

CASTING Qs by Bonnie Gillespie

Choice Training

Casting directors identify those acting schools and coaches that make a performer's resumé stand out from the stack.

Casting directors see hundreds of actors each week. They also see those hundreds of actors' resúmes. For our Acting Schools and Coaches Issue, the question Casting Qs posed was: Is there any correlation between the training credits on an actor's resumé and the strength of the performance the casting director sees in the room?

I asked casting directors in L.A. and New York to name the schools and coaches that—from their experiences—turn out the best actors. Here's what top CDs had to say on the topic of training.

The Programs

Several casting directors said there is no substitute for long-term, ongoing training for actors. "Local schools and coaches don't turn my head when I'm looking at an actor's resumé," said Dino Ladki. "I look for the fairly traditional schools—Northwestern and Juilliard in particular."

"NYU is currently the best in my opinion," Geoffrey Johnson stated, "along with Yale and Juilliard. I am afraid most of my choices for the best acting schools are located on [the East] Coast."

Julia Flores added a few West Coast schools to the mix, and also added that long-term training really shows in an audition. "[Actors] get more of a balanced and thorough training program, as opposed to just one person's thoughts and approach. The programs at Carnegie Mellon, NYU, UCLA, Cal Arts, and Pepperdine are so strong that even though I may not have met [particular graduates] before, I often bring them in directly for my clients," said Flores.

Other long-term programs recommended by several casting directors include American Conservatory Theater, the University of Cincinnati, the Actor's Center, and H-B Studios in New York.

The Legends

A big-name coach means something to some CDs but less to others. Said former actor Mark Paladini, "When I studied with Uta Hagen for three years in New York, I believed that—due to the rigorous audition process it took to get into the class—it would have an aura of importance on my resumé. Working in casting for 15 years, however, and seeing Miss Hagen's and Sanford Meisner's names on the resúmes of many actors whose performances did not live up to their mentors' ideals, I've come to realize that the name of a teacher on a resumé guarantees nothing."

According to Matthew Barry, "There hasn't really been an *impact* acting teacher since Roy London passed away. Most actors love their coaches, but that doesn't mean they're learning anything."

Nevertheless, Stephen Snyder noted, "The gurus are still strong," highlighting specifically the training of Roy London, Larry Moss, Howard Fine, and Milton Katselas. The high opinion of these names on a resumé was shared by casting directors Ladki, Victoria Burrows, Melissa Martin, Paul Weber, and Billy DaMota.

The Coaches

Beyond the legends, as Weber noted, "It's all so subjective." That doesn't mean there aren't coaches whose influence is evident in the performances of the actors casting directors hire. "Anything you do as an actor to study is going to be beneficial in the room," Elizabeth Torres indicated.

Your work is not done once you've gotten into the right classes. "Coaches can be helpful, but they shouldn't do your thinking for you," Flores explained. "They should just give you the tools to help you find your own answers."

Barry added, "If actors would just trust themselves, their work would be more significant. A good coach who is smart will guide the actor through the scene but leave room for adjustment [in the room]."

Arnold Munglioli described training and the work of an actor as an ongoing process: "Taking care of yourself as an actor—training and coaching on a consistent basis—is the best way to assure that when you are called upon to perform in an audition or performance you will be in peak form."

The coaches named most frequently by casting directors include Ivana Chubbuck, Harry Mastrogeorge, and Margie Haber. "Margie really gets actors to transition their techniques," Burrows said of the cold reading expert. "She knows timing," Barry added. "She has helped many a student prepare for the horrors of going to network."

Other coaches that top the list included Arthur Mendoza ("I've seen actors improve very quickly after studying with him," Dori Zuckerman volunteered); Belita Moreno ("I've heard great things about her," Debra Zane mentioned); Cameron Thor for scene study ("Everyone I know who has studied with him says he's great," explained Torres); Marnie Cooper ("She is amazing for kids. Her kids blow me away," Stuart Stone said), and Janet Alhanti (who was cited as being "great for comedy" by casting



Illustration by Lorraine Holt

directors Cathy Henderson, Zuckerman, and Martin).

Lisa Fields recommended John Sudol, saying, "We book his actors all the time commercially and theatrically. We can always count on his actors making interesting choices." Lori Cobe-Ross, as well as Henderson and Zuckerman, recommended Piero Dusa. "He is a caring and smart teacher," Cobe-Ross said. "His students work hard and are very well-prepared." Zuckerman recommended him "especially for brand-new actors."

Improv/Comedy Specialists

Everyone likes to laugh. Casting directors look for comedic timing and an actor's ability to think quickly no matter what type of project they are casting. While the Groundlings ("They've always had a first-rate reputation," Stuart Howard opined) tops most lists for strong comedic training, it is not alone on the list.

"I prefer Second City L.A. to the Groundlings on the basis that they seem to be more open with their students. The Groundlings has kind of lost some of its cachet," Barry explained. Snyder described both the Groundlings and Second City L.A. as "good lock-and-load" training.

Zuckerman noted that, while the Groundlings is an "excellent credit on a resumé, L.A. TheatreSports is the best improv [training] for actors who write." Acme Improv Comedy training topped the list for casting directors DaMota, Henderson, and Martin.

On Training in General

"I like talking to actors about their acting teachers," Paladini said. "I frequently ask actors about a single concept or aspect of their teachers' curriculum that opened creative doors for them."

Munglioli mentioned liking programs "geared toward the working professional, so that people who are already working actors can have a place to grow as artists."

A practical question about training came from Barry: "Do directors these days have the time or patience to deal with a Method actor? Some directors I've worked with won't hire [Method actors] on the basis that it's just too much work. So, what are [actors] left with?"

Clearly the answers to what training is best are vastly different depending on the person you ask. Without question, though, casting directors do respect solid training. As an actor, that means you must do your homework and connect to your process—whatever it may be.

Participating casting directors included: Matthew Barry, CSA (films), Barry Green-Keys Casting; Victoria Burrows (TV), Burrows Boland Casting; Lori Cobe-Ross (films, TV); Billy DaMota, CSA (indie films, commercials); Lisa Fields (commercials); Julia Flores (theatre), Flores Casting; Kimberly R. Hardin (films); Cathy Henderson, CSA (films), Henderson Zuckerman Casting; Stuart Howard, CSA (films, theatre), Stuart Howard Associates Casting; Julie Hutchinson, CSA (films), vp of Feature Casting at Universal Pictures; Geoffrey Johnson, CSA (films, TV, theatre), Johnson Liff Casting; Dino Ladki (films, TV), The Cast List; Melissa Martin, CCDA (commercials), Martin Casting; Arnold J. Munglioli, CSA (theatre), Munglioli Theatricals; Mark Paladini, CSA (films, TV); Stephen H. Snyder (music videos, indie films), J.S. Snyder and Associates; Stuart Stone, CCDA (commercials); Elizabeth Torres, CSA (films, TV), Roger Mussenden Casting; Paul Weber, CSA (indie films, TV), MGM Television; Debra Zane, CSA (films), and Dori Zuckerman, CSA (films), Henderson Zuckerman Casting. **BBW**

Casting Qs is a weekly column by Bonnie Gillespie focusing on the casting directors behind the projects. Suggestions for future Qs are welcome via e-mail to CastingQs@yahoo.com.

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