



Notes from Actors' Think Tank

02/03/2022

Rita Powers, Casting Director

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7:22

Rita has been in casting for 20 years and feels that Zoom has opened it up. It can be helpful for actors because you can do more auditions and have more time to prepare. The actor has more control. It can be hurtful, however, because there is a lot more competition.

In general, people have gotten better at self-tapes are doing them right and preparing.

9:37

The quality of auditions is not really better because she doesn't have a chance to direct. "Director" is in the title, but she gets so many, she only gets back to those are really good to ask them to re-do if there is a flub. She can re-direct by getting back to some people, but she's not going back to everyone. She thinks auditions are better being in the room together so she can direct.

14:12

Rita is really only interested in the audition material and doesn't worry so much about self-tape setup. She never edits auditions. She wants the client to see everyone. Some directors ask for her input, but usually they make the choices themselves.

15:52

Rich talked about being cast in Maharshi and he learned so much about how work produced in a different culture is different from American productions. Rita related that 20 years ago an Indian director walked in and told her he wanted her to cast in Bollywood film, which was shot in Manhattan.

17:30

Rita stated, "In India they have it down to a science. They do three to four more productions per year than Hollywood. Often, they are 'sh*t shows.'" Everyone is mic'ed up and yelling directions.

18:24

People in India work for free. She had to tell them that won't happen in America. They would want a top model to appear for free.

Rita has worked on films from many different countries, including China, Italy, and Germany.

19:43

It is important to let people know if you are willing and able to travel because casting sites are all global now. Make sure to note on your profiles that you have a valid passport and are willing to travel.

Rita has worked with most directors in India.

20:58

"Make sure everything is signed and specific and detailed before you even consider taking an overseas role." Rita said it is a great way to see different countries because you will certainly have some down time.

22:01

In addition to Bollywood, there is also Tollywood. Bollywood is in the northern part of India where they speak Hindi. Tollywood is southern India, where they speak Telugu.

Rita casts more non-Indians in Bollywood films. She cast the film English Vinglish, which traveled the world at film festivals. She has had two #1 movies in the world.

23:53

Rita prefers small, independent films because they are like families.

24:23

Rita's advice as a casting director is to make yourself more available and appealing through your materials. Rita recently had headshots done by Rex Lott, who she recommends for anyone needing new headshots.

26:58

The three things you need to get cast in indie films:

- 1) Reel
- 2) Website
- 3) Be nice!

Rita emphasized, "Don't be phony nice because we can tell, especially when auditioning in person." Rita used to sit at the front desk when people came in to see how much attitude she would get.

29:04

"If you're not going to be a team player – that's what it's all about! Be a team player. If you're in a scene with a partner and you're trying to look better than your partner, you have a problem."

30:00

“If you’re not sure of something, ask questions. Don’t be afraid to ask.”

Rita doesn’t know why courage is absent from many actors unless they lack training. Training is key to any field, not just actors. Some people are in the business because it’s all about them. Rita advises to stay away from those people, if possible.

32:24

“Two things – courage and confidence – that’s what gets people jobs. That’s why I’m successful. And don’t ever give up. I worked for other people, but I knew I wanted my own stuff.”

33:26

Rita could tell from the minute someone walked in the room who was going to get a callback. She knows as soon as someone walks in the door. “It’s all in the attitude, starting with the slate.”

“The slate has to have energy. Show energy from the get-go.”

36:14

“If you don’t know your type, you shouldn’t be in the business because no one will take you seriously.”

37:22

“You should become the role. That’s not typecasting – don’t pigeonhole yourself. Change your look, your aura. You should be able to play anything. Don’t be typecast but know your type.”

Rita gave the example of an actress who wanted the role of “Dr. Patel” in a film, but she wasn’t Indian, so she couldn’t be cast in that role.

39:19

Rita recommends you have all different kinds of headshots. She gave examples of business, artsy, biker, etc.

“Some people have no imagination and they need the pictures in character because they don’t want to go out of the box.”

40:25

Sometimes Rita “just knows” who is going to work. She casts actors without representation all the time. She has a gift and she has detailed discussions with directors about what they want.

42:14

“Do not slate in character unless directed to.” But if you’re not sure, ask the question. Sometimes you might be doing yourself a favor [by slating in character] and sometimes not.

Rita does not believe that self-taping is ever going to go away. “It is cheaper and more expedient this way. It is less time-consuming. They’re always going to go with what’s cheaper.”

44:30

Shelly asked if we should dress the part for self-tapes, including hair and makeup. Rita replied that if you want to act an older part, you have to age yourself. She said she did a period piece with a director who would’ve loved an actor to come in character, but other directors wouldn’t like it at all.

46:55

Dina asked if we should use props in our self-tapes.

Rita replied, “Keep props at a minimum. Some directors don’t like it, some do. Don’t go overboard. Less is more.”

48:12

Kelly asked about slate shots. Rita answered:

“Bring the real you. I will occasionally look at slate shots. They give a visual if you have no reel. Slate in the energy of the slate shot. No matter the look, slate as yourself.”

50:00

“Reels are important. Get clips from student films. Do student films.” Rita shared that a famous director referred her to an NYU student for his thesis film. She did it as a favor “dirt cheap.” As she was walking in to meet the student director, she met another student who later called her to cast his feature.

51:56

“Don’t turn down opportunities because you never know.”

Rita noted that she works with the New York Film Academy a lot and recommended we look at film programs at Drexel, Temple, Columbia, NYU, etc. She said she doesn’t use Backstage very much, but a lot of students post notices there.

53:08

Catalina asked if there were any productions Rita particularly enjoyed. Rita cited “The Place Beyond the Pines,” directed by Derek Cianfrance. At the time, Derek was an indie filmmaker. Later, Derek wanted her to move to Poughkeepsie to cast a show with Mark Ruffalo.

“Derek wanted the real thing. I cast real people. It was one of the best jobs I’ve ever done because it involved the community.”

55:27

Gabi asked if anyone has really stood out in Rita’s auditions. Rita replied, “Yes, many times” and noted “professionalism.” The ones who stand out “show up on time and they’re prepared for the role. Don’t show up needing to read off the paper.”

56:32

“Don’t wait until the last minute to submit your self-tape. Generally, the directors cast early.”

Rita noted that Armand Assante was one of the best auditions she’s ever done. She said there are so many good actors in New York, she can’t pick one.

58:13

Palmer asked about actors making a strong choice even if it isn’t the “right” choice. Rita said she has cast people who have made bold choices, even if they weren’t necessarily the “right” choices. She said always make a bold choice, as long as it isn’t too out there.

Rita said a lot of people are bringing the same choices, but some struggle with setup. She said everyone should have a plain background.

60:00

Ana asked about wardrobe for a callback. Rita replied:

“Wear the same thing to the callback as you wore for the audition because the audition got you the callback. If you’re not sure about what you wore, ask. The client isn’t going to call you back if they didn’t like your look. Sometimes they ask to have an actor wear something different.”

60:02

On self-tape auditions, “Everyone should be sending two takes – two different versions. Many casting directors don’t do that, but she does because then there are options.”

60:03

Regarding the question if “some” tape is better than “no” tape, Rita said, “A lot of people are now doing reels of self-produced work. If you have something that’s older, that’s better than nothing. Try to add something current.”

60:05

Paul asked what it was like working with “SRK” (Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan).

Rita replied that the first time she worked with an Indian director, he walked into her office and said, “The hero is coming!” She said “he doesn’t look like a leading man until you see him in action.”

She said he is very gracious and funny. The first day on set, the production had no security and they called her because so many fans had shown up to see SRK.

He once filmed a soccer move in an arena and 3,000 people stood outside trying to see him. He went into a gated area to greet them.

60:10

In a discussion about celebrities, Rita candidly reported, “I have met a lot of asshole celebrities.”

Session ended at 63:13.