



INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF FILM & TELEVISION

Downloadable e-Booklet

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## A GUIDE FOR ACTORS

# **How To OPEN DOORS in Hollywood**

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IAFT mentor

There's that old joke about the movie business...

INT: DARKENED COMEDY CLUB - NIGHT

Spotlight on:

STAND-UP GUY/GAL

(open mike in hand)

When I first took off for Hollywood,  
my dad pulls me aside and says to me,  
"You want to know what opens doors in  
Tinseltown? You really want to know?  
I'll give you two words."

(hold for a couple of beats,  
eyes darting expectantly)

"*PUSH* and *PULL!*"

ROAR of LAUGHTER. STAND-UP GUY/GAL basks in it.

CUT TO:

Reality.

For actors, it's pretty hard, prying those doors open. The reason: an excess of competition.

Back in the old days, when movies first got rolling--talking about the 1920s here, and probably all the way up through the '50s--the percentage of the overall population that wanted to hoof it to the sandy shores of California and make it in the movies was fairly negligible. There were a lot of people in the country fantasizing

about the silver screen, yes. But the ones who actually drifted west in search of their dreams--well, there just weren't that many, comparatively speaking.

Nowadays, after decades of mass exposure to screens big and small, the percentage of people who think maybe they have a shot at it--that number has grown exponentially. Constant contact with TV and now the internet has given more people the idea that it might be possible...

Maybe it is.

But there's another percentage at play on this field. The number of people who succeed divided by the number of people who try.

That percentage is still a small one.

You ever heard of Alfalfa? His real name was Carl Switzer, born in 1927 into a large Illinois farm family. Carl was a loony kid with a lot of self-confidence, a natural-born trouble-maker and entertainer. He made himself the center of attention singing off-key at shindigs and church picnics. It was the middle of the Depression, but that didn't stop people from going to the movies, and the **OUR GANG** shorts were always popular with the popcorn-munchers.

In 1935, Carl and his family took a trip to Los Angeles to visit relatives. He talked his father into letting him see if he could get into **OUR GANG** (a.k.a. **THE LITTLE RASCALS**), so they went down to the studio without bothering to make an appointment. No surprise, they couldn't get in. Doors closed. So they went into a café just outside the gates and Carl started singing to the lunch crowd. He delighted everybody there. And that would include the head of the studio, Hal Roach.

That afternoon, Roach had Carl written into the next script. Rechristened Alfalfa, he was in front of a camera within a matter of days. The title of Alfalfa's first **OUR GANG** short was ***Beginner's Luck***.

Unfortunately for the rest of us, it doesn't happen that way too often. For the rest of us, it takes sheer doggedness. And that means...don't let anything stop you. As actress Ruth Gordon once put it: "Never give up, and never, under any circumstances, *no matter what*--never face the facts." She took her own advice and kept at it, and when she was in her early 70s it won her an Oscar for best supporting actress (not that it matters).

Why don't we take a look at a few stories about how certain actors managed to find a way through the gates and onto the studio lot...

### ***TRUE STORIES ABOUT HOW SOME ACTORS CLAWED THEIR WAY IN***

Robert Patrick and I both ended up doing multiple pictures for independent producer Roger Corman, which is how we met, back in the late '80s. Robert's second movie was doing a major supporting role in a road-warrior picture I'd written called **EQUALIZER 2000**. It was probably one of the worst movies either of us ever did, but it was a blast while we were shooting, and I got to see the genius of his work up close. He's a dedicated actor, with a lot of range and depth, and he's worked hard at it.

Here's the funny thing. The producer/director of that picture--Tarantino favorite Cirio Santiago--had told me I'd be playing the role of Alamo. I was over in Manila where we'd already shot one movie, a thriller called **SILK**, and Cirio left me behind in the Philippines while he went back to L.A. to cast the leads. When he returned, he informed me I'd be playing a smaller role because they'd decided to cast a guy named Robert Patrick as Alamo. I was

disappointed, but I kept my mouth shut. (Always a good idea.) There was an actor/playwright in New York at that time named Robert Patrick, and I thought that's who they were talking about.

I remember thinking I'd be a thousand times better than that Robert Patrick in the role, so I started to steam about it a little, in private. Then one day as we got closer to our production start date, I was in the elevator at the hotel when the doors opened, and a tall handsome guy with a distinct light of eager enthusiasm in his eyes stepped in. One of the PAs introduced us. This was Robert Patrick. The real Robert Patrick. A far cry from the one I'd heard of in New York. Two totally different people. And this one standing in front of me was perfect casting for Alamo. I took one look at him and I thought genuinely, "Oh sure, of course, right." Instantaneous end of secret resentment.

Robert was the best thing in an otherwise unremarkable movie. (It was a post-apocalyptic road-warrior tale I'd set in an Alaska turned into a desert by global warming.)

We only worked on one other picture together but have remained amigos over the years. But there's more to his story about breaking in.

Robert (his friends called him Cowboy at the time) had done a lot of low budget action movies, quite a few for Roger, but they were all non-SAG, that is to say, non-union pictures, mostly shot over in Asia. At a certain point when he wasn't getting any younger, he still couldn't find a way into the union. I remember him calling me up one day, desperate about it, because, you know, you can only go so far--you just can't get any further as an actor without being in the union. He asked me, *What should he do, what could he do?* His agent was threatening to dump him if he didn't find a way into SAG.

I told him he'd done a lot of favors for Corman's company, working in non-union movies for less pay than the union actors (in those days, SAG actors could work in non-SAG movies shot overseas; can't do that anymore). Roger occasionally made movies at his studio in Venice that used an all-SAG cast. I told Robert to call in some favors, get Roger's casting assistant to put him in a SAG movie so he could get his card. It worked. He played the Cameraman in a hilarious movie called **HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD II** and paid his initiation fee (only \$600 in those days; it's \$3000 now).

The next thing you know, his agent is putting him up for studio pictures. And the one part he knows he wants is the T1000 in Jim Cameron's **TERMINATOR** sequel. (Cameron is another Corman graduate. Look up his early career in **The Film Encyclopedia**. He got fired from **PIRANHA 2**.) Well, Cameron's casting director took one look at Cowboy's headshot and said no way. Didn't even want to meet him. Said he was totally wrong for the part in every possible way. But Robert's agent wouldn't give up. He kept calling her, if not every day, then every couple of days. And it got to the point where months went by and she'd read every actor in town, including many well-known names, and the one they were leaning toward wasn't really right for the part. So here's Robert's agent calling her again. So this time she says, *Okay, send him over, I might as well read him, but this is just to get you off my back, I don't want you calling me anymore about this actor, is that understood?* Agent says sure. Robert goes in.

Three days later he's cast as the T1000 and is off and running on a solid Hollywood career. True story. I can personally verify it.

You want to hear about Kathy Bates? Another Oscar winner (not that it matters). I had the great good fortune to know Kathy in our university days. We were both in the theatre department at SMU. I was a senior in my final semester, and she was a freshman. I was

doing my senior project, directing Tennessee Williams' **SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER**. At the auditions Kathy came in with a knock-out resumé, citing a boatload of roles in lots of different community theatre shows and high school productions. She knocked me out with her reading, so I promptly cast her as Mrs. Venable, the Katherine Hepburn role--an old lady in the script, and Kathy was about 18 at the time. She was incredibly good in the production, the best thing in it, magnetic, totally focused and engrossing. I got a good grade off her great work.

Several years later we were both in New York and one afternoon over coffee she says to me, "Bailey, you know that was the first part I ever did." I said, "Come off it. You were an experienced actress. It showed in your performance, and besides, that rez..." She said she'd invented out of thin air literally everything on her resumé. Nothing in it had an ounce of truth. My SMU **SUDDENLY** was the first thing she ever did.

So what? It didn't change my perception of her. She was fantastic in the play. She had deep reserves of power as an actress back then and still does to this day. Nothing more required.

It still took her some time to break into the movies. She was doing lots of good theatre in New York and in rep companies around the country. There were a couple of times when she was bitterly disappointed, playing the central character in two different Broadway productions (800 performances in one of them), and still not getting cast in the motion picture version.

But all it takes is one person having faith in you, and in Kathy's case, it was Rob Reiner. Having seen her in numerous Broadway shows, he cast her without hesitation in **MISERY**, and she won the Oscar for best actress that year (not that it matters).

Same thing happened to Holly Hunter. I knew her work in New York and we became friends through our mutual pal, writer Beth Henley. There was at least one movie that I worked on in a small capacity where Holly should've played the lead, and the studio wouldn't let the director cast Holly because she wasn't enough of a celebrity [yet]. The director was worried about getting the movie made, and so didn't fight for Holly. But like I said, all it takes is one person with faith, and for Holly that was James Brooks on **BROADCAST NEWS**. And she was off and running, eventually winning a best-actress Oscar for **THE PIANO** (not that it matters). *(Why does he keep saying that? Because it's the work that matters, not the awards.)*

Those are all true stories I can personally vouch for. Here we have some of the very finest actors working today, and none of them had an easy time getting started.

One factor they all share is this:

Keep going. Never quit. Keep pounding on doors until the right one opens. Of course, you have to be civilized about it. You can't hold a gun on anyone to make them cast you, right? On the other hand, that's exactly what Timothy Carey did, as the legend goes. Held a rifle on director Elia Kazan and told him he had to put him in a movie. He laid the gun down and made a joke out of it, and Kazan did in fact cast him in something, but I don't think it really had anything to do with the rifle. It had much more to do with Carey's unique presence. (This was 60 years ago. I would not recommend you try this in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You'll end up in jail instead of a movie.)

Point is, never stop believing in yourself. Persevere.

## **PICKING THE LOCK**

You want to know how to yank open doors and rattle windows in Hollywood? Don't be afraid to make phone calls and fire off emails. Make lists and beat the bushes. But most of all: Exposure. Networking. And that means...



There are a lot of stage plays done every year in L.A. When I first got here in 1976, I did a bunch of them, aligning myself with a crowd of good actors. In 1981, we did a farce of mine, **NO SCRATCH**. It garnered a fair amount of attention, and that's how I met a wonderful woman, casting director Fran Bascom. She saw our play with her daughter Cheryl, and they both loved it. They came back to see it again and again, and every time Fran brought more people with her.

Fran's one of those rare types who actually want to help actors. A lot of people in this business revel in power plays and enjoy putting you down when they don't believe in you. But keep in mind there are people like Fran out there, generous, gentle souls, kind-hearted and willing to sneak you in the door. Don't ever let the mean ones get you down. Just keep looking for your own mentor.

They're out there somewhere, waiting for you right now.

## **AGENTS AND MANAGERS**

In this business, actors need agents. How do you get an agent? Here it is again: Get yourself cast in a play. You can do it if you keep at it. Work hard. Never be satisfied with anything less than your very best. And then, before the play opens, get a list

of approved agents from SAG-AFTRA. Send out announcements and invitations.

Let's face it, though. Most agents don't want to represent someone who's never done anything. They want to work for people who are already working. It means less effort for them. So maybe you should considering enlisting a manager too.

Sometimes a manager can help in landing an agent or a SAG card. But be careful who you sign with. Agents get 10% of your salary by law, but managers can charge more--15% is standard. And if you have both an agent and manager, there goes 25% of your income.

But at least here in the US that comes out of your pay check. You don't have to cough up in advance. In other countries, such as Japan, actors have to pay their agents every month, whether they have any professional income or not. In Japan, agents are more like managers anyway.

### **CREATE YOUR OWN BREAK**

Write a play, stage the play, and then put it on video! You can do it, and it's not that hard.

When my wife first came to L.A., she said to me, let's do a short video. All right. What's our story? No ideas right off the bat. Well, then, what locations do we have at our disposal? She was working as a waitress at a sushi place on PCH. She thought maybe she could persuade the assistant manager to let us use the restaurant on a Saturday morning before opening for lunch. We scouted other interesting locations close by, like a tunnel under PCH, a lagoon on the beach, and a tide pool under a bridge. I said, okay, what story can we tell using these locations, and which actors do we want to work with?

I remember her sitting on the beach staring out at the ocean. She said, "Let me think." And a couple of days later, she gave me an outline that really grabbed me, a sort of psychic dream about murder and adjusting to the reality of death. We wrote the script together, and she talked a friend of hers with a steadicam into shooting it for us. She produced and I directed. We even took our lead actor on a city bus and shot our opening scene to great effect. The whole thing was a huge effort, asking favors, pulling in contacts, getting it done, and I think we spent all of \$500. But in the end we had a short called **THE BUSBOY PUNCHES OUT** that was accepted in a couple of festivals.

You can do it too. Don't wait. Start now.

### **AN AFFORDABLE HIGH-QUALITY TRAINING FACILITY**

Find a good acting coach and take classes. Classes are like workouts--they help you sharpen your weapon. It's a way to stay in shape, battle-hardened and ready for action.

Better yet, if you haven't had any experience walking onto a set or working in front of a camera, take a class specifically offering that. You might be a neophyte, but you don't want to look or act like one when you finally get there.

We've got a course at IAFT, **The Actor On Camera**, that will furnish you with the tools and knowledge necessary to get you through your first day on the set...and your first week and your first year. We cover all the important points like set-ups and takes, hitting your mark and technobabble--and more!--all with the goal of helping you get ready, by providing some actual on-camera experience, so you'll be fully oriented before they deliver your first call sheet.

We've also got numerous other options in our acting program. You might even want to take some writing or editing or camera classes while you're at it.

In our diploma program, the filmmaking students make a short video at the conclusion of the course, and they frequently end up in festival showings. Our acting students are always the first in line to audition for the available roles.

That's what IAFT is for. That's why we're here. An affordable quality training facility at your fingertips.

The punchline of the joke seems even more fitting now.

*Push and Pull.*

Get it done.

*To find out more about our classes  
and on-camera scene work,  
give us a call at [818] 900-1900.  
Or email us at [info@iaft.net](mailto:info@iaft.net).  
It's all waiting for you, right here, right now.  
We look forward to hearing from you.*



"My definition of good acting is the ability to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances."

—Sanford Meisner

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