

With Countless Auditions And One Couch, Never Used

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film or television show. "Born on the Fourth of July" had "more than 200 speaking roles," Mr. Hopkins said.

"And we filled lots of the nonspeaking parts as well," he added. "I guess you could say that was our epic film."

The Business of Deadlines

Bramon-Hopkins has had as few as nine days to cast a movie ("Talk Radio"). The partners had eight weeks to cast a much larger film ("Desperately Seeking Susan"), and they have worked for a year or more on other projects, including "Jacob's Ladder," a thriller about the effects of the Vietnam War, starring Tim Robbins, which had preproduction delays.

Casting directors are paid \$15,000 to \$75,000 a film, "very little for what they do," Ms. Bramon said. On some low-budget films they get a percentage of the gross instead of a large salary. "Not only do they do the casting, but they suggest how roles can be changed to fit promising actors, they coach actors for roles, and they do up budgets, too," she said.

In stage work, actors' union rules often require open casting — the so-called cattle calls that are the stuff of theatrical legend, where the director keeps saying, "Next!" Film casting, though, is more selective; generally, actors are called in and auditioned individually.

"However, if we can't find the right person, we will go to an open call," Mr. Hopkins said. For "Born on the Fourth of July," Bramon-Hopkins advertised an open call for 2,000 children in Massapequa, L.I., one of the film's settings. The team also saw 8,000 people in Dallas just to cast extras.

'A Whole Scouting System'

Ms. Bramon and Mr. Hopkins met at the Ensemble Studio Theater in Manhattan, where they have done the casting since 1978, and have, separately, directed dozens of plays. They began casting their first picture, "Desperately Seeking Susan," in July 1984. Since 1985, they have done the casting for Lincoln Center Theater productions, including "The House of Blue Leaves," "Anything Goes" and "Our Town."

"We have a whole scouting system due to our theater work," Mr. Hopkins said. "For films, we get the new talent first."

Of movie casting, Ms. Bramon said: "You try for it to be an art form. Part of the art is getting away from the obvious choice — even, sometimes, suggesting changes in the role if you've found a good actor to do it."

Ms. Bramon railed against "boring, on-the-nose casting," saying that

some films are "'The Hollywood Squares' of casting."

"They find any bankable name to fill in the square," she said. "They cast a film by marquee value, rather than a rightness for the role."

Ms. Bramon said she loves to work "with a director who trusts you and has faith in you, and allows you to come up with an actor who isn't the director's exact vision — but who may work better."

"I've visualized midgets and cast giants, and vice versa," said Mr. Armiel, the director. "Whole new roles have condensed around an actor sitting in front of me. The process of casting is always a venture into the unknown."

Frequently, "The one part you think will be easy turns out to be the one you can't cast," said Mr. Hopkins. "In 'Fatal Attraction' we saw every single available actress in the known world," he said, for the parts of the wife and the lover.

An Idea and a Career Lift

Ultimately, the partners suggested that Glenn Close be cast in the role of the lover, though "she'd never seemed sexy before," he said. It was Ms. Bramon who suggested Anne Archer for the role of the wife — revitalizing Ms. Archer's career.

The Bramon-Hopkins office is hardly a penthouse with a billion-dollar view, like that of some agents they deal with: it is a cinderblock-walled space in the bowels of Lincoln Center Theater. On tables and the floor are boxes of actors' pictures and

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résumés; agents send along an average of 60 a week. In addition, each week a hundred or more agentless actors submit glossies and résumés on their own.

Some actors are so desperate that they accost Mr. Hopkins on the sidewalk, and even hail him while he is riding his bike around Manhattan. Actors have pursued Ms. Bramon in the supermarket and have camped out on the stoop of her Manhattan apartment with their glossies and résumés.

But the actors' persistence can be matched by the doggedness of Bramon-Hopkins in pursuing stars. "Risa and I don't take no for an answer," Mr. Hopkins said. "We call them at home or drive the script over to their house. The agents get really mad at us."

Reputation and Power

The profession hasn't always been portrayed favorably: David Rabe made a casting director an unsavory protagonist in "Hurlyburly," his acidic play about Hollywood. Indeed, a visitor to the Bramon-Hopkins office looked in vain for the casting couch. "Oh, Risa took the only couch we ever had, and brought it to Los Angeles!" said Mr. Hopkins of his partner, who has been on the West Coast for 10 months working on television and movie projects.

Casting agents do have a certain amount of power, Mr. Hopkins acknowledged, "But it's all really the director's choice," he said. "In the end, we're invisible."

Ms. Bramon commented: "Influence, yes — but power? Well, often you're smack in the middle. Actors get angry at you, agents get angry at you, and directors get angry at you."

Part of the term "casting director" is "director," and Mr. Hopkins and Ms. Bramon say they find their decade of theater-directing experience helpful when casting films. Both say