

Extra! Extra!

Student extras go off campus and on the set

"You tell them what talents you have — everything from riding a bike and waitressing to what kind of costumes you own."

JOHANNA TOMKIEL,
CSU, LONG BEACH

BY WENDY RUTHERFORD
U. OF TEXAS, AUSTIN '94 GRAD

THOUSANDS OF HOPEFULS FLOCK to Hollywood every year, praying for a big break. What they don't know is that today's students are finding a little fame (with even less fortune) mere blocks from campus. And although they might not get a star on Hollywood Boulevard, movie or television extras can start the clock on their 15 minutes of fame.

"A lot of actors don't like doing [extra work], but since I'm in college, I need all the money I can get," says Rob Evers, a sophomore at Syracuse U. Being an extra won't make you rich — pay ranges from \$30 to \$75 a day.

Positive that Sly and Arnold's next adventure won't be on location in Kansas? Don't be too sure. Filmmakers found *The Bridges of Madison County* in Iowa, a *Tombstone* in Arizona and *A Perfect World* in Texas.

"Absolutely every state has a film agency," says Carol Pirie, communications director for the Texas Film Commission. The state agencies provide hot line recordings to give out production information on movies being filmed in the state, including when to show up for casting.

"A friend of mine was doing [extra work], and it looked like fun," says Johanna Tomkiel, a senior at California State U., Long Beach. "I went to a local casting agency, gave them my \$20 and got my picture taken. You tell them what talents you have — everything from riding a bike and waitressing to what kind of costumes you own."

Tomkiel has appeared in movies (*The Net*, *Showgirls*), TV series (*Chicago Hope*, *Party of Five*, *Dr. Quinn*, *Medicine Woman*) and a *Soul Asylum* video.

"The worst was when I was on *Dr. Quinn*," Tomkiel says. "I had been out late with my friends the night before and had to get ready at 3 a.m. I had to stay in a long, hot skirt and bonnet until 2:30 the next morning."

Quiet on the set!

So let's say you're hired as Joe or Jody Average to play the part of background activity on a busy street corner. What can you expect on the set?

"Sometimes the crew treats you like dirt," says Andrea Lewis, a grad student at CSU, Northridge. But Lewis remembers a time when, while shooting an episode of *Blossom*, the late Bill Bixby took all the extras aside.

"He said, 'Without you, there wouldn't be classrooms full of people or crowded streets. Not only are you all actors, but you're also people, and don't let anyone tell you that you're worthless,'" Lewis recalls.

The days can be long (often more than eight hours), and it's often a hurry-up-and-wait situation, but sometimes the wait is worth it.

"The best set I've ever been on was *The Net*. It was on location at the beach in Palos Verdes," Tomkiel says. "I got to put on my bathing suit and hang out with the extras all day."

Seth Zachary Nagel, a senior at Ohio U., met his current girlfriend, a fellow extra, on the set of *The Great White Hope*. He has played everything from a computer nerd to a rich teenager. "While I was working on *Heat*, [Robert] De Niro was making faces at me over Al Pacino's shoulder."

Lewis took extra work to the next level as a stand-in for *The Brady Bunch Movie* and *Clear and Present Danger*. "I actually got to read lines with Harrison Ford. Interacting with a professional actor was such a high. It's been two years, and I still haven't gotten over it," she says.

Being an extra can be an easy segue for students from the college world to the film world.

"You meet a lot of contacts," says Kareem Ferguson, a senior at the U. of Utah who has appeared in *Class Act*, *Army of Darkness* and *Love Kills* and on *Beverly Hills, 90210*.

"I've used it as an opportunity to get to know the business better, and it's great experience," Ferguson says. "I've stayed in touch with actors, and they let me know about unpublicized movies and who to send my résumé to."

"I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille."

Is extra work the solution for stardom-starved students? Maybe, maybe not. But it's definitely the answer for *starving* students. Extras are often treated to a sumptuous meal.

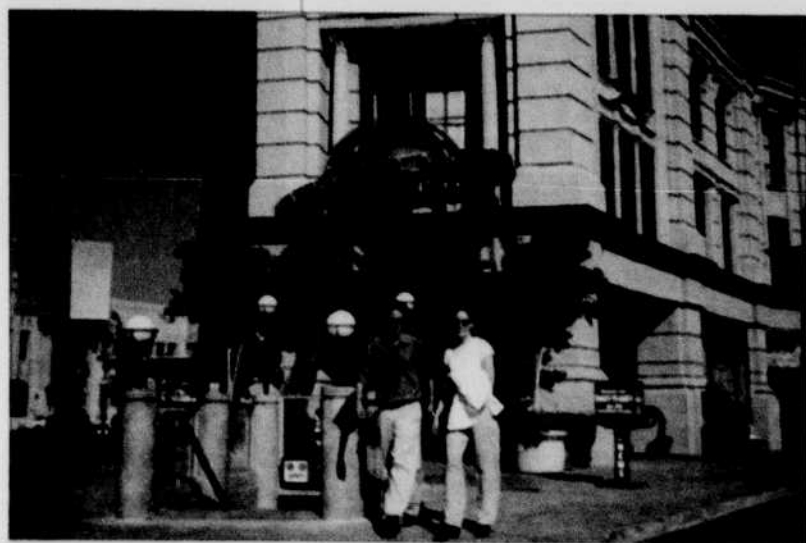
"Being a college student — I'm stoked on the food!" Tomkiel says. "They cater on location, serve halibut, steak and sushi and have stuff for you to snack on all day long."

Some students may use extra work to pay the bills, but Lewis advises potential extras not to quit their day jobs.

"The pay isn't worth it unless you're bored and have nothing to do that day," Lewis says. "It's a fun experience — when you know it's not your sole income."

Nagel advises would-be extras to be daring and take risks. "If you want to do this professionally, show them that you want to work. Impress them, and they'll call you back."

Wendy Rutherford desperately wants to be an extra in the next *Star Wars* trilogy. • Aaron J. Kearns, U. of California, Davis, contributed to this article



The new *Lois and Clark*? Student extras are flying high in *Metropolis*.



Being an extra brings out the beast in every student.