

How to become a Casting Director

This document has been prepared by the current CDG committee as a guide for people keen to get into the casting profession

In order to do their job, Casting Directors draw on years of artistic taste, imagination, knowledge, research and political expertise - all this before the collaboration with the Director, Producer, writer etc begins.

It is a job that requires an understanding of psychology, artistic taste and style, interpretative taste, current and historical social politics - and also, of course, knowing our core subject thoroughly - the different levels and styles of national and international actors and acting. We have to assess the limits to which actors can be pushed artistically, when to take a risk, when to cast against type. It is our job to know them intimately, and to use our knowledge of the wide variety of their skills to conjure up an acting company for a project that allows the visual story to be told.

It is an extremely artistic job and without the Casting Director a film, theatre or television drama would be much harder to produce.

We are constantly interviewing actors, assessing and filtering theatre, film and television performances; often hundreds of actors will be considered for roles before you even set up an audition list

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There is really only one way to become a Casting Director - You have to work as a Casting Assistant/Casting Associate.

You need real commitment and determination to embark on a career in casting as like most professions within the arts it is overcrowded

A number of the institutions still maintain internal casting departments, The National, RSC, BBC etc but the majority of casting directors are independent freelancers running their own offices, expanding their staffing needs on a production to production basis.

Casting Directors gain reputations for their casting expertise in specific fields, i.e. film, TV, theatre or commercials - though some shift from one medium to another. It takes years to build know-how and contacts. That's why you need to work as an assistant first and you should expect to be one for several years.

It is important for any prospective assistant to know that casting is not just 'choosing leading actors'. Although many Producers and Directors are delightful, you have to be able to handle difficult situations and sometimes nervous, ignorant or angry people with honesty, knowledge and charm.

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As a casting assistant, you will help the Casting Director with whatever task is required. This requires charm, brains and a sense of humour, not necessarily in that order.

The job consists of talking to agents, doing availability checks, setting up casting sessions, typing deal memos and contracts – possibly juggling two or three productions at once, keeping calm under stress – of which there is plenty – and generally being as helpful as possible.

Casting Directors often have to work in high pressure/tight deadline situations. It's hard work. The hours are long; often into evenings, it's an international business – and that's not counting the endless theatre visits described later. There is no overtime for evening work. Each casting job is finished when it's done – not when you want to leave work. It is 99% hard graft and 1% glamour. So if it's glamour you are after...

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Your own interest in drama should propel you into the company of people already working in the industry, whether your preferred area is in theatre, film or TV but it is up to you to find your own route.

Casting Directors are mostly self employed individuals and therefore do not have the time or resources to provide basic training courses for completely new assistants. Cold calling, emailing or writing randomly for a casting job with no previous experience of the business is unlikely to get you an interview – or even a reply.

Getting an interview is often down to word of mouth. We all like to know that a colleague has been happy with someone before we make contact with that potential assistant.

So it's up to you to show your interest and determination and make yourself visible to potential employers.

By working in other jobs in the industry people can judge how efficient and welcoming you are on the phone. If someone has had a pleasant and fruitful time talking to you when you are working somewhere else, they are more likely, when the need arises to employ you.

You need to keep abreast of what is happening in the industry – read reviews, interviews, look at the trade papers, go to the theatre, watch films and the TV. Get to know the actors.

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Example routes into casting:

1. Working for a theatrical agent means that you will learn how the business works, who the Casting Directors are and what areas they specialise in. They will also get to know you.

After you have worked for an agent for at least a year; you will realise that word gets round quickly about who is looking for an assistant and whether or not you want to apply for the job.

If you have been recognised as a 'good' agent's assistant you are more likely to be snapped up by a Casting Director.

2. People train at drama school as an actor or actress and then slip sideways into casting through contacts made while pursuing an acting career.

However before you decide to move from acting; you must know with certainty that you no longer want to act – otherwise it may all end in tears. You are not in casting to find work for yourself, but to place others in jobs.

3. Moving from another area of the industry, for instance, film or TV production or stage management.

You will understand how the business works and you could meet the all-important contact, who will eventually introduce you to a Casting Director.

It's all a matter of timing, patience and persistence.

All routes have one thing in common; *before applying for a casting assistant job you need experience of how the industry operates and a good understanding of the needs of a Casting Director.*

It is not necessary to have a university degree. Some assistants do, some don't. However you do need a good speaking voice for the phone and really good PC skills – Clarity is everything

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Things you should be aware of:

If you already have an established career, e.g. teacher, barrister, 'events' organiser etc; Careers which have nothing to do with the casting process; Even though you might be slightly older you can still only start at the bottom.

This is hard and may leave you poverty-stricken, wiser and wishing you had never left the security of your previous career.

Although there are casting opportunities around the country, living outside London can be difficult. Simply because the majority of directors, producers and actors are London based.

You should consider that regular visits to the theatre and drama schools are necessary, often two or three times a week and late night travelling is both problematic and expensive and your family life can suffer

Expecting to earn a lot of money; you will be employed intermittently. When a casting director has no work, there will be no money to pay you and you will be laid off, sometimes for weeks.

You have to be on the constant lookout for other casting jobs, secretarial or bar work just to keep yourself financially afloat. Only you can decide if this is worth it.

Be aware that the identity of the current leading actors is no secret: So announcing in your application letter that you think you have a 'good eye' for leading actors isn't very helpful.

It requires much more than a 'good eye' to get the balance of casting right, gaining the agents' trust, understanding how contracts work and knowing the right actors for the smaller parts. All requires huge experience which can only be gained over time.

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Perks: Agents will take you to the theatre. Occasionally you may get invitations to film and television screenings. And you will have weeks of unpaid time off – not necessarily a perk!.

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Oh, and buy the latest copy of **Contacts**. Everyone uses it. It is updated every year and can be purchased from Spotlight or Waterstones.

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