... he was telling other extras how slick he was and I just said, 'Hey excuse me, what was your name again? Oh yeah, sorry. Yeah, you're not SAG,'" remembers Deary.

"There's a whole other aspect to acting that doesn't come with a SAG card. Pay

your dues first. People think the [SAG] card is gonna open some magnificent door," he wails, "But, someone just comes up to that



"I'm just like anyone else in this business. You have to make it happen for yourself. You can't sit back."

door and says 'oh, no you don't!' and closes it."

Deary's best advice for getting a SAG voucher (even as the eligibility/entry requirements are changing at SAG): "Meet the Casting Directors at an open call, or office hours. Show up on time. Be professional. Work for it. That's what we notice."

## marketing

Postcards are still a favorite of Monica's because even when she's busy or doesn't have time to open piles of mail or a bazillion sealed manilas, a picture postcard allows her to see your face, or remember an actor, a play or a showcase. She thinks they work equally well for background and principals, but she does suggest only sending them when you know she has projects.

"Your pictures are all you got," she explains very matter-of-factly, "a headshot, whatever you're using. It better be you. Don't play around there. You are you. And you are definitely not helping yourself by misrepresenting yourself." Cooper is, of course, referring to those glamorized model shots

too many ill-advised actors use to pass themselves off as flawless-skinned thespians.

"I also think maintaining relationships is so important in this industry... for anybody. Actors, producers, whatever," she says. "Networking is so hard when you're busy, but you have to understand that you have to make time. You just have to. Emails, phone calls, whatever. Just keep at it. Sooner or later doors have to open. Once that happens, your job is to keep them open."

## principal acting

"For *Doggy Fizzle*, I let my actors go for it. Show me whatever you got. The show is out there, right? Okay, show me, I'm ready," remembers Monica, laughing. And boy did she see a lot – some, perhaps, she wished maybe she hadn't.

"Comedians, actors, tapes from friends, and friends of friends of friends of neighbors," she recalls. "I auditioned the heck out of a lot of different actors," she says. Even some traditionally employed as extras got on-screen lines. "Since *Doggy Fizzle* wasn't actually scripted or it doesn't always follow the traditional script format, I should say, there was a lot of room to go with it," says Cooper.

"Since this project was so outrageous and supposed to be real people in unreal or not ordinary situations, the way I cast it was a little different than traditional things," explains Cooper. An example of a more "traditional" principal casting approach can be gleaned from her most recent producing effort *Mind Games*. "There was a script, a full story played out... it was definitely not Snoopy's show," she says.

Her production company, *Make it Happen Entertainment*, carries a producing credit on the project that was a real labor of love for Monica. "My mom died before we even started filming," she says, remembering, "I put all my heart into this one." The film is dedicated to her mother.

## other endeavors

Next for Monica and *Make it Happen* is the movie *My Soul To Keep*. The film will be based on the best-selling book and it looks like Blair Underwood will star. Cooper and company are hoping to start this project in Miami "hopefully by the end of the year."

As if Cooper needed anything else to do. Her plate is already Thanksgiving Day full. She's currently working on the inaugural Bahamas One World Film Festival which launches November 13th, 2003. Right now, she's looking to confirm a reservation on a golf course for the festival's celebrity golf tournament to benefit breast cancer awareness.

"Bahamas One World Film Festival is for all independent filmmakers from all around the world," says Cooper, "and what a beautiful place to do it!" The festival looks to unite talented filmmakers from around the globe by showcasing their feature length films, shorts, and documentaries in a

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relaxing, inspiring environment. There's also a tribute to music videos that will add a Caribbean flair to the event, guest speakers and more.

All submissions are already in and final details of the schedule are being hammered out as we got to press, but you can get all the details as they are updated at:  
[www.BahamasFilmFestival.com](http://www.BahamasFilmFestival.com)

As Monica speaks to the festival's publicist, scans her computer's screen for the golf's course phone number, and tries to appease me for a moment to get all this together, she laughs out loud, covers her mouth, and then claps her hands together laughing some more.

"What?" I ask.

"How am I doing all this?" she asks back almost rhetorically, still laughing and obviously (if not only momentarily) overwhelmed.

We haven't even yet touched on the One World Film and Television Society, the organization she began as a way to empower people – filmmakers most specifically – by bringing them together to discuss all aspects of their craft.

The One World Film and Television Society began in January 2003 and is made up of writers, directors, producers, cinematographers, Casting Directors and newcomers alike. "We go to places, cities, where people don't have the kind of exposure or opportunities that might be available, say here, or in New York. We give folks an opportunity to speak with industry people in a way where they don't and won't feel intimidated," explains Cooper. The advocacy group of sorts will be setting a more definitive schedule soon, but Monica offers, "we're going to do networking events, monthly film screenings and things

like that so that knowledge and experience gets passed on and shared."

If you're interested in learning more about the organization or would like to join, check out the nifty website:  
[www.OneWorldFilmandTVSociety.org](http://www.OneWorldFilmandTVSociety.org)

"Putting people to work is one of the best parts of any of my jobs... I love that."

## the future

Okay, so now it's my turn: "How do you do all this?"

Monica laughs again. "Yeah," she says trailing off, "that's a really good question isn't it?" She pauses, "I just go."

And go she does. "I just keep going. I have to. I hate not doing anything. I have to work, do things, move forward, it's what I do best," she explains.

"I'm just like anyone else in this business. You have to make it happen for yourself. You can't sit back. But it's important that you learn as you go and as you grow... each step of the way. From the point when I started, as an actor or manager to now, I was very aware of what was happening around me," insists Cooper.

And what do you do for fun?

A momentary pause leads to laughter yet again. Then she offers, "work." A heartier laugh. "This interview is the most social thing I've done in six months... but it's not like I'm miserable. I mean, come on, I love what I do. I love all the things that I do."

"Where do you want to be in five years?" I ask.

"The same position I am now. To be able to help people. Giving people the right info or insight. That guidance is something you can't put a value on really. My efforts are real. People I work with know I'm real and it's not being a hard worker just to climb some kind of corporate ladder. Honestly, I don't want to change things much. Maybe more staff, more help, but the same," she says, "the same but bigger."

"How so?"

"I want to be able to greenlight my own projects and continue to educate people on the business in all the aspects I can. I don't want to be so big that I can't be or won't be accessible to people because I think that's so important... it's who I am," she continues, "I think actors, everyone, is grateful for that."

She concludes, "I just want to grow, but I want to always stay me. M. R. Cooper."

That's Ms. Monica Renee Cooper to you.

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