

BACK STAGE

MARCH 29 - APRIL 4, 1996

• THE PERFORMING ARTS WEEKLY •

\$2.25 (NY, NJ, CT, PA)
\$2.75 (Elsewhere)

By Simi Horwitz

There's an old Shelley Berman routine in which a beleaguered son finally confronts his father: "Dad, I don't want to be a doctor. I want to be an actor... No, not an extra. An Actor!"

It's a poignant snippet with plenty of resonance for the thousands of actors across the country who are, in fact, extras: the men and women who fill restaurant and street scenes in movies or TV shows, the background players.

In all fairness, most extras are working actors who do extra jobs, primarily for the money. And the money isn't half bad if you're a member of the unions—Screen Actors Guild (SAG) or American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA)—which have jurisdiction over filmed and taped programs. Daily rates vary with locales. In New York, a union extra on a film generally makes \$99; it's \$99 or \$128 on a soap, and for a commercial—the best bet financially—it's \$240. Various factors can increase these basic rates, like working nights or overtime, or providing your own wardrobe. By contrast, non-union players on a movie make \$30-\$70 a day.

New York-based union actress Jennifer Ann Galvez, who has grown to dislike extra work, admits that when she was doing it, she could make "\$300 to \$400 for a couple of days on a soap. And one year I made \$3,000 doing extra work."

Adds Shelley Kirk, an older New York actress who now almost exclusively works as an extra: "I do it for the health care and pension. I have vested interest in both unions and when I meet the requirements, my husband can also benefit from the health and pension plans." (To receive health insurance from SAG, for example, an actor has to earn a minimum of \$7,500 per year.)

Serving as an extra has an allure, too, for beginners of all ages who want to learn something about how a TV show or movie is made, and about the experience of working in front of a camera, and of interacting with cast and crew. "It also offers actors the opportunity to network and find out what's happening behind the scenes," observes Galvez—"which agents are in, which are out, and who's doing what." And, of course, everybody dreams that maybe, just maybe, a director will see his/her face, recognize star potential, and within short order a major—even minor—career will be launched.

The Pros and Cons of Being a Background Player

By Simi Horwitz

Feature begins on page 22



"When I started out, I was really optimistic. But in my experience extras are virtually never considered for larger roles."

—Jennifer Ann Galvez, actress

No More

At the opposite end of the spectrum stands 27-year-old Jennifer Ann Galvez, whose spin on extra work is downright dark.

"Initially, I thought working as an extra would be glamorous," she recalls. "I believed what they tell you in those books written by agents and casting directors, i.e., that one thing leads to another—that there are a series of steps you take to move along. Well, it's just not true.

"When I started out, I was really optimistic," Galvez continues, "I felt if the casting directors saw me on the set every day they would realize that I'm in for the long haul and take me seriously. In reality, they don't care. Yes, an extra may move into an under-five spot. But in my experience extras are virtually never considered for larger roles.

"I was an extra on one soap for six months and some girl I went to school with, suddenly, she's there—boom! A day player!—and she never did any extra work."

Galvez has been a working actress for five years, in regional theater and Off-Off Broadway productions and readings galore. She has appeared as an extra in soaps, commercials, and a fair number of theatrical and television films—"easily two dozen altogether." But she's come to the conclusion that she'd rather work as a temp between acting jobs. The office, for her, is simply less demeaning than the movie set. And she's not working as an extra anymore.

"How long can you be the butt of a

running joke among your friends and relatives? 'Oh, I saw the back of your head,' or 'I recognized your shoe.' And the idea that getting a glimpse of, say, Goldie Hawn on a set is thrilling just doesn't work for me. What am I? A glorified fan? Doing extra work had become soul-killing."

It's also unacceptably back-breaking, Galvez reports: "You can get a call as late as 12:30 at night and be told to be on a set by 6:30 the next morning. You then have to pull together nine or 10 outfits and bring them Downtown, only to be told, 'We don't like your clothes.' You stand around in icy, cramped quarters, and wherever you are, you're toting your luggage. If you're shooting outdoors and it's freezing you can end up with a bad cold. You've now become a kind of messenger—you're certainly not treated as an actor—who is sick! And one thing an extra can't be, if he wants to work again, is sick!"

Galvez's strong feelings about extra work evolved over time, but there was one striking emblematic moment, during a shoot for the "Cosby Mysteries" two years ago. "At 7:30 in the morning, we were all standing outside in weather below 20 degrees. It was so icy I ran back into the holding area and crouched beneath a table. I wanted to leave, but knew I couldn't because I needed the money. And then it hit me: I have friends who are heads of corporations, not to mention featured players. And here I am at 25, hiding under a table!"