

Welcome to Rob Kendt's "Inside Track" column at Showfax, a weekly column by the founding Editor of *Back Stage West*, the L.A. actor's trade paper. Every Friday Rob gives you an inside view of what's going on in the world of casting, who's doing what, who's on the move and more. Visit Showfax, www.showfax.com, for previous issues of the Inside Track column by Rob Kendt.



"All talent should be very, very real."

No, it's not a position statement posted over the entrance of a Method-based acting conservatory or a reality-TV "casting" office. It was a bolded "NOTE" at the top of a breakdown put out last week by commercial casting director Sheila Manning for a client producing an ad titled "Money for Schools Instead of Iraq" (I didn't know those were the choices--but I digress).

Now, we've heard for years that the trend has been toward "more real" in commercials, that the perfect-teeth-perfect-tan-print-model look is not as predominant as it used to be. But why, we wonder, the need for the extra emphasis--"very, very real"?

"What real means is, they should not appear to be actors," said Manning. "Usually most agents think 'real' means 'ugly.' This does not mean ugly--it means they should look like normal people off the street, but they can't *be* people off the street, because people off the street can't do the job."

Is this trend purely aesthetic, though? Since the commercial actors' strike of 2000, hasn't there been a steady increase in non-union ad production?

"There's a lot more non-union than there ever was," admitted Manning. And some ad producers new to the field still need to be reminded that, union status aside, a non-actor is not the best hire.

"You still need to say that from time to time--that 'real' doesn't mean non-actors," said Manning. "But in commercials these days, it's almost always 'real' people, people who don't look like actors."

And people who don't look like any one ethnicity, either: One of the breakdowns in the "Money for Schools" spot sought a two- to four-year-old girl who was "ethnically ambiguous."

"Isn't that a great statement? That's my favorite description," said Manning. "That's the way of the world in commercials these days. We see it a lot--we may even have invented the term, I'm not sure."

OK, but what does it mean exactly?

"It means any race or any combination of races--I hate the word race, I like to use ethnicity instead," said Manning. "The idea is to hit as many people in a demographic with one person as possible. So it's not uncommon, especially with kids, to have actors who are part African-American, Caucasian, Asian, and Latino, all in one."

Manning even jokingly suggested that this term of art should be a choice on the national census form: "There are people who feel the designations on the census form don't give you enough choice. Maybe 'ethnically ambiguous' should be on there."

Most fashion models these days, Manning pointed out, would fit that vague description. It's harder to claim that Hollywood has followed the same lead--although Jessica Alba, The Rock, and Leah Remini come to mind.

We're just waiting for a post-*Sopranos* breakdown for a Mob boss to give the phrase a twist: "Male, 40s, ethically ambiguous."

Size Matters (Hair, Too)

You may have heard the axiom that casting directors don't really know what they want until it walks in the door. But that's usually the exception. Quite often they know exactly what they want, and they take pains to spell it out in the breakdown.

Take a recent call from Romano/Benner Casting for *Scrubs*, which caught "Inside Track's" attention because it included the urgent phrase "to work tomorrow." It sought a "scrawny Asian male" in his 30s. I wanted to know how the casting went.

"That one was hard to find," said Blyth Nailling, an associate with Debby Romano and Brett Benner. Only phone submissions were sought for the role, and several actors were considered, but "only two or three were right for the role." The problem was the word "scrawny."

"What some people consider scrawny isn't; just because they're short didn't quite cut it. They didn't have that *scrawny* thing. The whole scene had to do with a father and son at a carnival, doing that game where you swing a big hammer down and the thing goes up. The joke was that they could do it but [series lead] Zach Braff couldn't."

Most of the submissions were from managers and agents with Asian clients, she said, but the part went to the unrepresented (according to SAG) Kaidy Kuna, who stands at 5'5".

Similar confusion arose recently in submissions for Romano/Benner's other show, the NBC sitcom *What I Like About You*, which sought a "male, 30s, Caucasian, bald, 5'4" and under." Nailling said she got a lot of submissions for actors who are *balding*. "I'll call the agent and say, 'He has hair,' " Nailling said. "The breakdown says 'bald.' Actually, one actor said he would shave his head. But that's different."

And who says no one respects the written word in this town?

On the Move

When I began this column, I wasn't sure I'd have enough material to report, news-wise. But if you think actors are gypsies, consider the always moving world of casting directors. Here are some recent changes of address:

Jan Glaser and Christine Joyce, who are just finishing up casting the Mob-themed feature *The Account* from an office on Beverly Drive, have moved, more or less permanently, to a new building on Ventura Blvd. in Studio City. They're now casting the feature *Vice*...

Sheila Jaffe, best known for casting (with Georgianne Walken) *The Sopranos* and a ton of hip New York indie films, has moved from an office at Paramount to new quarters in the Lantana Center in Santa Monica. It's described as "much nicer than the space she had above a set workshop on the Paramount lot"...

And it's not permanent, but Susan Bluestein's office, where the military dramas *JAG* and *Navy NCIS* are cast, has moved from Building 20 to Building 35 on the Sunset Gower lot in Hollywood, reportedly due to a "bug problem." (You mean someone was trying to record their conversations? Terrible.)

Spiked!

One move I reported last week was the departure of associate Blythe Cappello after five years with Bestrop/McCarthy, which cast such broad comedies as *Austin Powers*, *Starsky & Hutch*, and *The Nutty Professor*, and such actioners as *I, Robot* and *Equilibrium* from their office on Wilshire and La Brea.

Cappello's new job is Director of Casting and Talent Development in the West Coast office of Spike TV, formerly TNN, which has been advertised as "the first channel for men" (sorry, ladies, but what does that make ESPN?). She's mostly looking for hosts at the moment--for *By the Numbers*, Spike TV's answer to Fox Sports' *Best Damn Sports Show*, and for *Holiday Gift Guide*--but she'll soon be developing the talent side of original series programming à la HBO (a field even ESPN has gotten into with *Playmakers*).

So pardon us for asking, but how did a woman land a job at the men's network? Or, to put it in more sexist terms: What's a chick doing in the rooster house?

"Well, you look at my resumé, the last 30 movies I've cast have been things like *Austin Powers*, *Zoolander*--very male-driven, with scatological humor and boob jokes," Cappello pointed out. "That's my sensibility. I have a more 'male' sensibility than a female one. I don't watch Oxygen or Lifetime. I would watch Spike.

"That doesn't mean we're anti-female," she continued. "I mean, we've got a million women running the talent department. But 'network for men' is a marketing tool. And we do have some surprises in store, though our target audience is definitely young men."

To wit, she's working on no fewer than 12 shows--everything from specials to series to half-hours to episodics--toward Spike TV's goal of going from a rerun-heavy netlet to 50 percent original content by 2005. "Development is kickin' ass," she said. OK, she *does* sound like she belongs at Spike TV.

The biggest difference between her old job and the new one--apart from a gorgeous new office facing the ocean in MTV's Santa Monica Water Garden digs--is that at Bestrop/McCarthy, she worked on big-budget films with stars attached. Now she's essentially starting up a new property, and she realizes, she said, "I'm going to have to dig a little deeper here. I'm holding a lot of generals, going to showcases."

So how would she sum up the Spike TV talent pool? I suggested "babes and dudes." Without ruling those categories out, she said, "Funny people who are talented and interesting and fit our demographic. And we want ethnically diverse people on this channel. We want to be a creative, friendly environment where talented people feel comfortable coming."

She certainly sounds comfortable there. Cappello began in the business with the William Morris Agency before going into casting, and she's happy to return to a more corporate environment. After working in an independent casting office where administrative chores were on everyone's mind, she said it's great to have a computer help line and departments to handle accounting and payroll.

But the main perk is the job itself.

"The beautiful thing about this job is that I have both autonomy and responsibility," she said. "And I'm not out there on my own trying to compete with my old bosses."

So, everybody wins, then? Nah, that sounds too Lifetime. You go, girl? Too Oxygen. Here's my stab at a Spike TV-style capper: Bitchin', Blythe.

Casting Skills "Sharpened"

You'll see it sometimes--a major film/TV casting office releasing a breakdown for a student film. Just this week, Jami Rudofsky, who with Mara Casey casts *The Gilmore Girls*, released a notice for *Ben & Holly*, an AFI film.

A notice last week for another AFI student short called *Sharpened* came from Holstra/Sugar, the office that casts *10-8* and *Strong Medicine*. But the casting director was listed as Beth Soike--Judith Holstra and Lori Sugar's young associate, who's doing this small two-character film as a resumé-building side project.

"You've gotta start somewhere, as far as doing your own thing," said Soike, who hails from the Midwest. That's where she befriended the film's director, Tarik Adam Karam. The film calls for two white males, a 45- to 60-year-old father who works as a barber and his 20ish son, who's flirted with gang life.

Soike first looked at AFI's SAG Conservatory roster--part of the deal that allows union actors to work on AFI students' films--then opened up the roles through Actors Access and BackStage.com. She's already had some good submissions.

"It's exciting. I mean, I knew it was prestigious to be involved with an AFI film, but I wasn't sure what the response would be."

With huge, ethnically diverse casting calls for *10-8*, Soike has her hands full with just her regular job. Her work on *Sharpened* will mean some late nights and weekends.

"I know I'm making some longer hours for myself," she said. "But that's the business--you gotta work long hours." Giving advice that should ring true for actors, as well, Soike said, "You've got to go out and find your own projects. Hopefully it will work out, and Tarik and I will keep working together."

It probably doesn't hurt, either, for actors to get in front of an associate at a major casting office.

"It's always good to get in front of me," said Soike. "I always take notes."

On such notes are casting careers built.

Divisek Crosses Divide

Commercial casting director Barbara Divisek felt it was time for a change. After 28 years on the job, she first tried a move to Florida. Earlier this year, she founded a management company with Susie Mains, Trilogy Talent. Finally, she decided to make an even more decisive move over to representation: She recently took the commercial division at Bobby Ball Agency, working under owner Patty Granna Miller.

"I rode my wave of casting and needed a change in my life," Divisek explained. "I've gone from being a buyer for 28 years to being a seller." It's a natural transition—in many other businesses, too—since, as Divisek said, "A person who was a casting director knows the things that could make or break an agency."

She has her hands full getting to know all of BBA's estimated 500 clients (not all of them in her department). She's earmarked a few months for this task and for "reassessing everything." One thing that's an improvement over casting: "Being an agent is sort of going into work, whereas in casting you never know if a particular job is going to be your last. The life of an agent is a little steadier, and after 28 years of being a freelance person, definitely an appealing thing for me."

Indeed, with the commercial business hit hard by runaway production—"Many of my directors have moved to Canada or got out of the business," she said of her former casting employers—a regular job is a comfort. Then again, being a seller in a down market is no cakewalk. Barbara Divisek has her work cut out for her, but if anyone knows the talent and the trade, she does.

Footnote: Others who've made a similar jump include former commercial CD Nancy McCook, who's now at Arlene Thornton; former commercial CD Pam Sparks, now at Sutton Barth Vennari, and theatrical CD Jerry Franks, who worked for a short time years ago at Metropolitan Talent.