

How To Be a Film and TV Extra and Why You Should Be One

By James Everett

At various points in time, I've been asked how you go about being a Film and TV Extra and what it's like. These questions range from:

"How do you get into it?"

"What's it like?"

"Does it pay well?"

Several years ago, during what I now call my "quarterly life crisis" I started working as an Extra – technically known as a "Supporting Artist" or "SA". I discovered it somewhat by accident, but I later worked on productions such as *"The Crown"*, *"Vanity Fair"* and *"World on Fire"*.

Now I work predominantly behind the camera rather than in front of it, and I found that being an SA helped me progress in other areas of the industry as well.

In this cheat sheet, I'll explain how to go about being an SA, the pros and cons of doing so, and how it can be used to access other areas of the industry.

Before I go any further, please don't be put off if you can't act and have no desire to be an actor. You don't necessarily need to have any acting abilities to be an SA. It's great if you do, but it's not mandatory. The most important thing is that you're punctual and able to follow instructions.

Benefits of Being an SA

Money

The first and obvious benefit is that it's work and money in the bank. Typical rates can be found here: <https://www.castingcollective.co.uk/production/pay-rates>

The notable things you get paid for are:

- Being on-set during shooting days
- Attending a costume fitting – typically a half day's pay

- Having a hair cut, shaving your beard, and having your appearance dramatically altered
- Performing specialist actions when on set – eg. Dancing, juggling, or delivering a line.

It's worth noting that, in the vast majority of cases, if you're working away from home, you are neither provided with accommodation, nor given money towards finding your own. Therefore, if it's not feasible to commute to and from home each day, you may need to find a hotel room or AirBnB near where you're shooting. This obviously eats into your overall profit. For this reason, some people have a camper van or stay with a nearby friend or relative.

Unique Adventures!

Secondly, you're able to visit places and experience things that you'd never normally be able to do. Whether that's firing live muskets during a recreation of the Battle of Waterloo, being a servant for Elizabeth 1st in a Tudor manor house that's not normally open to the public, or riding in WW2 military vehicles and running around a beach during a recreation of the Dunkirk evacuation – all of which I've done. Don't get me wrong – there are some boring productions to work on as well – but the exciting ones definitely make up for it!

Networking and Socialising

Thirdly, you get to network with a diverse range of people – some of whom have really interesting professions and lives. I've found myself talking to anyone from financial advisors who wanted a change of direction, to J.R.R. Tolkien's grandson.

Working on set can be a good bonding experience, and it's surprising how quickly you can become friends with lots of people.

I've found this to be useful off-set as well. If I've been stuck in a specific area of "Adult Life" it's invaluable to have a network of people who you can ask for advice.

Free Time

As you've perhaps heard, when you're working on-set, there's a lot of waiting around. This can be boring, but equally, it can be an opportunity to do things you wouldn't normally have time to do – anything from reading a book to replying to your emails. A friend of mine regularly replies to her emails when she's not needed on set, and says how nice it is to be paid to do her admin!

Free food!

On the majority of productions, the food is really good. And free. And there's plenty of it! You're normally provided with two meals a day, plus snacks.

Breakfast is either a full English or continental. Lunch is generally two courses plus extras, and there's often snacks at the end of the day.

If shooting goes into overtime, a takeaway is often ordered for everyone. On *Wonder Woman*, a Transit delivery van full of Dominoes pizza arrived one evening... Because an army marches on its stomach.

However, common convention is that the cast and crew are served food first, and the SA's are served last. But don't worry – there will be enough food for everyone and you won't miss out.

Bad Things About Being an SA

As you can imagine, it's not all fun and games. So here's some of the bad points – in my opinion.

Unpredictable

Firstly, it's very sporadic, and certainly can't be treated as a full time job. Therefore, most people treat it as an additional job around their main work. Sometimes you might not have any work for several weeks; sometimes you'll get 4-5 days a month; and sometimes you might be working for several weeks continuously. For this reason, it's essential to have another form of income.

Short Notice

Although you may have been asked several weeks in advance if you are willing and able to fill a role, invariably you won't receive final confirmation until the day before you're due to work. This means you'll have to be flexible and make arrangements at the last minute, which can be a pain in the proverbial.

Waiting, Waiting, and More Waiting

Of the scenes scheduled to be filmed on a particular day, you probably won't be needed for all of them. Sometimes, you'll only be needed for one scene. Therefore, there is A LOT of waiting around, so make sure you bring something to occupy yourself.

Long Hours

Filming days are long and tiring. A typical shoot day lasts 11 hours – including an hour for lunch. Sometimes you run into overtime, too. Therefore, you'll be required to wake up early in the morning and / or stay up late at night in the case of a night shoot. If this isn't for you, better that you know now.

How to Become an SA

If you think that being an SA could be for you, it's relatively easy to become one. You simply sign up to as many casting agencies as you can and wait for them to offer you work...

What's a Casting Agency?

A casting agency is a company that supplies SA's for productions. They have a large database of people who are willing to accept work as an SA, and details about each person – e.g. Measurements, appearance, and relevant skills.

When a production requires SA's, they contact a casting agency and give them a list of their requirements. The casting agency then consults their database and puts forward anyone who meets those requirements. As you might imagine, there's a bit more to it than that – but don't worry! I'll explain everything...

Signing-up to Casting Agencies

To appear on a casting agency's database – known as being "on their books" – you need to sign-up online. This allows them to offer you work.

The process of signing-up to the very first agency – whichever one you start with – can be a bit long and laborious. This is because they ask you to provide various pieces of information, such as photos, your measurements (for costume fitting purposes), and a scan of your passport and driving licence.

You probably won't know things like your wrist measurement off the top of your head, or have a scan of your passport to hand. In which case, you'll need to spend a bit of time with a tape measure and a scanner compiling this information and entering it into their online form.

The good news is that all agencies ask for the same sorts of information, so once you've compiled the information and signed-up to the first agency, it's easy to sign-up to the rest. You'll find you can simply copy and paste the same information and upload the same documents.

Some of the agencies ask for an initial sign-up fee of varying amounts. Other simply take commission from each job you gain through that agency. Regardless,

make sure you read the terms and conditions of joining each agency so you know what you're signing up for! Don't forget to do this bit!

There are a number of casting agencies out there. I have included a list of the main ones at the end of this document. I recommend signing up to as many as you can. It never hurts to be with as many agencies as possible.

Headshot Photos

Now let's talk about headshot photos, because a lot of people ask about them.

When you sign-up to a casting agency, you have to provide photos of your face from the front, back and side. You can either take some photos on your phone and upload them, or you can have some professional headshots taken by a photographer.

You may assume that having professional headshots means you are likely to secure more work. If you were applying for a normal full time job, someone with a well presented CV is more likely to secure a job than someone with an untidy CV. However, in this case, it's not quite as simple as that.

When a production company is scrolling through the photos of people who are available for a role, they are simply looking for people with a particular look. That "look" will depend on the scene that's being filmed. In general, there's no "right" look you can have.

Most of the time, they will spend around 1 or 2 seconds looking at each person's photo. During this process, they are simply filtering out the people who have the correct look. You could hire an amazing photographer and take some amazing photos, but if you don't look right for the scene, you won't get the work.

However, it certainly doesn't hurt to have good quality photos, and it does suggest a level of commitment and professionalism. But just be aware that it's not the be-all-and-end-all.

Receiving Work Offers

As I explained earlier, when a production requires SA's, they contact a casting agency and give them a list of their requirements. If you meet the requirements of a particular production looking for SA's, the casting agency will send you an email. This email will include information such as the dates they require you to

work, the filming location, and a description of the work you'll be doing. It will also include information about a costume fitting (if one is required).

If you are able to meet all the requirements, click Accept. If not, click Decline.

Clicking "Decline"

If you click Decline, there are no penalties or repercussions. You are not required to work a minimum number of days per year, for example. If you wish, you can decline every offer you receive with no comeuppance. This means that you can fit being an SA around your existing commitments.

Clicking "Accept"

If you click Accept, you are not guaranteed to secure the work. You are simply informing the casting agency that you are willing and able to complete the work required.

The casting agency will then provide the production company with a list of everyone who is available and meets their requirements – which will include you.

The production company then decides which SA's they would like to use and then informs the casting agency of their decision. The casting agency then tells you if you've been accepted onto the job or not. As I explained earlier, most of the time, you're not given final confirmation until the day before you're due to work.

If you are confirmed on the job, you will be expected to attend the necessary costume fitting and filming days as outlined in the initial email. A few days later, you'll be off to set – where glamour, fame and fortune await you.

(Sorry, but that last bit is a lie. The industry is not glamorous, as you'll discover...)

Important Things To Do and Not To Do!

Punctuality

Do NOT be late. Ever. In fact, you need to be a bit early, and leave plenty of time to get to where you need to be. If you are late, you need to have a VERY good excuse, and ideally notify the relevant person as far in advance as you can. (You'll be given an emergency contact number in your confirmation email.) There's a common saying "If you're on time, you're late."

Taking Photos

Don't get caught taking photos when you're on-set – either of the set itself, or the main actors. If you do manage to sneak a few photos, do NOT post them on social media before the production has aired. If you do, you can get in A LOT of trouble, and it's possible you won't work as an SA again.

Props

If you're given a prop to hold, carry, or use, don't tamper with it or break it! Some of the props given to SA's are rare originals and / or expensive and time consuming to make. The people sourcing and making these props have more than enough work on their plate as it is – so props being broken is a complication they don't need. So if you are given a prop, please be considerate of it,

If you find it uncomfortable or difficult to use, speak to the Standby Props team, the people who will have given you the prop. Do not attempt to alter it on your own volition.

Aprons

If you're eating anything and you're wearing a costume, make sure you're wearing a plastic apron. Costume should provide you with aprons but, if you haven't received one, ask for one. Costume won't be happy if you spill food on your expensive costume!

Additional Actions

If they ask for volunteers to perform additional actions – eg. Riding a bike, playing an instrument, etc. put yourself forward – assuming you feel comfortable doing so. If you are asked to perform an action that requires a specialist skill, you are paid more. For example, someone I worked with was once paid an additional £30 for riding a push bike for a few seconds!

Thermals

If it's cold, bring some thermals to wear. You may be given a costume with lots of layers, in which case you might find that you don't need them. However, it doesn't

hurt to have them just in case. If you're waiting around and not moving, it's easy to get cold and damp. Hand warmers are good, too.

If you want to go the extra mile, waterproof socks are very useful. They'll probably be the most expensive pair of socks you'll ever buy, but they're worth every penny. Even if you're not expecting to get your feet wet, they are both warm and very good at keeping out the damp.

Entertaining Yourself

Bring a good book. Or a film to watch on your phone. Or plenty of podcasts. Or something else to entertain yourself. As I said above, there's a lot of waiting around and it can be easy to get bored.

Alternatively, look around you and watch what's going on. It's often interesting to see how a production is made, so enjoy the opportunity while you can – because not many people are given that opportunity.

Snacks

If you're offered a snack, it's worth taking it – even if you're not hungry at that particular time. You can then put it in your pocket and eat it later when snacks might not be available.

Working in Other Areas of the Industry

If you think you'd ultimately like to work in another area of the industry, particularly one in which you're not in front of the camera, being an SA can be a very insightful job – and one that is often overlooked. As I said in the introduction, I found being an SA was a good springboard for working in other areas of the industry.

Further Benefits of Being an SA

If you're new to the industry, and still not completely familiar with how a film is made, or the role of some of the departments, being an SA allows you to be a fly on the wall and learn more about the whole process.

While you're on-set, you'll have all the departments working around you, and it's a great opportunity to see how they all work, overhear discussions, and generally learn more about the process.

The additional benefit of being an SA is that, unlike most roles, you don't have any major responsibility while you're on set.

As I explained earlier, one of the potential down-sides of being an SA is that you won't be on set all of the time. In-fact, a lot of the time you'll be waiting around somewhere off-set. However, it is still possible to continue observing, even if you've been taken off-set.

One way to do that is to approach one of the 3rd ADs. (3rd AD stands for 3rd Assistant Director. This is sometimes abbreviated to "the 3rd" or "the AD". If you're an SA, these are the people who will look after you and usher you around.) Simply explain to them that you'd like to work in a "behind-camera" role and ask if it would be possible to return to set so you can observe what's going on. If you catch them at the right moment, sound enthusiastic, and assure them that you won't get in the way, a lot of the time they'll allow you to do so – but not always. It depends what's happening at that particular moment. However, if they say yes and you're on-set without a 3rd AD, make sure you don't get in the way!

Potential Work Experience

Another benefit of being an SA is that you'll be working alongside many people who are already established in the industry. If you're careful and pick a good

moment, you should be able to have a chat with some of them and ask them some questions.

One of the best-case scenarios of this is that you'll come across someone senior in the department in which you'd like to work. If you do, I would recommend explaining that you'd like to work in their department, and ask if it would be possible for you to have some work experience or even a junior position in their department. It doesn't hurt to ask – and if you don't ask, you don't get.

The point I want to stress is that **picking the right moment is key**. If you pick a moment when they're clearly busy, you're likely to get a very negative response. If you can, I recommend speaking to them at the end of the day, or sometimes at lunchtime. Before you start a conversation in earnest, I'd also begin by asking if they're free to speak.

It's important to note that this is far from a guaranteed method to secure work experience. It also relies on you being extroverted, and even audacious enough, to approach the necessary people in the first place. However, it's potentially another tool in your arsenal, and it can pay off – as it once did for me...

On one production, I unexpectedly got talking to one of the Art Directors, who later gave me several day's work experience on the same production. So it can work, but you just have to be tactful about how you approach the situation.

I hope you've found this document useful, and good luck on all your future adventures! Finally, as promised, on the next page is a list of the main casting agencies:

List of Main Casting Agencies

Universal Extras	www.universalextras.co.uk
Casting Collective	www.castingcollective.co.uk
Extra People	extra-people.com
Two10	www.two10casting.com
On Set Extras	www.onsetextras.co.uk
Mad Dog	maddog2020casting.com
Guys and Dolls	guysanddollscasting.com
Key Casting	www.keycasting.co.uk
Ray Knight	www.rayknight.co.uk