

THE CHOSEN ONES



FROM A CASTING COUCH FAR, FAR AWAY

From headshots to YouTube and online casting sites, casting can be done from a couch far, far away.

Georgia's largest movie studio is scheduled to open this summer in Gwinnett County, featuring seven sound stages. Films shooting in the state have created job opportunities galore and provided exposure for local attractions globally. The *Los Angeles Times* even had a graphic depicting the changing landscape of filming and how much California is fading out in feature film projects compared to other states in the US, like

Georgia, that are offering incredible tax incentives that the entertainment industry simply cannot ignore. And, sure enough, the casting business has adapted itself accordingly to keep up with the welcome demands the industry has presented. Conversations with local casting directors and talent agencies give us a feel for how much the casting business has changed and is changing in the face of all this activity.

By: Ruksana Hussain

Big Picture Casting

Casting directors and co-founders of Big Picture Casting (BPC), Jen Kelley and Rita Harrell, have more than 24 years of indus-



Kelly



Harrell

try experience and extensive knowledge of the local talent pool to help with principle casting for all types of film and commercial projects. While the majority of their work is local, they have done a fair number of projects across the Southeast and nationally. "On an average day, we are auditioning all day if we have a casting session. When we don't have active sessions, we are busy prepping for the next job, scheduling talent, talking to agents, and getting all our paperwork done—lots of organizing and multitasking. We are in our third year of business, and we hope to continue in the direction that we are going now with casting even more feature films, and we would love to be eventually working on a prime-time television series," they share.

Kelley worked as a talent agent in Los Angeles, and Harrell worked in casting in New York before they met at the People Store in Atlanta and decided to form Big Picture Casting together. A full-service casting company, they also have affiliates in New York and Los Angeles. They are involved in everything from breaking down scripts and creating character descriptions to holding casting calls and negotiating contracts. Projects they have worked on include feature films like *The Good Lie* and *A.C.O.D – Adult Children Of Divorce*, starring Amy Poehler and Jessica Alba; television work with the Travel Channel and Investigation Discovery (ID); commercial projects for Belk and Georgia Lottery; and industrial projects with IHG and Wal-Mart. Current work includes a new show called *Deadly Places* and casting for some re-enactment shows.

"With the advances in technology, we are definitely able to cast a wider net and find work in different regions, so technology has helped to extend our

reach," say the ladies at BPC. "Tools like Casting Networks, 800Casting, and other various casting sites help us get our jobs done much quicker. They are not replacing casting directors, but are helping the process by making our job and the agents' jobs easier and streamlined."

BPC comments about the growth in their business, the changing demands and changing technology:

There has definitely been an influx of talent moving here from LA, especially since the tax incentives have happened. There is so much work here, so actors who are looking for work and may not get the opportunities in LA are coming here for the benefits of a smaller-town scenario.

With the increase of business here, the expectations of talent are much greater. They need to train harder to be able to compete with the LA and NY actors who are now looking at this region as a possible place to move to. Competition is much greater. All kinds of agencies are trying to extend their reach in various regions. Local actors here need to train and take it as seriously as the working actors in those other larger markets.

The business outlook for Atlanta in the next few years is optimistic. There is lots of good work coming in. Everyone is staying busy, so projections are good. We are focussed on the Southeast and plan to do more local casting on films and television.

People Store

People Store is an Atlanta-based talent agency owned by Rebecca Shrager, a stylist and production coordinator who realized the need in the Atlanta



Shrager

market for a more diverse range of talent. Over the past 30 years, People Store has grown into one of the most successful and well-respected talent agencies in the country. In 2012, People Store opened a New Orleans branch as well. They have divisions for film and television, voice-over and print, commercial and industrial, and entertainment and events. Projects they have worked on run the gamut of film and television productions recently shot in Atlanta such as *Anchorman 2, The*

Conjuring, The Hunger Games: Catching Fire, The Walking Dead, American Horror Story, Devious Maids, and more. They represent more than 700 on the talent side.

"The casting directors here are booking national roles, series regular roles, people for movies," says Shrager. "We have a great commercial department, but our claim to fame is film and television. We represent the actors and are always trying to communicate better with actors and clients, network, and get out there to let the talent be as prepared as they can. The best part of my job is telling clients they've booked something great like a series regular role or something substantial—and sharing in the excitement."

Rebecca Shrager comments about the growth in her business, the changing demands and changing technology:

Technology has affected work really greatly lately. It used to be the case where casting directors would just call and tell us what they needed, then we would have people come to an audition with the casting directors and they would only see 10 or 20 people per role and do call-backs. But because of this technological aspect, the casting directors are now getting hundreds and thousands of submissions for each role. They are sometimes seeing 500 people and even booking right from tape without ever seeing the talent. We have been using inEntertainment software for a year now, and it has been beneficial for keeping track of when people audition, when they are booked, etc.

If things continue this well and tax incentives remain, with the infrastructure and the studios being built, it will just keep getting bigger and bigger. We are going to be getting these giant movies that we didn't used to get before.

We have continually had to be better organized, hire more employees, more agents. It used to be just me and Brenda Pauley, head of the film and television department. Now she has two other agents in Atlanta and one in New Orleans that work with her. With all this technology we have to do more—we have to send out the audition call, get back submissions, upload them, then send them out ... it is time consuming. As things get busier, we continually have to try to find ways to be better organized and make sure things run smoothly, so using inEntertainment software has helped."

Houghton Talent

Another well-known Atlanta talent agency is Houghton Talent, in business since 1990, specializing in film and television, commercial, corporate, print, voice-over, and event/entertainment marketing for adults and children. Project credits include *The Odd Life of Timothy Green*, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, *Necessary Roughness*, and *The Vampire Diaries*. "Current projects include the Hunger Games movies, *Devious Maids*, and *Drop Dead Diva*...everything everyone wants to be on," says agency director Mystie Buice. Located in the Midtown design district, Houghton assists with casting primarily for regional projects, but also with national projects. With a staff of ten, they are specialized in on-camera work and modelling and fashion.

Mystie Buice comments about the growth in her business, the changing demands and changing technology:

Technology has changed things dramatically. We are now charged with a lot of the initial casting responsibilities like the first call, the taping, the uploading, making sure of the technicalities like file size and lighting. It's significantly and completely different. We use some national services that we are attached to that all the largest, the biggest, and the best of the work comes through called Actors Access via Breakdown Services, and also Casting Networks Inc., Now Casting, 800Casting, etc. Social media is huge, and the Internet in general has opened up more in that now everybody is much more informed. We dispense information about classes, photographer specials, when projects are airing.

The opportunity here is enormous ... huge. The incentives have really changed our marketplace. Our current governor and Kasim Reed [Mayor of Atlanta] have been supportive of that. The city welcomes the work and the opportunity for the local acting community.

We will definitely see an uptick in the level of activity and the amount of opportunity. We are certainly seeing a lot of people inquiring about moving in from out of market to avail themselves of that work, so over time we will see that change the local acting pool. We are all doing the work. We just need to continue to raise the bar!

The technology has created more work and made it more demanding, but it is

better now than before and has equipped every one much better. It has made everyone raise the bar. The talent and agencies are working and producing at a much higher level. Everyone has had to ratchet it up, be ready for the work, and deliver—and exceed the expectations for people who are coming out of other markets and maybe don't know what to expect from the local market. From my experience, from casting or production, they are always more than pleasantly surprised with the calibre of the talent as well as the ability and the availability of crews and studios. The market has stepped up and has really said, "We are ready for the work!"

800Casting

800Casting is a free, web-based client software designed for and used by many casting and talent agencies not only in Atlanta but across the US and soon across Europe as well. CEO Donald DiPrima says, "We provide software for the industry—for casting directors, clients, producers, studios, photographers, agencies, talent. So it is multi-level software for their benefit and use. What our software does is provide an interface that combines everything together. If a casting director puts out a casting call, the agencies would pick that and be able to submit their talent. Talent who are normally independent and wouldn't see or hear about the job can also submit themselves back to the casting director. Each entity of the business has an independent software interface."

There is much more to 800Casting than meets the eye. The software has several interfacing components including talent database (800Casting), auditioning software (Audition800), talent agency software (TAS800), casting director software (CDS800), and industry professional software (800Client). The power of the interface lies in the fact that 800Casting is the only software that interfaces talent, agents, casting directors, and industry professionals (clients) into a single bundle for greater talent exposure.

800Casting's agency software allows unrestricted agency use for any client. "We run anywhere between 75,000 to 150,000 submissions a day, and that's just

agents using the software, submitting talent back and forth," shares DiPrima. "That's how much interactivity is happening on a daily base. The advantages to the agency are incredible. If you are a big agency and you have grabbed how good this software is, you will use it as your core software every day." For an annual fee of \$39.95, talent that registers with 800Casting can get an online portfolio, 10 images, 10 reels, 10 videos, 10 voiceovers, a resume. They are allowed to link to unlimited agencies and clients, stream video for auditions, or submit to anybody they want to all for that same annual price. For the client, the software is free, and it is larger than any other software available.

Don DiPrima comments about the growth in his business, the changing demands and changing technology:

The trend in the business is that there is more software becoming available, more Internet capability available. You put out a casting notice, receive submissions, request a remote audition from those submissions you feel would best serve your clients' purposes, review those auditions, do callbacks—and that's the danger of the beast today. We have the ability. There is not a client or talent in the world who can't pick up a smartphone, use the Audition800 app, and do anything he or she wants.

It got very expensive a while ago to drive some place—the cost of gas, weather conditions. You would do a casting call, and there would be 200 people sitting in a room. With our remote audition, the talent can pick up a cell phone anywhere and generate a video as per client instructions. The casting director can sit in an office and eliminate people one by one, request auditions, book them, or have a callback!"

I am seeing a surge in clients registering for the software. There are clients that come with million-dollar budgets to do a commercial, and they hire a casting director. On the other hand, there are clients who have a smaller budget and don't have the money to hire a casting director so they do it themselves. Those are the clients I have seen a whopping surge in!

