

MY LIFE IN SHOW BUSINESS, OR HOW I SHOOK JACK NICHOLSON'S HAND

The phone call came on a Thursday afternoon. My client excitedly stated "I'm going to be in the Hoffa movie!"

I calmly replied "Can you get me in?"

She responded "You will have to shave your beard."

My considered response "I don't care - I'll do anything!"

It had been more than eight years since I had tampered with my full beard. My present wife, then not even my affianced, when greeted with the unexpected appearance of my shorn countenance, queried "Are you mad at me?"

My habit had been to periodically change from among an assortment of mustache, sideburns, mutton chops, Fu Manchu, whatever. Being that she was imposed with the burden of viewing my face, and obviously did not relish the prospect, I grew the beard back. Yet when the prospect of even a tiny part in making a Jack Nicholson movie appeared, I unhesitatingly committed, even to the derogation of my wife's sense of sight.

I was faxed the information that wardrobe fittings would be at Cobo Arena the following Saturday. My client, an employee at the Teamsters' Credit Union, signed me up for the 9:00 a.m. shift. The scene was the re-enactment of the 1957 Teamsters' Convention, when Jimmy Hoffa was first elected President of the Teamsters' Union, and which actually took place in Miami. We were to wear old style shoes (no problem for me there) and bring a couple of pair of dark pants. The scene was scheduled to be shot the following Saturday, starting at 5:00 a.m., continuing for ten to fourteen hours.

"Baby, you can drive my car - Yes, I'm gonna be a Star!"

If anything, my wife finds my singing somewhat less attractive even than my face, and was not thrilled as I sang this on the way through the door as I arrived home that evening.

Nor was she impressed at breakfast when I asked if the limo had arrived from the studio to take me to my fitting.

"Enough already! Out, Out!"

I love her affectionate send-offs.

I asked for directions at Cobo and was sent upstairs to the huge ballroom facing the river, now filled with what looked like hundreds of racks of clothes, belts, hats, shoes, short sleeve shirts, long sleeve shirts, pants coats.

On signing in, I was given the message that my client had preceded me.

I found her just inside the entrance to the ballroom, waiting with other employees and their spouses. She was supposed to be one of the 150 wives of delegates in the scene; there were some 850 delegates.

Only three people were actually fitting costumes, so it was at least a half

hour before my turn came. I spent that time guessing which of the arrivals were completely raw extras, like me, and which were local actors given work as extras, or small parts. This was fun because I was always right, as there was no way to verify my guesses.

When my turn came, I was given a number, which I had to remember for the day of shooting, because my "costume" would be stored by that number. On of the three fitters led me around the corner of a draped off area of the ballroom. I had been asked my various clothes sizes, which I guessed, and which had been written on a card referred to by the man leading me on.

He selected for me a long sleeve brown shirt, thin belt, and pants to match. Turns out I need not have brought the two pairs with me from home.

I asked him if brown were that big in 1957; everything seemed to be that color.

He said that was all that was available.

Next I was sent to make-up.

The moment I had been dreading. Would I be able to keep the moustache, my companion of twenty years. I thought this would not happen until the day the scene was shot, but I was beginning to realize you could not give over one thousand people haircuts and shaves the same day you shoot the scene.

I told the barber I wanted to cut the beard at home, in front of my daughters, so they would not wonder who I was without the beard. I had heard stories of little girls saying who is that man when their father appeared home beardless after leaving bearded in the morning.

He told me the moustache could wait until the day of the shooting, possibly could be altered to one of the pencil thin variety rather than being entirely eliminated.

As he was trimming my hair, he launched into a tale of how he was asked

Do you want to be in the movie, he said sure, but what will I do? I'm just a janitor here. They told me You could cut hair. I said I don't know anything about that. They said I had 1,000 extras I could practice on, by then I'd be ready for Nicholson. Pointing to the two female barbers, he said I don't have a license, but these two are training me.

I was laughing too much for him to continue; in response to my question he said most people did not laugh as much as me, and once in a while someone would believe him and start to panic.

He marked where my sideburns would end so I knew where to stop shaving the beard.

This part of the adventure took about three hours.

The scene was supposed to be shot the following Saturday; we were told to be back at 5:00 a.m., ready to stay 12 to 14 hours.

Thursday that was postponed.

I received a copy of the fax stating the makeup date was uncertain, probably two weeks from the next Tuesday, concluding, "That's show business!"

Then it was confirmed, Tuesday at 5:00 p.m. No reason why the change from a.m. to p.m.

Just coincidentally, I called my client about 2:15 that day, on another matter. She said Didn't they call you?

No.

Oh, they changed it to this morning.

My career finished before it started!

Well, call this number, see if its too late or not.

I called the number she had, which was answered "Wardrobe."

Uhh, I was out of the loop on the time change for today's shooting, any

chance I can still get in?

Sure, if you can be here in the next hour. They won't start shooting until five anyway.

No problem, my office is in the David Stott Building downtown.

However, I did have a meeting scheduled with a bank attorney regarding some half a million dollar debt one of my clients was having trouble paying.

Without hesitating, I had the receptionist call to cancel the meeting, saying I could reschedule it for tomorrow, and headed for Cobo.

Racing back to the wardrobe area, I was stopped and turned around, directed back the other way, where a series of tables were set up and I was directed to sign various documents.

Being in a hurry, like a good lawyer I did not read any of them. I showed my birth certificate, which was required unless you showed your Social Security card. I had been told this in advance, could not find either, so paid \$20.00 for a certified copy of my birth certificate.

The shaving of my beard revealed a mole that needed to be removed if I were to continue shaving. This set me back another \$40.00, so my expected \$50.00 stipend would still leave me in the hole. Of course, I was not there for the money.

One of the documents was some sort of exclusive agreement for a talent agency to be my agent. All I did was read enough of the directions to be able to figure out where to sign, and head back to the wardrobe area.

The first person I encountered said "Little late, aren't you?"

I thought of replying "It's my first day in show business, but thought better of it and said nothing.

I remembered my all important number, but was told my costume had probably been parceled out already. The change to a workday made it impossible for many of the people who had tried on costumes to appear, so the movie people called unemployment offices and got replacements, who had to be outfitted.

I was in luck, my costume was intact, the pants had even been hemmed.

I was redirected to makeup, as it had been two and one-half weeks since my haircut.

There were at least 20 people in line ahead of me for the same three barbers.

Not one to pass up comic opportunities, I availed myself of the chance to play straight man to the male barber.

Hey, did you finally pass the barber's license exam?

No, I got everything right except the haircut questions!

During the wait I got acquainted with the man in front of me.

He had been called by the unemployment office and eagerly responded.

He was undergoing withdrawal from being separated from his moustache of 14 years. He told me he grew it when he got divorced, so I could understand the emotional attachment.

Just as we got to the front of the line, a woman with a walkie talkie cut in front of us, followed by four long haired gentlemen.

"Where's the band?" a voice crackled over the walkie talkie.

"I have them, they are just about to get their hair cut."

Shucks, another delay.

One of the gentleman was explaining that Danny DeVito decided late last night that a band would be good for this scene, so someone called him about one in the morning. Amazingly, they cancelled their gig for that evening just for the chance to be in the movie. Some people are hard to understand.

However, this meant they were new to the comic barber's routine.

As he worked on the first band member, he said, Does that hurt?

No.

I can make it hurt.

Most of us in line were laughing along, but the next band member looked nervous.

Apparently, the barber noticed.

When his turn came, he was asked Did you read that contract you had to sign?

No.

It says I can cut your hair anyway I want.

He was given some more of the standard repartee, when, out of the blue, the barber jumped back and said Oh \_\_\_\_\_!

The victim jumped out of the chair, screaming what did you do! what did you do! searching for a mirror, only to find that nothing had happened.

This whole episode was found to be uproariously entertaining by the waiting throng.

My haircut proceeded without incident.

Someone led us, a group of 8 or 10 at a time, to Cobo arena.

A stage was set up of the floor by the ground entrance from the outside.

Potted palm trees stood on it; providing that Miami ambiance. There was a podium in the middle, and tables and one row of chairs on the right and three of four rows on the left. Three sections of chairs, left, right, and middle, about 20 rows deep, were in front of the stage, mostly filled with people wearing Hoffa buttons and carrying Hoffa signs.

Larger than life posters of the people playing the candidates Hoffa had defeated at the convention adorned the left and right sides of the stage, towering over the audience as each side was about 40 feet high, and supported a cross beam topping off the stage, decorated in appropriate patriotic convention red, white and blue.

I had planned to sit in the front by an aisle, figuring that would increase my odds of actually appearing on camera, but my lateness forced me sit near the back in the middle of the aisle.

I asked the gentleman next to me what time he had arrived.

He said 11:30 that morning.

It was now 3:30 in the afternoon; he said there would be no shooting before 5:00 p.m.

Turns out he had been working as an extra in most of the scenes shot in Detroit. He was a local member of the Screen Actors Guild, though only being paid the wages of an extra. A handsome guy, clean cut, befitting 1957, about 5 foot 9, blond, I think 28 years old, as he said something to a fellow Guild extra about giving himself 7 years to make it in the business, until he was 35.

Throughout the evening he had many, to me, enlightening comments.

At some point, I had been given a convention name tag to pin on, with the name Steve Berke. I noticed about every fifth delegate shared my name, as only five different names were used on the tags.

I also noticed the large tables through the exiting aisle on our right, filled with bagels, donuts, apples, oranges and other food and drink. Never being one to turn down free victuals, I made many trips for free refreshments during the frequent lulls in the proceedings.

While waiting for the festivities to begin, I saw a Detroit police officer friend of mine, who often is assigned to locally shot movie sets. After he came over to say hello, someone in the row behind me asked why he was dressed in a Detroit uniform when the scene was supposed to be in Miami. I explained that he is a Detroit cop, not an actor.

At some point, I am not sure when, I suddenly noticed Jack Nicholson on the stage. It is amazing how much he resembled Hoffa. I was not sure that it was Nicholson for several minutes.

Much of the time was spent checking camera angles. At least three were being used, including one that moved on a large motorized dolly, from the back, over all the rows of chairs on the right side, up to the front; at least for some shots. The various placards had to be precisely placed not to obstruct these camera runs, and this required repeated test runs.

Though this was not clearly explained in advance, the scene was the introduction of various union officials, concluding with the introduction of Hoffa, the newly elected president of the international union, who would give his acceptance speech, be hugged and shake hands on stage, then be carried off and around the convention floor by exuberant delegates, followed by a conga line of the dignitaries from the stage around the convention floor.

My actor acquaintance told me it was considered good to get 3 to 5 minutes of a movie in one day's shooting.

Most of the actual direction was given by the assistant director, through one of those cordless Mr. Microphone things. (please excuse my descriptions if they become overly technical.)

However, Mr. DeVito usually declined to use this, and was particularly difficult to see, through the signs, from where I was standing. Even though he was on the stage, his height did make him difficult to find at times.

Sometime during the second hour of shooting, a corpulent middle aged man several rows in front of me, and over in the middle section, (I was on the left) keeled over on the floor. Someone started taking his shirt off, people moved chairs out of the way, an ambulance arrived and drove right onto the arena floor from the outside entrance to the left of the stage.

As the man lay there helplessly, someone with a futuristic looking small video camera circled slowly around him, with the camera on. I can tell by that little red flashing light.

Somewhat shocked by this, I received an explanation from my actor acquaintance. It seemed Danny DeVito was doing one of those, "The making of \_\_\_" videos, which would be marketed as a separate item. I subsequently noticed this cameraman moving around the actors, seemingly unnoticed.

My cop friend later told me the man had suffered a heart attack, but was alright.

About 7:00 p.m., a lunch break was announced. This took me by surprise, as I had figured the generous snack tables to have included lunch. My cop friend strolled by and I told him I was skipping the lunch due to excessive trips to the snack tables. He asked if I would join him in a tour of the set.

Of course. I love V.I.P. treatment. Who would challenge a Detroit cop walking around the set during the break?

He first suggested going up on the stage.

On our way, a man ran up to him, nervously asking him to keep an eye on all of the equipment around the stage, especially during the break.

Ah, I thought, these Hollywood people have heard of Detroit.

Of course, the cop assured him.

That was Mike, the set location manager, he explained.

We circled behind the stage. The cop leaned over a man sitting in some camera contraption like an oversized wheel chair, staring at a video screen the size of an index card, which was replaying takes from before lunch.

My friend motioned for me to join him. As soon as I did, relishing the idea of trying to identify myself on the small screen, the cameraman turned around and told us he was not allowed to share this process with anyone, or

words to that effect.

After an interesting chat with Jack Nicholson's chauffeur, a former musician roommate who now "works when Jack works" driving him around on all his movie locations, and who liked Detroit better than Pittsburgh, "too many hills," we walked up on the stage.

As my friend pointed out the lovely potted palm trees, a man on the arena floor, wearing a red "Joe Louis Arena" jacket, approached the front of the stage and declaimed to us "Hey! You! Get the hell off the stage!"

We did so as I thanked my friend for using his influence to get me thrown out of two places in less than five minutes after spending four and one-half hours going wherever I wanted to.

Someone asked him to go outside to get a car towed which was blocking some trucks. It turned out the car belonged to a local Teamsters' Union business agent.

After he did that, he said "Watch this."

Into his walkie talkie, he said "This is officer \_\_\_ for Mike, the location manager. Yes. Mike? Yeah, this is \_\_\_. I was trying to watch that equipment like you asked, but two of your people threw me out of the building. I hope your stuff is OK."

I was too busy rolling on the ground laughing to hear the rest of the conversation.

By now, break was over and back to the grindstone. Having been warned to bring something to fight the boredom, I had the Michael Crichton book, "Jurassic Park" with me to read. I did get through over a hundred pages during the slow parts of the evening, which I hope I am leaving out of this account.

The poor guy who kept doing the introductions must have had laryngitis the next day. If he did it once, he did it 40 times, raising his voice with each new name, building to a crescendo with the introduction of Hoffa.

After the acceptance speech was finally shot in its entirety, and Nicholson embraced and shook hands with the various characters on the left of the stage, he went to the front of the stage and started shaking hands with delegates who had rushed the stage. Four of them grabbed him and carried him about 7 or 8 rows, as people showered confetti that had been passed out on them.

This is the only time DeVito got upset, as this was a dry run not being filmed. "What is the matter - you people got wax in your ears!"

Certainly not enough to qualify for the stereotypical temperamental Hollywood director.

This looked to me like my big chance to get on camera. It appeared Nicholson would be carried all the way past me.

I smoothly elbowed my way to the aisle on the first take, timing my squeeze to the aisle to coincide with Nicholson's hand coming free from the last handshake, and grabbing it as it became available. Nicholson continued smiling and waving to the crowd with his left hand as he gave me a firm handshake with his right hand.

As he neared the last row, someone unleashed a handful of confetti right into his mouth. It could have been accidental, perhaps it wadded up in the person's sweaty palm for many minutes before being used. Still, it seemed quite rude.

Nicholson took it in stride, not ranting and raving, as I think I would have under the circumstances, but spitting the confetti out for several minutes as he was set down and walked past me back up to the stage.

There were three more takes of this scene. During all of them, he kept smiling, but with his mouth closed, and did not shake hands with anyone.

Well, this made my day, Nicholson fan that I am. I am sure it did not

leave quite as big of an impression with him, but what the heck.

About 1:00 in the morning, as some of the less committed artists were slinking away or nodding off, we had to move from the floor chairs to the arena seats to the left of the stage, so the camera could take some shots across the front of the stage from the right, with cheering delegates in the background.

For the umpteenth time, Nicholson started the acceptance speech in his Hoffa voice.

"Ladies and gentleman of the Teamsters' union-" he then leaned forward over the podium and reverted to his natural voice take a f---ing hike!"

The crowd went wild - a standing ovation.

Nicholson pranced around the stage like a heavyweight champion, both arms thrust into the air, as the crowd continued the applause.

About 2:00 a.m., the A.D. (assistant director) announced that they needed about 250 people to stay for some close up shots of the stage area, who would receive a surprise bonus for their extra work as extras, and everyone else could leave. Glutton for punishment that I am, I volunteered.

This mostly involved one of my favorite activities, silent cheering and hand waving, done so the microphones could pick up the dialogue the actors were whispering to each other on the stage.

After 12 hours, for me, the scene was finished. We were herded back to wardrobe, and then had to check out with someone, indicating whether we wanted the standard \$50.00 for one day as an extra, or \$100.00 Eddie Bauer gift certificate. I chose the latter, as \$50.00 would still leave me in the hole.

I eagerly await the opening of the film, although I will probably have to wait for the video release, find someone with a large screen TV and VCR with a pause switch, and go through the convention scene frame by frame to see if I can find myself. Modest person that I am, I probably will do just that.

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