



One CPA's Day as a Movie Extra

By

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CPAs play many professional roles: auditor, tax advisor, Controller, CFO. However, few of us ever get in front of a camera in a major motion picture as I did in ***Conviction***, starring Hillary Swank.

Film companies began flocking to Michigan several years ago when the legislature passed a law providing movie and video gaming companies a 42% tax credit for production costs incurred in the state. The first major motion picture to take advantage of this law was Clint Eastwood's ***Gran Torino***, filmed in Detroit. Film crews came to Michigan to film portions of Drew Barrymore's roller derby movie ***Whip It!*** and George Clooney's ***Up in the Air***.

Movies frequently require many extras. An extra is essentially living scenery. Extras do not have lines and often their only compensation is the adventure of being in a film.

I have been an amateur actor for most of my life, getting started in my high school Junior Class production of ***Up the Down Staircase***. Since then I have performed in lots of live theater, mostly one-act plays. I even wrote a couple of plays, including one called ***Frontier Accountant***¹ more than 20 years ago.

In early 2009, our local newspapers advertised auditions for extras in the true story of ***Betty Ann Waters***, which was the original working title of the movie. In the movie,

¹ You can download a copy of the script for ***Frontier Accountant*** from Executive Education's website: <http://www.executiveeducationinc.com/file/frontier.doc>

Hillary Swank plays a Rhode Island woman who goes to law school to free her wrongfully convicted brother from prison.

The audition location was a hotel conference center only two miles from my home. "This could be fun," I thought, so I showed up five minutes before the scheduled opening time for auditions to find 750 people in front of me. I estimated that 1,700 people eventually showed up, five or six times the number of people that the talent agency expected. The huge crowd overwhelmed their staff. Their advertisement said they were looking for muscular tattooed men for the prison scenes and people for the courtroom scenes. Since I am a 56-year-old CPA with no tattoos, I opted to wear a suit and tie hoping they would cast me as a lawyer or a juror.

I stood in line two or three hours in Michigan winter weather and then another hour inside to hand them my acting resume and have my picture taken.

A few weeks later, the casting agency invited me to play a law school professor for a shooting two days later. Since my calendar was busy, I almost said no, but then my wife reminded me of the hours I spent standing out in the cold. I cleared my schedule.

At 8 AM, I showed up at the Duderstadt Center at the University of Michigan, which would be the film's "Roger Williams Law School". I was one of 164 extras called that day. We were ushered into a "black-box" media studies classroom set-up with black plastic and chrome steel chairs. Of the extras, 160 were twenty-somethings playing law students and four of us older adults playing professors and librarians. Thirty-nine of us were paid extras from the casting agency and the rest were volunteers. They warned us that there would be a lot of "downtime" so I brought a briefcase full of professional reading.

After a brief explanation of the day's schedule, the "extras wranglers" moved the paid extras to a comfortable modern seminar room with padded armchairs and tables so that everyone could spread out. Costuming followed. As requested, I brought a variety of outfits that would play as if they belonged in the 1990s. I wore my most professorial-looking tweed jacket with contrasting slacks and a striped shirt. The costume mistress pondered my outfit at first, but gave it her seal of approval when I assured her that the jacket was genuine 1990's vintage. She chose a 1980's vintage tie I brought with me to round out the outfit.

By 10 AM, all we had done was fill out paperwork, have our costumes approved and hear several orientation talks. After they fed us breakfast along with the crew, which is apparently very unusual, we got to work.

When filming a movie, the assistant directors (ADs) are in charge of the extras. Our AD, Marie, explained our roles again and then I took my place as one of the four professors. I sat at a table with Ann, a retired social worker, who looked professorial in a maroon suit and we talked in front of a 1990's vintage laptop. Without any papers, the table looked bare and Marie liked my idea of spreading around the contents of my briefcase. If this scene makes it into the film, you might notice a copy of *The Journal of Accountancy* lying in front of me! Coincidentally, a February 2008 copy of *Strategic Finance* happened to have "The Business of Making Movies" as its cover story.

The first camera set-up involved Swank's character walking through the crowded university commons area between classes. The rest of the extras were to sit miming conversation at tables or walking through or around the commons area. The ADs rehearsed the extras five or six times, adjusting the flow until they liked the "look" of what was happening. During these rehearsals, Swank's stand-in, "Renee" walked the scenes. For the final rehearsal, Swank herself walked through the scene in her costume of blue jeans, a purple turtleneck shirt and a long winter coat. She carried a leather book bag and purse.

Swank's path went immediately behind our table. Thus, Ann's face will probably be easily recognizable on film and the shot will likely feature my profile gesturing with a yellow highlighter. They did this shot four or five times and then reset the scene from a different angle. For each take, the assistant directors reset 165 people. Each time Swank returned to her starting point, an assistant would follow behind carrying her bag and purse. The third set-up positioned the camera about 60 feet away from me, pointing at a 90-degree angle from where I sat. Ann and I acknowledged that there was little chance we would show up on film this time. After this shot, all but 15 of the "free" extras were done, leaving only about 50 of us to fill in the scenes to be shot for the remainder of the day.

While the crew setup for another shot, they fed us a late lunch, once again with the crew and cast members with the exception of the two stars, Swank and Minnie Driver. Director Tony Goldwyn, who played the villain in *Ghost*, ate lunch at the table by the door, with his wife and twin toddlers.

For the last shot of the scene, people walked in the background and they staged us into three lines with instructions to walk across the scene up the stairs, down the stairs or into a utility room representing a hallway as an AD pressed our arm to go. Once in the utility room we formed another line to walk across the scene going in the other direction. It seemed odd that we were just walking in a circle, but apparently, it works on film.

For our last scene of the day, being a 56 year old in a crowd of student extras again put me close to the camera. In the scene, Betty Ann Waters has just learned how lawyers use DNA evidence to exonerate convicts and goes to the library to read about it. The AD selected me to stand at the reference desk next to Swank as she does her research. My character was to help a law student, played by a pretty, young, unemployed landscape architect. Once again, the set was nearly devoid of props, so I pulled out my stack of reading materials and spread it around me on the counter. This time, my main prop was a seminar manual on ***International Financial Reporting Standards*** from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nova Scotia. Swank's props were barely better; she used a thick Webster's Unabridged Dictionary as her DNA research material.

In all, I was on the set for more than 11 hours during which they shot five or ten minutes worth of material. I received a minimum wage check for \$90.28, the lowest hourly rate I have earned since 1976. Still, it was a wonderful adventure and with all of the movies being made in Michigan, one that I may repeat some time.

Conviction, starring Hilary Swank, Sam Rockwell, Minnie Driver and Juliette Lewis will be released by Fox Searchlight Pictures October 15, 2010.

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