

## What It's Like to Be a Movie Extra: Anonymous background actors share their cool stories from behind the scenes

By [Rick Mele](#) May 18, 2016



Photograph by Warner Bros. Pictures/Miramax Films

They've shared the screen with A-list stars, been directed by legends, and will appear in every blockbuster this summer. Yet you won't find their names on any movie poster—or even IMDB.

That's because they're extras: background actors who casually stand in crowds, react to Oscar-worthy meltdowns, and run like hell from CGI explosions.

And while they may not earn million-dollar paychecks or walk on the red carpet, none of your favorite flicks would be the same without them.

As summer movie season heats up, we wanted to give these unsung Hollywood heroes a chance to tell their own behind-the-scenes stories.

### The Casting Process

Actors go through rounds of competitive auditions and callbacks in hopes of scoring a juicy role.

The casting process for extras is far less rigorous: First you spot a local casting call on sites like Backstage.com. Then you “go in, have your picture taken, and have a nice day,” says Calgary-based actor Neil Enock, who recently appeared in *Interstellar*.

Movie producers usually screen for specific looks. If it's a Civil War drama, they're looking for extras with long hair and Lincoln beards. If it's a modern-day romantic comedy, the more generic, the better. You're supposed to blend in, not stand out.

If you meet the basic requirements, you're hired. Then it's show time.

## Filming Rules

Once you show up on set, there are three basic rules you need to follow: Act natural, try not to trip over anything, and don't look at the camera.

This is trickier than it sounds, says Jeff McLean, who used to do background work for extra cash in Vancouver. (You *haven't* seen him in *This Means War*, *Arrow*, and *The Company You Keep*.)

"Even though no one's looking at you, you don't have a lot of acting experience, so you can end up being so awkward," says McLean.

It's tough to act natural when so much of filmmaking is *unnatural*, like "taking fake sips of drinks that you're not allowed to drink" or miming conversation, McLean says.

Still, that's the best part of the job for Robert Wax, a Detroit-based teacher who does extra work over his summer break and has appeared in 19 films, including *Transformers: Age of Extinction* and *Whip It*.

"Being asked to act is the fun part," says Wax. "Having the chance to 'pretend to talk' to someone over and over is the reason you're there."

(The trick to perfecting those silent conversations? Mouth the word "watermelon," says McLean. "It emulates speech really well.")

## What Happens During Downtime

For many extras, the bigger challenge comes when the cameras are off. "I was surprised, at first, at the amount of time you wait for a scene to use you," says Wax.

If you're on set for 10 to 15 hours, you're only being filmed about a quarter of that time, McLean says.

Some extras use the downtime to study or work. "Others just nap all day," says Enock.

While you might be tempted to hang with the talent, acting like a fanboy around movie stars is a surefire way to get sent home, says Wax.

"On most sets you're asked *not* to approach the main cast," he says.

But unless you've been given explicit instructions not to make eye contact with a certain A-lister, most actors are happy to shoot the breeze between takes, says Jason Klamm, whose credits include *The Hangover*, *The Aviator*, and 20 episodes of *Mad Men*.

Remember, stars have to sit around and wait to shoot, too. They just get paid much better for it.

## The Money (Or Lack Thereof)

You don't get into the extras business to make a buck. "Compensation is minimal," says Enock.

Unless you're in an actors union, you make minimum wage, Klamm says. "I found out the hard way that non-union folks don't get overtime after 18 hours on the set of *The Aviator*, sweating in a rented tuxedo."

Your paycheck is even punier if you have an agent, says McLean. After your agent's cut, you get 85 percent of minimum wage, minus taxes.

"The *real* way you get your money's worth is by stuffing your face at craft services," says McLean. "Some guys bring Tupperware." (The general rule of thumb: The bigger the production budget, the better the food.)

## **The Grind and the Glory**

Being an extra can be grueling when you're balancing the gig with a day job, says Ed McNamara, a New York lawyer who auditioned for a massive battle scene in *Noah* on a whim.

"I would be in court in the morning and then run over to set in the evening," McNamara recalls. "Then I'd leave set between 5 and 7 a.m., sleep for a few hours, and head to the office or court."

Staying awake all night while charging across a battlefield and being blasted with frigid rain wasn't easy, McNamara says—but it was fun. And for most extras, the long hours and low pay are worth it if it means fulfilling your lifelong dream of seeing yourself in a movie.

That is, if you can even see yourself.

Kilee Morris, an Atlanta-based actress who can be spotted in *Neighbors 2*, explains: "Sometimes when you think the camera is pointed in your direction and you're the fabulous 'chosen' extra for the day, they could just be getting a close-up of the main actor and all the camera sees of you is your blonde hair in the background."

Or you're so far in the back of the shot that you're totally out of focus. "I liked to call myself a 'professional blur,'" says Klamm.

So the next time you're watching a movie, look out for the extras in the background. They may not get paid as much as the stars, but they still play an important role—even if it's just as Blur #2.

<http://www.menshealth.com/guy-wisdom/secrets-from-movie-extras>