

CASTING 91,000 FILM ACTORS A YEAR

Billy Grady Directs Enormous Job for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

The most harassed and defenseless men in Hollywood are the casting directors.

Last Monday, up early in the Hollywood dawn, they poured 11,000 calls for "extras" into the gorged trunk lines of Central Casting Corporation. By nightfall, 10,200 of these had earned \$7.50 each for a day's work, had gone back home to sit and wait for another call. It might come next morning—or next year. The other 800 were kept over for another day, perhaps two.

The casting directors are victims of everything from blandishment to ground



Billy Grady: "And he said he was an actor"

glass, from blunt, remorseless politics to insane scheming. They have to be quick enough to detect an actor's plot, smart enough to crush it. That intermittent \$7.50 a day is the difference between life and death by starvation to hordes.

Hiring—The harrowing job of these casters is to find and engage competent actors for motion-pictures.

It would seem an easy, glamorous task. Actually, they fight for fifty-two weeks in every year the most wearying fight imaginable: theirs the work of fending off the 80,000,000 persons in this country who believe with fierce confidence that they have more to offer films than have either Greta Garbo or Clark Gable. Any casting director alive is willing to confess that one in that 80,000,000 probably is right.

The greatest single employer of "extra" labor, at from \$3 a day each for plain mob workers to \$25 a day for a "dress" extra who speaks a line of dialog, is Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. It lumps this tremendous task on the shoulders, naturally, of an ace casting director.

Hollywood's No. 1 casting director is Billy Grady, broad-shouldered, open-faced Irishman, a terror to counterfeits, a downright softy when he encounters an honest man—or woman.

Life Begins—Grady arrived at his desk in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios by a long, tedious and circuitous process that began the night he was born in Lynn, Massachusetts. Mother Grady, slender, daft about theater, eager to teach shambling adolescents of Lynn the first steps in grace, posture and elocution, was in the midst of a dramatic lesson. She had been thumping clear speech into half a dozen witless infants for an hour. They still spoke English as if it were two parts barbed wire and one part hot mush. She was tired, discouraged. Suddenly, she excused herself from the lesson, sent the little dramatic guinea-pigs home and welcomed son Billy into existence.

"He will be an actor," she said.

Hamlet—He was three, the youngest back-porch *Hamlet* in Lynn's history, when he first understood about his birth. It seemed a good idea. He joined forces with his mother.

"I knew then it was a good idea," he acknowledges now. "Acting is fun, always has been. I was born to act, and now look."

He spread wide, sturdy palms across a desk littered with casting sheets and jotted notes on suggested players for pictures.

He hires—and fires—91,000 persons a year, all actors. Any personnel manager with a labor turnover of as little as 500 persons a year knows the groan quota of such a job. Let him multiply that quota 180 times, allow for acting temperament—and never feel sorry for himself again.

Start—Acting is far away from Grady now, as a personal ambition. Nor was his entry into it auspicious, altho Mother Grady told him it was all right. All great actors, she assured him, began humbly. His first job in theater was as janitor of the Lynn Theater in Lynn. He shoveled coal, dusted seats, got the theater warm. Even then, he used to look at actors and wonder.

A circus played Lynn. Automatically, he went to it. Just as automatically, he mingled with the professionals, ignored the audience of home-town people. He learned the circus needed an animal tender who also could handle "props" for the performers. He left with the circus. The Grady family nodded in satisfaction. Actor Billy was on his way.

When his adolescent vocal cords finally smoothed down, he found himself with a tenor voice. The circus pitched in a city near New York; he took a day off and went to Broadway. By nightfall he had a job, singing illustrated songs for publishers. His mellifluous Irish tenor was supposed to work people to such a state of emotion they would tumble over themselves buying copies of the songs. A better showman than his employers, he decided to dramatize himself, get a distinctive name. He was certain it had to be Irish, then thought of some bird-like quality. He thought of calling himself "The Irish Thrush," and discarded that as being faintly feminine. Lynn came to mind and then linnet. He billed himself as "The Irish Linnet." Sold lots of songs, that way. Irish families, awash in tears, would buy songs by the bale.

When spring came, he went back to the circus, this time in the No. 1 ticket wagon, an important job. Winter closed in on the circus and he fled for Broadway. He had met some vaudeville actors while players he decided he could do it as well, in many cases better. He became a vaudeville actor.

Grady sent word home that he finally was an actor. Mother Grady rejoiced and paid no more attention to his sketches. She felt vindicated. He toured for many years, was known on the circuits from Coast to Coast. He specialized in villainy.

Six years ago, when vaudeville began to collapse of its own fell weight, he wondered what he could do. He had written a play two years earlier, but no one wanted it. He knew more actors than possibly any one in the business. Hollywood was swallowing up actors who could talk as well as act. He decided to become an actors' agent and place clients with the studios.

He was so expert at suggesting the right type at just the right time that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer decided it would save money by hiring him to go to First Nights on Broadway and make a daily report on the competence or incompetence of stage players. It was decided by Metro's executives that if Grady as an agent could induce them to pay \$750 a week to an actor obviously worth only \$300, his persuasive power could hire for them \$1,000 actors for \$500. His persuasive powers could and did.



"Ummm. You see, it's like this with actors . . ."

Reviews and Records—For three years, he saw every show produced on Broadway, wrote a daily report. Unabashed by the studio, unawed by its executives, he daily air-mailed to Hollywood critical reviews such as never have seen print in any newspaper engaging a formal drama critic.

There was a play called "The Green Bay Tree." It was about two sybarites, wealthy, cultured. It was produced handsomely, elegantly, and the newspaper reviews were phrased in words of satin.

That annoyed Grady. He thought it time to debunk the gloss. So his review winged to the Metro Studios in the form of a letter written by an ex-convict to a pal still in prison.

"So look, pal," it reads, "there's this old fluff, see, and he's got plenty of dough. Along comes a young guy and they take a tenement dive in London."

There are 1,200 words to it. It is a classic of gutter speech reporting.

Grady had one other habit. He kept books. He kept books on every actor, sketch and play he ever saw, with dates, type of rôles, and places.

The day the studio wired him to come to California and be casting director, he took the records with him. They have helped him to confound many a pompous, untruthful actor trying to get a job.

Spotted—One came in, with his agent, while Grady was being interviewed. A swollen, spatted, gardenia-ed actor, speaking counterfeit British. Grady recognized him, remembered him, but didn't admit it. He waited to see what would happen.

"My client will tell you his experience," said the agent.

"I was leading man for Katharine Cornell," said the actor, "and before that I played a lead with George M. Cohan. I was in a Theater Guild play, starred, last season."

Grady shrugged, reached into a file, thumbed nine pages of a record book and glared.

"Why try to lie to me?" he snorted. "The truth is the Guild never stars any one, you never have been even an understudy in a Cornell company, you haven't had a job in exactly two years and eight months and four days and in your last fairly good job you played a butler but were fired after the first night because you dropped a tray and, in reaching for it, hurt the star's left eye with your elbow. The star, if you must know, was Jolson. The play was 'Wonderbar.' That's your record."

The actor turned white, the agent turned purple.

"If you ever bring this man in here again," Grady said to the agent, "I will throw both of you out."



For "Camille": a cane to Grady from Garbo

They vanished, mumbling to themselves.

Hobby—Grady's office is a five-room bungalow on the studio lot. He has fourteen men and three secretaries working for him. His own office is protected by two of the three secretaries, double sets of doors, a private switchboard and a window one may look out of, but not into. His office is severely plain: a desk, two chairs, three telephones, a bookcase full of actors' records and an old-fashioned umbrella stand. It is stacked with canes.

The canes are his hobby. He collects one from the star of every picture made on the lot.

Paul Muni gave him a Chinese ash cane for "The Good Earth." Gable gave him a blackthorn for the Irish "Parnell." Garbo gave him a sword-cane with an ivory head for "Camille." There are more than thirty-eight canes in the collection, six more were expected hourly. He never carries one.

Just looks at them. The umbrella stand is from the front hall in the house in Lynn.

Advice—He isn't awed by stars, he will weep for troubles afflicting an extra. Directors, planning a new picture, call him, suggest a certain star. If Grady doesn't believe the star is suitable, he says so. One such name was mentioned while he was being interviewed. A director was telephoning to inquire if the actor was available.

"You can have him if you want him," Grady barked, "but I warn you, he has a sheep-nose. Besides that, he can't act."

The actor didn't get the job.

"He hasn't a sheep-nose and he can act," Grady explained, after hanging up the telephone. "But he would have been wrong for the part. If I had told the director that, he would have resented my doubting his casting ability. So I told him the actor was ugly."

He has a standard formula for answering the telephone.

It rings, he nods at whoever he is speaking to in his office, he picks up the receiver, cries: "Square-Deal Grady speaking!"

He has a free hand in the matter of hiring extras, with one exception. Director W. S. Van Dyke has a "panic list," a roster of once famous players, now broke, forgotten by the public, who need work. Whenever Van Dyke starts a picture, he sends the "panic list" to Grady, Grady telephones the old-timers, gives them work. John Ford, at RKO Studios, has a similar arrangement.

Assignment—Grady's toughest job was to find bit players and extras for "The Good Earth." His fourteen assistants combed the West Coast from Vancouver, British Columbia, to San Diego, California, rounding up Chinese able and willing to work in the film version of Pearl Buck's novel.

They found a Chinese banker in San Francisco, a noodle manufacturer in Los Angeles, a doll-maker in Vancouver, all willing, for a lark, to play in the picture. In addition, they found 1,500 other Chinese. They brought them to Grady.

"We need 2,000," said Grady. "Go get more."

He was told there weren't any more. So Grady hired 200 Filipinos and 300 Mexicans, choosing the latter from the more Oriental-eyed types. The 1,500 Chinese will be seen in the front ranks of all mob scenes in the picture, the Filipinos and Mexicans will fill up the background. They will look Chinese, but not enough Chinese to stand the full glare of the camera's eye.

Frequently, actors with money in the bank, perfectly able to support themselves, apply for work and pretend to be poverty-stricken. Grady fell for the trick twice, both his first day in the new job. But never again. He worked out six systems for testing the truth, mixes them up, varies them, so that no actor knows whether he is being tested or not.

Test—An aging actor came to him early one morning, begged for a day's work as an extra at \$7.50 for the day. Grady remembered him from the Broadway theater, remembered him as an actor of means and importance. It had been ten years ago, but Grady wanted to be sure the man was really down-and-out.

"I'm no sucker, Dan," said Grady. "I work the kick-back here. If you want work, you've got to kick back to me. Half of what you get."

The actor never blinked, accepted the terms. He was then sent to a stage as an extra in a mob scene.

Grady forgot the incident, was working hard and at 5:30 that afternoon was miles from the studio. He needed a report, so drove to the studio to get it. It was 9:10 P.M. There sat the old actor on the bungalow steps.

"What are you doing here?" Grady asked. "Your troupe finished at 5:15."

"I know, Billy," said the old man. "I've been waiting for you to give you that \$3.75."

Grady was furious with himself, with the old man for believing such a fantastic arrangement. But his fury didn't last long. He began to weep. He curtly dismissed the old actor, told him never to believe anything like a kick-back again and sent him home.

Next day he discovered the old man had had seven cents when he came to work, hadn't eaten for two days, was being ejected from his boarding-house. Work was found for the actor for two weeks.

Charity—Hollywood has among its major plagues the charity racket. Whenever a promoter needs pocket-money he announces and stages a charity benefit for any that will stand for it. Players are exploited, the needy never get the money.

A few weeks ago, Grady called the casting directors together, suggested a way of helping broke and ill extras in a sane way. He proposed an annual ball in Hollywood, with five stars from each studio as guests of honor. Tickets were to be a dollar, the studios would furnish the orchestras without charge. It would be known as the Casting Directors' Ball and 15,000 tickets would be sold. The money would be used to send tubercular extras to West Coast hospitals, to pay rent, buy food for worthy extras.

"It is impossible to give enough work for all the extras in Hollywood," he explained. "Consequently, some go broke, become ill from malnutrition. They have worked hard when they could get it, they have been faithful, dependable. It is our job to reward that with all the help we can give them. We'd be in a bad way without such men and women."

The first Casting Directors' Ball will take place this winter.

A secretary came in, handed Grady a package.

"Did you dip this in water?" he asked. "It's probably a bomb."

She said she hadn't. He decided he'd chance the contents. He opened it. It was

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chance the contents. He opened it. It was a letter, six photographs and a square of white cardboard on which two human hairs had been glued. It was from a monstrous man in Iowa.

Letter—"Sir: I am the hairiest man in Iowa and my friends tell me I'd be a natural for your *Tarzan* pictures. Hoping you will agree, I am enclosing six photographs of myself, nakkid, and in several poses. The hair on my chest is two inches thick. I could be an ape-man, sort of, for pictures. I have plucked two hairs from my chest so that you can see for yourself what I mean."

The buzzer was pushed for a secretary.

"Return the pictures, thank him for writing us, refer him to a mattress factory."

She vanished with the package.

"You know," said Grady, "there are 80,000,000 guys and girls just like that. They want to be in pictures so bad they can taste it."

LITERARY DIGEST