

Foolish Mistakes & Healthy Doses of Rejection

If I've portrayed my early acting career as uninterrupted bliss, it's unintentional, I assure you. I've had as many bad auditions, and made as many mistakes, as any other actor. I just have an uncanny ability to erase most of them from memory shortly after they happen.

In the interest of full disclosure, here are some of the bad auditions I *do* remember, as well as tales of some films that never happened, and one or two big errors in judgment.

I was impressed to see the casting director at an audition for who-remembers-what is a working mom with a sleeping infant in a stroller at her side.

I began my monologue, *Glass Menagerie's* Tom, whining about that damned shoe factory.

I must have been too loud because the baby awakened and began to whimper.

I won't let it break my attention! I thought, and I kept going.

The baby began to wail. I upped my volume a bit, and I kept going.

The casting director – without taking her eyes off me – reached down, picked up her baby, pulled out a breast, and tried to feed the son of a bitch. I kept going.

This is my chance to show my chops! I continued the monologue without missing a beat. The baby continued to wail, refusing to be fed. *I refuse to be thrown!*

I finished. She thanked me and shook my hand with the one not holding her screaming child against her bosom. I left, annoyed but impressed with myself.

I never heard from the production – whatever it was.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a feminist, and an advocate of public breastfeeding. Only please don't do it in my eye line during my monologue.

I later read the shoe-factory speech is one of the Most Overused Monologues for Men. Little wonder the baby was acting like an asshole.

An actor/screenwriter sent me a buddy-comedy feature-film script and asked if we could read it together. The script was funny and manic. He lived in Marin County and was going to be in the City, so I invited him over for tea and a quick read.

He arrived, polite and pleasant looking. We sat down, and he proclaimed his love of all things Jim Carrey. *Uhm, now that you mention it, this script does have a strong Jim Carrey vibe!*

We began reading. It was immediately clear – as in, frying-pan-to-the-face obvious – this guy wasn't an actor. He was a Jim Carrey impersonator. His facial expressions, his line readings – straight early Carrey. He was soon bouncing off the furniture and slamming into walls.

We got through the reading. I gently rushed him out, fibbing I had an audition to get to.

I never heard from him again. Maybe he gave up acting to become a pet detective.

Throughout the mid-1990s, almost every San Francisco actor eventually popped up on the CBS series *Nash Bridges*. They imported principal actors from LA, but sometimes cast day players from local SAG talent.

One day, my agent Belinda called. Nancy Hayes, the local casting director for the show, wanted to see me for a role that would shoot for several days.

Belinda faxed me a scene.¹ The character was a gay man on his way to a first date when his subway train is hijacked, and the passengers held hostage. The dialogue was great, surprisingly honest for a network show at that time. The role was clearly the comic relief, but he made jokes instead of being the butt of them.

The audition felt great. I left Nancy laughing. Belinda called later that evening to tell me I had a callback at the *Nash Bridges* soundstage on Treasure Island the following afternoon. She was audibly thrilled and gave me all sorts of pointers. (*Lots of rest, lay off the caffeine, don't make any big changes from the first audition.*)

¹ Yes, faxed. I'm old!

I arrived at the stage and was told that they were just wrapping and to please be patient.

I didn't see any other actors there to read. I took that as a very good sign.

My patience was just beginning to wear thin when the producers arrived. They walked me onto the cavernous stage. I slated and performed the scene. It went well. They were too tired from a long day of shooting to really laugh, but I sensed they enjoyed it.

Then, radio silence.

I usually recover from rejection quickly, but this one stung for a few days.

Fast forward to six weeks or so later. I sat down to watch the *Nash Bridges* episode which rejected me, to see who got the part. I watched for 15 minutes. The train is taken hostage. The scene I auditioned with never happens. *Where's the gay guy?* I watched 15 minutes more. There's no sign of the character anywhere.

Did CBS chicken out? Did they write the character out? Did the actor shoot the scenes only to see himself cut? Thank God I *didn't* get the part! I would've told my parents, sent postcards out to industry pros, then been absolutely humiliated to discover I'd been cut out.

Shear Madness was a long-running SF stage hit and tourist attraction. The high-camp murder mystery set in a beauty salon allowed the audiences to decide "who done it," requiring the cast to be prepared to play any number of climatic scenes at the end of the second act.

Three times over two years, I was called in to audition for the flamboyant hairdresser who heads the cast.

Each time, theatre management provided me free tickets to see the show.

Each time, as I watched the madcap shenanigans unfold, I thought to myself, *this guy is too gay, even for me!* But each time, I showed up for the audition.

Each time, I'd see Christopher Jenkins, the show's director. He had directed many shows at New Conservatory, and I'd auditioned for him often – but was never cast.

Each time, Chris said I wasn't outrageous enough for the hairdresser.

Each time, he would add I was *too* outrageous to play the undercover cop.

Each time, I felt bad about the rejection. A *paying* role in a long-running stage hit is like winning the lottery. After my third failed audition, I was feeling sorry for

myself. I decided to “push on the bruise” and look up how much the show *would* have paid me.

I was surprised to learn the show had a “Cabaret” contract with Equity – meaning it paid much less than the standard straight-play contract. With eight shows a week, holding down a day job would’ve been impossible – and living on that small stipend alone would’ve been equally impossible.

Not all losses are bad things.

In 1996, Belinda called with exciting news. The new Tri-Star movie starring Jack Nicholson, *As Good as It Gets*, was in San Francisco, auditioning openly gay actors for a couple of gay roles in the film.

Gay actors playing gay roles in a major Hollywood release? How novel! I rushed downtown.

I reached the casting director’s office, opened the door, and saw every single gay actor in town sitting in that waiting room. We were each interviewed for about five minutes, then released.

Apparently, Tri-Star lost its nerve. The film was released with heterosexual stars Greg Kinnear and Cuba Gooding Jr. in the gay roles.

The horror-feature script I received from three Asian brothers in San Jose was amazing. A trilogy of tales – the first two stories introduced by an Ann Rice-esque vampire, who then stars in the third and final yarn. Each story was written by one of the three brothers; each was to be directed by its respective screenwriter.

I cajoled Laurence to drive with me to the three brothers’ home in San Jose for a meeting. I promised to get in and out as quickly as possible, then we’d go to lunch.

Alas, they had me read the *entire* screenplay, beginning to end, acting it out full stop. It was a blast! Some 60+ minutes later, I shook hands with the brothers and made it back to Laurence, who was fuming in the car.

Weeks passed without a word. Finally, I received an email from one of the brothers.

He explained that he and one brother loved my work, but the third brother hated me. *Hated me!* Arguments over my casting caused such acrimony that the brothers were no longer speaking, and the project was abandoned.

It's nice to cause serious reactions, but honestly.

Another of the greatest movies never made was an indie feature comedy called *Dating the Devil*. It was a hilarious script, about an Everyman geek who discovers his new, too-hot-to-be-true girlfriend is actually Satan herself, visiting Earth in human female form to get some jollies. Writer/director Alexis Hurkman asked me to audition without specifying which role. I assumed I'd be reading for the cynical, smart-mouthed best friend.

When I arrived, Alexis asked me to read for the *lead* role. My hopes plummeted because (a) I'd done all my prep on the other character, and (b) you know, "*too gay!*" I did the best I could and headed home dejected.

The call came quickly. Alexis wanted me! I was thrilled – a straight lead in a feature film with a great script.

Alexis invited me to his house to meet the cast and read the script. Alexis' best friend, as it happens, was playing the best-friend role I originally thought would be mine. And Alexis' girlfriend was playing Satan-turned-woman Samantha.

I learned later, after I left the reading, Alexis' best friend beseeched his director. "But Leon is gay!"

Alexis was sure I could pull it off, he told him.

We staged a reading for a large invited audience in a theatre and got big laughs. Alexis seemed optimistic about the film's chances. I started doing serious script work.

One night, Alexis and his girlfriend, plus his best friend and his wife, asked for comp tickets to a performance of *A Few Gay Men*.

I figured they could handle the strong sexual material. But I wondered how seeing me pantomime receiving oral sex, or writhing in a simulated sex-club scene, or hearing my character talk frankly about being HIV-positive, might weaken Alexis' stance that I could pull off *Dating the Devil's* straight romantic lead.

Alexis' email updates became less frequent. Then they stopped and I never heard from him again. As far as I know, the script remains unproduced.

This one hurt. *I coulda been a contender!*

I'd played a street hustler in Christoph Dimas' short art film *Breath*. Christoph and I really hit it off. The film was a hit on the festival circuit, and I was delighted to hear from him with an offer to appear in his next film.

Alas, the role was that of a drag queen, slowly putting on her make-up and gear in a public men's room as she mouths Barbra Streisand's "All is Fair in Love." Now, I love that song, and I love Christoph. But I just didn't want to play a drag queen on film.

I saw the film the next year at the Frameline LGBT Fest. The sequence with the drag queen was beautifully shot and very moving. I hated myself for saying no.

I hated myself even more – much more – when the film screened at the Cannes Film Festival. It serves me right for being such an uptight pill.

A voicemail said to get downtown to a commercial audition. The role was a "Pit Boss."

"Laurence, what the hell is a Pit Boss?"

"Aren't they the guys in Vegas who stand behind the dealers?" he replied.

I dressed in my reliable black suit, and headed to the casting director's office.

When I entered the waiting room, I saw a dozen burly bears in flannel shirts and caps.

They can't be here for the same audition. Can they?

I was called into the room. Before I could even slate, I was admonished by the casting director.

"What the hell are you wearing?"

"A suit, obviously. Like a Vegas pit boss...?"

"Pit boss! Pit boss!" he snapped. "You know, the guys who service race cars when they go in for a *pit* stop?"

I apologized for wasting their time and left the room. There was no point going through with the audition. I'm not *that* good an actor, especially in a room where I'm already hated.