

Ask Tammy

Stand-In Catch-22

by Tammy Smith, Smith & Webster-Davis Casting

STAND-IN LINE . . .?!

It's 7am. I'm on the 405. I'm on my way to set. Traffic is in its usual parking lot-state. My cell phone rings. I can see it's the 2nd-3rd-4th A.D. on my caller ID. My stomach does that insy-binsy stress "flip" that happens when the phone rings from set and you know trouble could possibly be on the other end of that phone.

Which background actors haven't shown up? Please tell me it isn't the old character man Dixie found in the supermarket. Please don't tell me that someone showed up with a white car from the five background booked specifically with blue, green, and brown cars. Please tell me it isn't the picture-picked waitress that will be featured in the scene that I spoke to three times myself last night. I pause, take a breath and answer the phone.

"Hey Tammy, it's Suzy A.D. here, on the set. We are missing our Stand-In for Johnny Actor Dayplayer" (you know him, he starred in the last war movie titled *Not Another War Movie* as the G.I. who dies halfway through the monotony, I mean, movie). He's not there??! No way - his call time was 6:30AM!! He hadn't called the office when I checked just before I got on the road myself. Shoot!! Dang!! Pow!! Holy-not-acceptable-Bat Man!! A Stand-In...NOT there on time... woooo-weeee...he is so-o-o FIRED he must have smoke coming out of HIS ears too!

I advise the 2nd-3rd-4th AD to pull someone else from the background to do it and that I will find out what's up with the original guy and I will call her right back. I immediately whip open my "bible" on the passenger seat next to me, find his number on my sheets and call his cell phone (don't worry, traffic is so slow I could be doing a crossword puzzle). He answers the phone! I say, "Hey, super-star-background-artist-turned-stand-in-thanks-to-me, where the heck are ya? You were supposed to be on set a half hour ago???" He says, in a very shaky, panicked voice, "I overslept and now I'm stuck in traffic [uh, yeah... because he is now traveling in peak rush hour]. I am on my way." I reply, "Rrrrrright... well, that is true... you ARE on your way...on your way back to the trenches as a background actor until you figure out that you need to set thirty-nine alarm clocks so that you don't blow a coveted Stand-In gig ever again."

I don't scream and yell. That is not my style unless you have pushed "my button" by being completely rude or by insulting my intelligence by trying to lie. I simply inform Mr. Oversleeper (as nice and easy as possible) that, unfortunately, he should now exit

the freeway and go back to bed because they have already pulled someone else on set to be the Stand-In (and made that person's day, that's for sure). Sorry. No hard feelings. I assure him that I understand... it happens... it does. It was an accident, and I will still continue to hire him as a background actor. But standing in... well, we'll see.

First, I have to arrive at set and do some damage control and assess just how annoyed the A.D.'s and D.P. are that they didn't have what they needed first thing in the morning. It's a wild card, and how ever they react to me regarding the situation will probably effect whether or not I give Mr. Oversleeper a second chance down the line. Some A.D.'s are cool about these human error situations, and some treat us C.D.'s like we are the ones who screwed up... like we had some control over Mr. Oversleeper's alarm clock.

This story is a scenario that just shouldn't occur. Stand-Ins are supposed to be one element that C.D.'s count on to go like clockwork. In a perfect world, we book Stand-Ins and the only thing we ever hear from the A.D.'s about them is that they want those Stand-Ins back for more standing in. The Stand-Ins on most projects run on autopilot. Half the time, once they are booked, they usually get their call times (recall) from set. They are really almost like crew, and in most cases, no news is good news when it comes to Stand-Ins. It's when the phone rings and you have an A.D. complaining about a Stand-In that just kills me.

Booking 150 bikers or finding thirty-five real South Africans are the types of things we need to worry about... NOT the Stand-Ins who are supposed to be, let's face it, the cream of the crop in the background world. There's nothing quite like getting a call from set that your Stand-In for the lead actress on day one of shooting isn't there - only to find out later that she isn't there because she is in jail with a DWI from the night before! As you might imagine, this really sets your day off in a ba-a-d spin (it gets even better when that Stand-In then claims it isn't her fault because she was in jail, claiming: "what could she do? her hands were tied."). Um, yeah, how about NOT go drinking like you are still in college the night before your first day on a film as the lead actress' Stand-In... hmmm? Sound like maybe something you should consider for the next time? If there even IS a next time? True story, by the way. It happened on a film that is about to be released.

What are some of the main complaints, you might ask?



- 1.) They can't find the Stand-In when they call for "second team."
- 2.) The Stand-In keeps bugging the D.P. (Director of Photography) trying to brown nose for future jobs.
- 3.) The Stand-In is bothering the actors.
- 4.) The Stand-In has an attitude... or worse - the Stand-In isn't here... is LATE...and, thus, is Dea-a-a-a-d meat!! (he-he... climactic ending). Unbelievable, these calls are. The elite few who are the good, experienced Stand-Ins know that these things are taboo and it is rare that the calls are about them.

Herein lies the Catch-22. You hear it all the time: "We want to book Stand-Ins with Stand-In experience," yet how do you get experience if you've never got a chance to stand-in because you don't have the experience it requires?!? How does the door open for those background artists "jonesing" to be a part of that world? Well honestly, it is so simple, so basic...so zen. The force is with you. Yes, it IS a small portal where only a few people can squeeze through at a time. But with patience and self-discipline, you are bound to find your way into standing in. The probability is high because actors come in all shapes and sizes, and there aren't enough mega-experienced Stand-Ins to go around half the time.

So here it is in a nutshell. Remember the trenches I mentioned earlier in regards to Mr. Oversleeper? Well, think of background work as just that. You are earning your stripes on your way to being Sgt. Major Stand-In. Yeah, yeah, of course your physical characteristics come into play and that is the luck-of-the-draw part of the deal. But let's face it.

Ask Tammy

Standing In isn't exactly brain surgery. It is mostly common sense. COMMON SENSE!!

If you are someone who Dixie or I have booked at least a few times before, you always show up on time, bring the right wardrobe, have a good attitude, an even keel type of personality, you confirm on time, garner no complaints from the A.D.'s... yadda, yadda yadda... Stand-In potential will ooze from your pores without you having to come over and throw yourself at us on set in your pursuit for Stand-In status. I gotta tell ya, we are sort of in "asking for SAG voucher territory now" (see my article in the last issue of this magazine). The people who come up to me on set and tell me to keep them in mind for a Stand-In gig... sometimes scare me. It is sort of an association thing with me. The overzealous asking approach for Stand-In jobs goes hand in hand with that person who might just go over the edge and start bugging the D.P. on set for future work or trying to buddy-buddy the actor so that he will request you on his next show. LOW KEY is the key. Remember, you are dealing with egos in this business, and your ego should not come into the equation.

Don't kid yourself. We are paying attention. We know who the responsible and dedicated background actors are. Dixie and I don't claim to know them all, but you can be assured that after my thirteen years of doing this and Dixie's twenty, that we can smell someone with good Stand-In potential when they come along. Those are the people that we will look to for standing in when the usual suspects are not available and newcomers are welcome. Honestly, sometimes a newcomer with the right attitude is better than someone who has been standing in for a wee bit too long and starting to look like the color JADE.

The rest of the variables we don't always contrid. Yes A.D.'s request Stand-Ins they have worked with before. Yes, sometimes actors have people they like to use. Sometimes the D.P.'s care about the Stand-In looking like the actor and sometimes they don't. Honestly, they usually care more about the person being smart, easy to be around and reliable. A lot of times, the A.D.'s, actors, and D.P.s don't like to get personally involved by having Stand-Ins that they regularly use because it is too much personal investment for some, and honestly some Stand-Ins just get a little too close for comfort in those situations.

So how do we fill these "oh-so-desired spots?" Put the square pegs in the square holes. And guess what? Sometimes the square peg isn't always so square... but it fits. Like when the actor you need to book a Stand-In for is 5'8", red hair, and your choices for Stand-Ins are a person who is 5'6" with red hair or one 5'9" with slightly reddish

brown hair. Unless one has notably more Stand-In experience than the other, I, in good conscience, am going to book the person who I feel most confident is going to be COOL. Even if the person is two inches shorter, a good A.D. or D.P. would much rather have me book someone for them to work with who I KNOW is a conscientious, quiet professional in heels rather than someone who just happens to look like the actor but who I have never booked before. That's why we get paid the big bucks - to make these kinds of decisions. They trust me to send them the "goods." It is usually when they (D.P., A.D.'s, etc.) DO care about the hair color and height, that newcomers to Standing In have a greater shot at getting booked. A lot of times this is when they want the Stand-In to also be a good Photo Double for those days when they are in "Actor Scheduling Hell." What if you can't find someone with mega-experience to fill these shoes? This is when that zen master skill comes into play. Book the person who looks like the actor most, who you know and trust most, give them the Stand-In schpeel on the phone to prep them and let them fly. It can be just that easy.

The Stand-In schpeel is simple: Be early so that you have had your breakfast at the truck before they need you (Stand-Ins are generally needed right away - at their call time), be quiet and listen. Always be nearby when they need you. Be pleasant and nice and don't get too schmoozy with anyone... ANYONE. Just be aware, alert, easy to be around and pay attention. Those who "get it"... will always "get it"... and therefore GET the Stand-In jobs. So when given the chance, you better hone in on the right vibe to "get it" (not to mention that those people become the favorites of the D.P.'s, A.D.'s, and even the actors who actually DO like to request their Stand-Ins). Sharp yet low-key people are always who they want, sometimes regardless of how they match the actor they are lighting for. For the record, personality conflicts and lack of awareness are the most common source of Stand-In problems.

For those of you who do Stand-In or have done it, but have trouble getting Stand-In gigs... what can I say? Most of the above DOES actually apply to you as well. Again, it is a crap shoot and, yes, the politics involved are a little hazy. In this case, it is a bit of who you know and who you've worked with. Yet, it also does help to submit to Casting Directors indicating that you are an experienced Stand-In (always mentioning who you have been a Stand-In for). Personally, I am not a fan of a separate Stand-In resumé, but bring your experience to our attention on your file or mention it when you see us (just don't overdo it - you know what I mean) and don't you dare stretch the truth either (like saying you were someone's Stand-In on an entire movie when, in fact,

you filled in one day when the regular Stand-In was sick).

One other thing: What about selling us on the fact that you have wigs and five different sizes of heels? "Fuh-get-abowd-it" ...95% of the time, a CD books someone who doesn't need all that. If we need you to be taller, we assume most people have a few different height shoes or are willing to go out and get them anyway. Wigs are really a part of the "Stand-In veteran world" and become useful only when the Stand-In is requested because of her experience, yet needs to match different looks. Once in a blue moon, a unique situation comes along where you need wigs for a job and you can cross that bridge when you come to it. I'm not saying you shouldn't have wigs or shouldn't promote that you have them... it is always good for us to know that you have them, but some people really push the wig thing when trying to solicit Standing-In and, honestly, it really is more like a "last resort" when choosing a Stand-In.

Standing-in IS within your reach. Just remember, it is mostly about you and your personality and the fact that we as CD's want to book people to stand in who we can count on (even more than when you are doing background work). The Stand-Ins make a good impression for us and are the last thing we want to worry about in our day's work. A good, reliable background actor with common sense, and the experience of being around the camera is really all it takes.

casting
SMITH & WEBSTER-DAVIS

