



Stars Need Not Apply

Casting directors Risa Bramon and Billy Hopkins bring a New York sensibility to their work.

And Hollywood clearly likes it: they've cast thirteen movies in three years.

BY
Jeff Shear

ERIC BOGOSIAN (LEFT)
IS BERATED BY ALEC
BALDWIN IN
"TALK RADIO."



JOYCE RUDOLPH

THE ACTORS SIT IN FOLDING CHAIRS ALONG A GRIM brown hallway in a New York City production facility. They all understand that the next hour or so could have a major impact on their careers, and they conceal their tension behind the pages of *The New York Times*.

Casting director Risa Bramon hunches over a gray metal desk in an adjacent room, talking on the phone. She handles the outside portion of the audition. Her partner, Billy Hopkins, is on the inside. It is a logical division of labor—Bramon deals best with agents, Hopkins can be tireless with actors—but it isn't entirely acceptable to Bramon. She feels she's a victim of Hollywood sexism. "It's the boys' room in there," she says, turning toward a brown fire door leading to the sanctum sanctorum, where actors can be heard reading lines from director Oliver Stone's new movie, *Talk Radio*. "No girls allowed," she says acidly, "except actresses."

Suddenly the door to the casting room swings open, and Stone shuffles out. It is time for a coffee break, he says, and he gives his order to one of the assistants. Bramon leaps in. "Is there anything else I can get for you?" She smiles—or is she baring her teeth? From inside the room, someone hollers, "Yeah, get me a five-eleven blond."

Bramon gives the men in the room the finger. "She flipped a bird," one of the actresses says, laughing. It is a friendly bird but not a feckless one. Rather, it is a bird in a huff, the result of an extraordinarily compressed casting schedule. Bramon, Hopkins, and Stone have just nine days in New York to complete casting for *Talk Radio*. They saw about 150 local actors in the first three. Today is the fourth day, the first for callbacks. "Kamikaze casting," Bramon calls it.

In just three years, Bramon and Hopkins have cast thirteen films, including *Fatal Attraction*, *Wall Street*, *At Close Range*, *Something Wild*, and *Making Mr. Right*. And they are the sort of people actors' agents dream about (when they are not fighting with them). William Morris's Myrna Jacoby, who represented Anne Archer when she was cast in *Fatal Attraction*, says, "They don't cast stars. They look for actors, not celebrities."

"I have a horror of being yessed to death," says director Adrian Lyne. "I look for controlled conflict throughout a movie, and Bramon and Hopkins give me that. They were very forceful in their opinions about *Fatal Attraction*. I didn't always agree with them, but often enough they would bring me around."

Talk Radio should be a real actor's movie. The play, written by and starring Eric Bogosian, was staged at New York City's Public Theater in 1987. It takes place on one set and is about the evening a belligerent but successful local radio talk-show host gets his chance to make or break his career nationally. In the movie version, the character is a darker, more controversial figure who resembles Alan Berg, the talk-radio host who was murdered by a neo-Nazi group in 1984.

Bramon and Hopkins have worked in the New York theater world for ten years, which is important to Stone because it gives them an insider's knowledge of new talent. It is particularly helpful since Stone has only \$3.5 million to spend. As coproducer Alex Ho says, "Oliver had to find a way to create a champagne dinner on a barbecue budget."

Casting for the movie got under way in an hour-and-a-half meeting at Stone's Santa Monica home in early January. Since Bramon and Hopkins had dealt with him before, they knew Stone was a "strong director," one who is comfortable with his own vision, which they appreciated. Like them, he had self-confidence. At the same time, such unbridled strength was a potential source of conflict.

And, in fact, early in the meeting a contest developed



HOPKINS AND BRAMON CASTING "TALK RADIO" WITH OLIVER STONE

BARBARA WALZONIX

over an actor named Michael Wincott. Wincott had played Kent—a heavy-metal fan who tells vicious lies to gain attention—in *Talk Radio* when it was at the Public. Nobody was flipping the bird over the issue, but lines were drawn. Bramon and Hopkins wanted him; Stone did not.

"There was no one else for the part," Bramon contends. Stone agreed that Wincott was good, but he worried that he was too old for the role in the film. The director believed it was possible to hide an actor's age from a theater audience, but that it was harder to conceal from a movie camera.

"With Oliver," Bramon says, "if you want him to cast C, you tell him you want A and B. That's how we work with him. He knows we do it and makes fun of it himself." Wincott got the part.

BOTH BRAMON AND HOPKINS LIKE TO PRETEND THEY have no history, that there exists only the slightly imperfect present—and the boundless future. Bramon grew up in a suburb west of Montreal known as Côte Saint Luc. Her father runs a modest printing business; her mother manages the home. As a teenager, Bramon spent her summers waitressing at the Concord Resort