

COMEDY CASTING ---- Q & A

Q: I have a question about casting and I hope I could have some opinions from you. Yesterday when I was casting actors for my upcoming project (a 10 minutes Comedy) I had a hard time making decisions on which actors to cast. I wonder if there is a different concern or standard of casting a comedian from casting actors for drama? There were lots of actors exaggeratedly playing effects and attitudes without grounding the basic rule of talking and listening. And the resumes of a few of them mark that they were doing lots of comedy shows, and one of them even won the Emmy award. Also, I wonder what else is more important casting a comedian? Is the look of the actor or the sense of how one says his lines important? I am so confused now and don't know how to make my decisions on casting. I greatly appreciate if you would shed some light on these.

A: Terrific question!

here are some answers or, at least, thoughts:

1. There are not two different standards of "truth" or "honesty" in acting. A comic actor needs to be, if anything, more truthful.
2. Comedy is difficult so there are a lot of bad comedies out there and a lot of actors who have been in bad comedies. Use your own eyes and ears and don't be confused by their resumes. (send me – if you can – the name or resume of the actor who won an emmy...i'm very suspicious).
3. The "look" of the actor is no more or less important in comedy than in drama. It is not the most important determinant in casting, but it IS important to "make the fiction plausible". Something about the "read" that you get off an actor has to support the story you are trying to tell. It can be a subtle factor...
4. Some people "look funnier" than others....why? Well, I'm afraid you have to take my course The Practical Foundations of Comedy CTWR 404 or at least CTPR 476 or the section of 532 I'm teaching next semester. But basically, instead of thinking of "exaggeration" think of "excess" a greater than normal amount of ANY substance or quality. So an actor with a big belly can be imagined to have an EXCESS OF APPETITE, or an EXCESS OF GRAVITY..or that he takes up an EXCESS OF SOCIAL SPACE. These things are funny because Comedy is Social and is based on the logic of social norms...things that deviate from the Norm but are not violent need a gentle correction, and that correction is the reprove of laughter.
5. Line readings are not the most important things although most rookie and even journeyman directors may think they are. It is the objective behind the line reading, played through the instrument of the character that makes it funny. All of Christopher Walken's line readings are "WRONG". And yet they are funny. Because of his honesty and the truth of his intentions (objectives).
6. Music – what does matter in regard to line reading in comedy is Music..there is a rhythmic back and forth to comedy – it is game-like. Actors cast in comedy do need to be sensitive to music and game rhythm