

Disclaimer:

I am not an actress. I am not a model. I have no grand delusions of fame & fortune. My first piece for this site was going to be about driving cross-country. But when you're writing for a site called nodignity.com and you get a call from HBO to be a whore - the math does itself.

HBO called. They want me to be a whore.

Like many people that come to LA, I was in need of money as I looked for a job. Since the temp agencies didn't seem to be working out at the moment, someone suggested I look into doing work as an extra. I figured what the hell, I'd give it a shot. I showed up at Central Casting on Visiting Day for non-union actors, gave them twenty bucks for my headshot, and figured I'd hear if they needed me. Considering that they do these days twice a week, and there were about seventy people there that day, I walked away pretty much assuming I wouldn't hear back from them, since I'm not exactly LA glam and lacking in any ethnic uniqueness that would make me stand out from the crowd.

Four weeks went by, and I'd pretty much forgotten about Central Casting. Then one day, as I was walking from one job interview to another, my cell phone rang. Not recognizing the number, I answered it, thinking it might be, you know, an actual job.

Claris : Hello?

Central Casting Chick : Is this *insert real name here*?

Claris : Yes, can I help you?

CCC : This is Central Casting. We were wondering if you'd be free to work on *dates here*. We're casting extras for a series for HBO.

Claris : Yeah, sure, I'm free then. Why not?

CCC : Well let me tell you what the part is first.

Claris : Why?

CCC : Because you'd be a whore.

That's right, boys and girls. Hollywood called and wanted me to be a whore in the Wild West. Seems there's a production in the works called Deadwood that's looking to staff its bar with whores, and someone saw my picture & thought I'd be perfect for it. Thanks guys!

I think.

The only catch is that I can't shave for a week beforehand, because they're going for full historical accuracy. Blech but okay. It's October, so we're moving to the land of pants & sweaters anyway, right? I ended the call, then walked to the elevator. As the doors closed, I sat there & realized what I'd just agreed to do.

And laughed.

Mom : so, how was your day?

Claris : Weird as hell. You?

Mom : It couldn't have been that bad. I'll bet mine was weirder.

Claris : HBO called. They want me to be a whore. There's no nudity, but I can't shave for three days before. Historical accuracy & all.

Mom : What? *insert Claris' full name here*?!

I never did get to hear why her day was weird.

I am not a pretty whore.

Went to Western Costume today - appointment for the costume fitting. Found out a little more about the production - it's a new series for HBO - this is the pilot. It would seem I'm supposed to be a "Gem girl" ...and they weren't happy girls. We're not talking satin-wearin' can-can girls, here, kids. These were the unfortunates that spent time doped on opium & laudanum.

Break it down? I'm the 18th century version of a crack ho. Gonna make my mom proud. And just think - you know it'll be re-run at least five or thirty billion times. And, KitCat has informed me there shall be a special showing in Feb., as well as the joy of screencaps...You ever just have that moment where you look around & wonder if it's not time for new friends?

Meanwhile - Western Costume...it's the size of a airplane hanger. Walk in, register & stuff - was asked by what I'm guessing was a Production Assistant the following, while making sure I also knew that I would still be welcome to the set, and would be compensated monetarily for either. Am I willing to :

- A) allow myself to be groped in the scene, ie., sit on someone's lap, or walk by & have my ass grabbed
- B) go for full frontal nudity from the waist up.

Okay then! Welcome to Hollywood. I said "maybe" to A, depending on what precisely they wanted, & a definitive "no" to B, thanks.

Waited about five minutes, meet the hair & makeup people. By the way - I look at the Central Casting timecard & see that I'll be making \$13.50 for the time it takes to put on costumes. Pity I can't do this stuff more often. The hair person informs me that my hair is perfect for the part - turns out not having had my hair cut since last October actually can pay off - who knew? I'm supposed to put it in curls for the day of the shoot - which means I'll have to dig out my curling iron and buy a pack of bobby pins (pincurls, you see. That's what they want. *shrug*) I'm instructed "don't touch anything at all" with regards my hair. Really shouldn't be a problem...Which leads me to wonder how often they have people sign up & then between the fitting & the shoot suddenly decide, "Hey, I'm gonna be in a Western - I'll dye my hair blue!" I'm guessing it happens, since they felt the need to warn me against it.

Makeup man peers at my face, and suddenly I feel like Janeane Garofalo in that scene in The Truth About Cats & Dogs where she's at the department store & the mirror makes her pores look really big....but he straightens back & says, "Lovely. Won't have to do a thing with her. Just show up with a clean face that morning, sweetheart. I might actually have to make you down more so you look a little drugged up..."

I think that last one was a compliment. Still not sure. Anyway, let's move on.

So I make my way back to the actual costume portion...oh my. You should have seen some of the stuff that was in there. I had to refrain from going, "Wait! Can I just look at this for a bit?" every time we passed a new section. *grin*

Got measured by the costumer & her assistant, & the results made me feel like going to the gym for about a month. Let me be clear - the running to the gym impulse wasn't the costumer - she was very nice & at one point informed me that I was stunning. Of course, she told me this as she was pulling the strings on my corset, so that may have been a factor in her complimenting me at that particular moment.

It was rather like playing dress up, if, you know, as children we played dress up with holey army green stockings, loose blouses that had no support, and undergarments made with whalebones. I'm in an interesting array of patterns, that's for sure. Blessedly, it was decided that I should bring my strapless bra & I should be able to get away with wearing that under the costume. Thank goodness, 'cause wow. Twelve hours in no bra doing a full day of work? Not in my world. At least,

not comfortably in my world. They're ripping the lace off of the blouse that I'm to wear, which is probably good, since lace has never been my friend. I was supposed to wear these pointed granny boots, but after ten minutes in them, went, "There is no way I'll last eight or twelve hours on my feet. Do we have anything else?" Forget the foot binding the Chinese did - those suckers gave me a whole new respect for the women back then. Go Dr. Quinn. Instead, due to the fact that I'm a whopping size 10, & they didn't have any other canoes in my size, I'm wearing these men's ankle shoe thingys that are just slightly large & make me feel a bit like a duck.

But hey. As of now, I'm whore W-15. The costumer hands over a card with my number, intones slightly dire warnings about losing said card until the day of the shoot, and sends me back along my way.

It's all very cloak and dagger, you see.

Friday before the shoot. I still have no clue where I'm going. Drop a dime to Central Casting, and find out that such things are done with voice mail boxes. It's rather smart, actually. Instead of having to call a boatload people & give them directions, Central Casting simply records a voice mail message, then calls the people & tells them to dial up after seven (in my case) and punch in a code, then they can do everyone's directions in one shot. Not bad.

However, due to the fact that I was very, very busy that night going to dinner with my friends and bitching about the fact that our lives suck ass, I didn't remember to actually call until Saturday morning.

'Twould seem you can be cut from the list of extras. The voice mail announces that some people have been switched to a different time and day, and immediately invoked my "Oh, shit!" reaction. I didn't feel like rearranging my temping schedule to do this. Thankfully, my name is called for Monday, & I'm not cut. I don't know precisely what that signifies - does this mean I got through the private interviewing the judges did earlier in the week and will be able to compete in the swimsuit competition? We'll find out.

The message also reminds us all once again about the fact that we're not allowed to shave. Have I mentioned that we're not allowed to shave? They've only told me ten jillion times. Trust me guys - I remembered. Haven't used a razor since last Tuesday, and now not only feel like Bart Simpson's aunts, but am also kind of itchy.

Claris: I'm gonna be the 19th century version of a crack ho. I am not a pretty whore.

Sam: What would that be, an opium whore? Crack is recent.

Should I get all supportive in response to that last bit? "I'm sure you'll be the prettiest whore on the set" just doesn't have a certain ring to it.

You see? You see? You need to start doing drugs right now. *For your craft.*

I'm ready for my close up now....

9:00 am.

Welcome to Melody Ranch. Oddly enough, I was early. The two hours I was told it would take to get here was actually about an hour & 5. The feeling of driving in LA & watching all the other traffic going in the other direction as you whiz by is downright disconcerting. Novel and slightly exhilarating as this new experience is, I'm still more than a wee scoche early, so I sit and wait from someone to direct me where to go. Note to self: Leave later tomorrow.

I'd also like to take a minute & thank Central Casting for forgetting the fact that you have to hit # after punching in the gate code. I know there are a couple of other extras that would join me in extending the sentiment. Luckily, someone on the crew drove up behind me & let me in.

After finding the tent for "background", an Assistant Director (A.D.) named Valerie greeted us. Valerie was also the same crew member that got to ask questions a & b at the costume fitting.

She gets all the fun jobs, it would seem, 'cause she's in charge of us for the day.

12:10 am.

Well. I've been here for about three hours now. I'm corseted, my hair is up and appropriately disheveled, complete with stern instructions from Rudy the Hair Guy that I'm to do it in pincurls tonight so that it'll be perfect tomorrow. I swung by the makeup booth & dutifully allowed myself to be layered in "dirt". (Seabreeze & tanning lotion.) Hours actually spent shooting?

Zero. But hey - I've been told I'm a lovely whore.

1:00 pm.

Pictures. They seem to be all about the pictures. The digital camera must have been a godsend for hair and makeup people in Hollywood. We're probably starting after lunch.

1:45 pm.

Had lunch.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting some more....

Did I mention the part where I'm doing a whole lot of waiting?

Waiting.

I'm so bringing my knitting tomorrow.

2:30

Okay then. Valerie appears to let us know that they're ready for us on the set, and we troop over. After being warned to be as quiet as possible, we're shepherded inside. You know how a movie set looks on those "Behind the Scenes" thingys, where it's this building that gets taken apart and put back together again like the ultimate 3-D jigsaw puzzle? It's exactly like that. When I walked in, one entire wall of the "bar" was gone. The cameras were there instead. In fact, this particular set was so new that the wood was still fragrant from the sap which also made it a bit sticky to the touch.

We were distributed out across the room by another A.D. named Kenny. I was paired up with another extra named Tony. Our job was to drunkenly stumble around a corner, fall onto a bench, do a shot, then stumble up the stairs. Shooting started, and we went through our paces.

Again.

And again.

Again with the again.

Hey! One more time!

The rather nice thing about this is that once we got past the first landing on the staircase, we were no longer in the shot & could therefore just hang out on the balcony to watch the process - and the tech who was napping in the shadows behind the lights that I'm guessing he was in

charge of.

Actors are patient people. I watched the three principals in the scene go at it between ten and fifteen takes and hit each line with almost exactly the same pitch and cadence in each run through. As someone who gets jumpy waiting at red lights, I was ready to move on by the sixth time I did a shot. However, my boredom tends to breed questions, and here's what I learned.

--> our "shots" were one part Coke, two parts water. Which explains how they tasted. Blech.
--> The majority of the props for Deadwood are the real thing. My fan was from around 1910, and the poker chips were about 150 years old. (And to whoever made off with 25 of those chips, you suck. The prop guy was looking for them, you know.)

When that scene was declared done, my partner Tony made a much-desired break for the bathroom. That left me footloose and fancy-free. Being an independent kind of whore, I plotzed myself down at one of the tables, and began playing blackjack for the next scene. Hoo boy. Let me share a secret with you. People playing cards in Westerns aren't peering at their cards because they're acting stupid. That's what happens when you give a group of people from the 21st century a deck with *no numbers*. We sat there counting, "Eight, nine...yeah, blackjack. At least, I'm pretty sure I've got 21."

Since card-playing doesn't require all that much in continuity (or, at least, it didn't in my case), the three of us just phased out and played endless rounds. For those of you wondering, yes. I won a bunch. Pity there wasn't actual money involved.

The scene wrapped, and background was herded outside while they....did.....stuff. (I wasn't there, so I don't know what they did while I was gone.) It was then that I learned a valuable lesson - if you throw out your trash, & craft service sees you doing it, craft service will love you. A bunch. This was proven by Randy, who showed himself to truly be a might amongst men when he brought three of us hot cheese quesadillas when we were freezing our butts off standing outside in the desert at night. Randy rocks, I tell you. Beyond the telling of it.

The red light for shooting finally went off, so I scurried back in and hid with a couple of the others in the back where we were warm and out of the way. Not to mention near craft service.

After hanging out for another forty-five minutes, Valerie came over and let us know we were done for the night. Time to de-corset, drive home, and shower off the dirt while fighting the urge to shave.

Hours worked: nine

Hours actually on set: maybe three?

Paycheck: \$63.53 - post taxes

Tip of the day: If you're going to be an extra, wait until after the first day to wear a white shirt. You never know what your make up will be. I stopped at a convenience store on the way home, & the combination of my hair & Hollywood "dirt" caused the cashier to ask me if I'd been doing mechanic work.

Take Two

8:30 am.

I'm a bit more prepared today. Pincurled my hair last night. Check. Remembered to toss my knitting and a book into my bag for today. Check. Go me.

As yesterday, I checked in, retrieved my wardrobe, and got gussied up. Well, as gussied up as one gets when makeup is using red eyeliner to simulate the bloodshot eyes of an opium addict. I then hied my way to the tent with all the other extras. Everyone was a bit more comfortable being there today, guessing by the conversation. I was given the low-down on L.A., working as an extra, and the politics of going union.

SAG, as I discovered, isn't just something you show up for. While you can work as a non-union extra or actor, more money is gained by going union. To do this, you have to get three Union pay vouchers, and then pay \$1300 as your fee. However, union vouchers don't just fall out of the sky. One of the girls, Karen, said she got her first one ten years ago, and only had one left to go. Not exactly a profession for the weak of heart, acting.

Whiled away another couple of hours. For those of you that know my knitting habits, it was a two square day. However, we got our call to the set before lunch. So off we trundled.

It would seem that today is an ambitious one. The goal is to shoot six and two-eighths pages of film. The first was a speech by the villain of the story. We were each assigned places to move to and from, rather than the random placement of yesterday. I got to move from a little alcove to stand on a trunk while the principal in this scene did his thing. It was all very, very exciting, I tell you.

Then came the rather cool part. Playing with fire! Gunfire, that is. We went to the scene immediately before the speech, and one of the other principals fires a pistol. They walked around handing out earplugs for those who wanted them. I took a pair, but figured I'd wait to see how loud it actually was before I put them in. Surprisingly, it wasn't worse than a cap gun, and I was about six feet away from the shot. I remarked as such to one of the guys standing near me, and was informed that this was nothing, since the show he'd been working on last week was using sawed off shotguns that were "way louder". I asked what he'd been working on - seems he'd been an extra on Firefly quite a bit, & had worked there the week before. I laughed, and we ended up having a discussion about the fact that while the show is a solid concept, it probably would have done better if FOX had aired the episodes in order.

Now, my plan going into this exercise was pretty much to keep my head down, do what I was told, and basically not get kicked off the set. So I was very surprised when Valerie walked up to me as I was going back to the set and asked if I would like a SAG voucher. I believe my response was a stumbling acceptance and thank you, all the while wondering, "Um, shouldn't that go to like, real actresses?" But yes. Two days as an extra, & I got my first SAG voucher. I guess keeping quiet & moving like a good sheep pays off. Who knew?

On the way out of that shot, I mentioned to one of the other girls, that I'd gotten one, as well as how I felt a little guilty about it, since I knew that Karen only had one left. In an attempt to laugh it off, I joked, "But hey. It's a nice souvenir, right?"

To which I was immediately told, "Never let anyone else hear you say that. It would be very, very bad."

Okay then. In the interest of self-preservation, I kept quiet.

Lunch! Catering rocks, man. I had shark for lunch.

As we were waiting to go back up, Valerie walks over and chooses myself and another two girls to go up to do a tight shot. Then we get there, and are asked, "Did anyone sign the nudity

waiver?" Negative, Ghost rider, the pattern is full. Turns out none of us did, and they were looking for a nudity shot. However, one of the principals that was a whore was willing, so we were placed in the background while they shot her silhouette as another guy fondled her a bit. Which is how I was in my first nude scene. Um, yay?

Moving on from that, we do some more scenes based around the speech from earlier today, as well as the introduction of the character of Calamity Jane. In this one, we were told to take our places from the first scene of the day. Then they started moving us. So we were supposed to be exactly like before - just....different. Riiight. Continuity's going to have a conniption when they see the results of that one. For the Calamity scene, I once again got to walk upstairs and hang out. My new man and I made our way up the stairs to the balcony, where I discovered such fun details as the fact that to get a warmer tone in the shot, they were having one of the FX guys hold a lit brazier under the lens of the camera, and the fact that the first A.D. had on cowboy boots that glittered. We decided he was secure in his masculinity indeed.

Thankfully, they didn't really need us once that set was finished, so we were sent off to change. After extricating myself from my corset and sighing in relief about the blessed miracle that is denim jeans, I headed over to the tent where Valerie would be signing our timecards for the day. She asked me to wait for a minute. I took a seat, and was joined by Karen. She looked at me and went, "Are you waiting for the same reason I am?" It turns out she also got a SAG voucher for the day - ten years, but she now had all three. Suddenly, I didn't feel a bit guilty at all. Lovely!

Hours worked: 10.8

Hours actually on set: seven, give or take

Paycheck: \$128.81 - post taxes

Tip of the day: Getting a SAG voucher doubled my rate for the day. Excellent! Time to go home!

Once more, with feeling!

Third day on the set.

Show up.

Corset.

Make-up.

Rah rah rah- I'm betting you've picked up on the routine by now, yes? Sat in the waiting tent for our required stint, & when the makeup artist came around to make us all dirtier, she asked me if I had had my lips tattooed. People do this, it would seem. I was told that my lips just always seemed to be really, really red, & she was checking because we weren't supposed to be wearing any make-up. Odd, that. Are *your* lips tattooed?

That morning, we did more from Calamity's entrance. This would be a portion of the part that's exactly the same - except different. So, again with the walking. In this one, they find out that the Injuns dun gone and kilt a settler family on the creek. (before anyone gets their hopes up - no, it wasn't a massacre at Dawson's Creek.) Which means I was once again climbing my friend the staircase. Then they turned the cameras for close up shots, and I wasn't in the scene at all. This left me leisure to sit on the staircase and just watch them work. One of the crew referred to it on the first day as "a beautiful ballet", and in a way, it is. Here's your sequence :

--> There's this almost manic sea of people around the set - costume, makeup, lighting, props refilling beers & handing out cigarettes.

--> Then comes the cry of "Rolling! We're going to be rolling, people!"

"Sound!"

"Rrrrrrrrolling!"

"Picture!"

"Rrrrrrrrolling!"

Yes, they really say it like that. I don't know if it's like, tradition, or if the A.D.s on Deadwood only took the job 'cause they couldn't get the "Ruffles have ridges" gig.

--> The shooting bell rings, and suddenly, all the extraneous people are gone. Disappeared. Most of the time, this is because they've just hustled off the set, but sometimes, it's because they didn't have enough time and ducked under a table or behind the bar. (If you watch a movie, and the bartender takes a rather odd route from one end of the bar to another, it's entirely possible he's doing so to avoid crew members hidden back there because they were caught on set when shooting started.)

--> Clapboards. We had speculations on whether or not the guys who do that train as sprinters to get their job.

--> "Background!"

(That one is the extras' cue)

--> "And.....aaaction!"

The action goes forth, and while the actors do their job, there's a total silence. No one can move, no one can talk. Except for, you know - the people that are supposed to.

--> They hit the end, the director tells "Cut!" followed by at least three other people yelling "Cut!" in case we didn't hear him the first time.

--> Suddenly, many many people come raining back onto the set, and the whole thing begins again.

Somewhere, there's a queen bee that's jealous of the swarming abilities of a Hollywood set.

Lunchtime, people. This time, there was an actual rib barbeque thing. Very neat in a Western sort of way. However, taking into account my ability to keep myself mess & muss - free, I went with the far less messy chicken breast.

After lunch wound down, we were all placed again for the next scene. This time, I was sitting in the alcove. Cool. Out of the way of everything. I start talking to Trip, my partner for the scene, & Denise, one of the other girls, comes to lean on a pillar & join in, since no one ever actually put her anywhere. The three of us settled in, figuring that we could just hang out for this part.

We continued to think that right up until the part where three of the principals walked over and stood next to us, that is. Turns out our little alcove? Pretty much the focus for this scene. Lovely. So Denise, who had just kind of chosen that spot because she had nowhere else to go, was now in the entire shot, and Trip and I were directly behind the dialogue for this one. Oh dear. It's weird enough to pretend to whore yourself out to someone you'd never met until two days ago and most likely would never see again, but then knowing that hey! You're right - in - the - shot! Yeah, that tends to make you a little jittery. Or, it does for me, anyway.

But I dug deep, found that Amazon spirit, and survived through it. I'm sure I'll wince in horror if that shot actually makes it on screen & I'm in it, but I survived, and that's the important part, right? Right!

Here's hoping that the three principals block me completely, or those screencaps will haunt me for years, knowing my friends.

And then back to the speech. Except that since this time, since they were shooting it from the angle which would put me behind the camera, I was put in the background in an entirely different spot. All I have to say is, wow. Anyone who actually notices that is going to think, "Man, those whores were quick runners back then! That girl just went from one end of the room to the other in the space of three seconds!"

So then there was more standing, and pretending to give a care about the po' set'lers that dun got kilt by the Injuns. However, in setting up for it, I found out from the first A.D. that his glittery boots were made from stingray skin, which is why they were iridescent. I didn't know they made boots from stingrays, did you?

Finally, we hit the end. Extras were sent back to change. I unlaced my corset one last time, and turned in my petticoats. And with that, my dear friends, my career in Hollywood came to a close. It was a long, arduous road, and after getting my pay voucher signed, I shed a wistful tear while I drove away. (Okay, so the tear was actually from dirt kicked up when all the cars were leaving, but let's pretend, hrm?)

Hours worked: 12.3

Hours actually on set: eight

Paycheck: \$80.98 - post taxes

Tip of the day: If you are the extra nearest the door of the bar where costuming is sitting during the shoot, you will be fussed over. And tucked. And nudged. And eventually sewn into your costume, because the fact that your shirt isn't hanging quite right will bug the crap out of the costumer near you. I don't know why. It just will.

The moral of the story

The result of all this? Nothing, really. Contrary to what people say, I was treated very nicely the entire time I was on the set. No one went out of their way to be mean or spiteful, and when I mentioned that I hadn't done this before, they were more than willing to help.

What have I learned? I understand how so many people fall by the wayside in this industry. From what I've seen, you hit the ground running, and there's really no place to stop until you're done. No matter what you might think, Hollywood works hard, man. They're there from 6 am to 7 pm on a good day, and let's not even talk about the bad days. They're sticklers for detail, but they have to be, because working today doesn't mean you're not already trying to line up work so that you'll have a job next week. It's a hustle, that's all.

I actually found out as I was leaving that the people who'd called Central Casting had heard my name on the callback lists for the next week. Lovely as that was, I'd already decided that Hollywood just isn't the place for a delicate soul like me, and didn't bother to call and arrange my next spot next to the spotlight. So, much to Sam's dismay, the world is to be denied the joy that would be Entertainment According to Claris.

But hey - there's always the internet.

I'd like to thank everyone at Roscoe Productions & on the set of *Deadwood* for being kind to a rookie extra. They had no idea that I intended to write about the experience, but I'm hoping they don't try to sue me for doing so. *Deadwood* premieres sometime in early February on HBO - do a couple of people a favor and watch it so it gets picked up and they'll all have jobs. Thanks.