



MISTER PEEPERS

SCHOOL OF INFECTIOUS ACTING

by Andrew Duncan

When pantomime becomes plague, film crews are entertained.

A few weeks ago, I was visiting some friends on the crew of a Disney television movie about an aspiring musical artist. They were in the middle of a scene about the production of a music video, so a lot of the extras had been dressed as film crew. At one point, in the deep background of the scene, a couple of young men playing electricians sauntered over to a pair of coiled extension cords (referred to on a real film set as “stingers”). Unlike real-life movie electricians, these two extras examined the extension cords like cavemen trying to figure out how to eat a Lamborghini. One rubbed his chin in thoughtful contemplation while the other pulled out his iPhone and started typing something. He may have been tweeting about it... you know, because maybe that’s what real movie electricians do?

In their defense, it’s not easy being an extra. The AD team doesn’t always tell the extras what they should be doing during a scene and more often than not they spend more time telling them the things that they shouldn’t be doing (things like: “Get out of the Director’s chair!!” and “Don’t stare at the camera during the take!!” and “Don’t actually talk during this scene, you moron!”).

The next time you watch a scene in a restaurant, turn down the sound and pay attention to the people at tables near the main actors. If it looks like they’re actually having a conversation, they did a good job because in reality they were only pretending to talk; a lot of the time extras don’t even know what their table mates are pretending to say because extras aren’t even allowed to whisper during a scene. The sound mixer is only interested in one thing: recording the actors’ dialogue.

Of course some extras can take things to the other extreme.

Extras should be like ninjas. They should never stand out and they should never make noise. They’re only included in a shot to add movement and a sense of normality to a public setting.



While my friends on the Disney crew were wracked with silent giggles at the inauthentic actions of their fake electricians, I was reminded of a similar situation that occurred back in 1999 during the filming of a very powerful scene starring Denzel Washington in the feature film “Remember the Titans”.

We were shooting a scene in which Washington’s character, Coach Herman Boone, is loading the school’s recently desegregated football team onto two school buses bound for football camp. In the story, the first time the teams load onto the buses all the black players got into one bus and all the white players got into the other bus. Realizing that this was a bad start toward building a unified football team, Coach Boone ordered all the players to exit the buses and right there in the parking lot, in front of their parents, he split the boys into their defensive and offensive units. Black boys and white boys, mixed together, then loaded back aboard the newly christened “defensive” and “offensive” buses.

What you may not have noticed in the background of this scene is that the extras portraying the parents of the players were placed beside their parked cars, and some of the white parents were instructed to express open surprise and disapproval of Coach Boone’s improvised integration of their children’s football team.

As the camera guys worked out a final rehearsal, I walked over and gave Washington his character’s prop wristwatch and then headed over to the craft service cart to grab a snack. As I rounded the back end of a stakebed truck parked behind video village, I noticed my friends Rhea and Darryl standing off to the side, in front of an unattended video monitor. They were laughing their heads off.

“What’s going on??” I asked, as I stepped over to look at the monitor.

“Watch this guy,” said Rhea, jabbing at the monitor to point out a balding man with glasses. The man was one of the extras playing the parent of a white kid and he was extremely animated. As more of our crew stepped up to watch the monitor someone absentmindedly referred to that extra as “Mister Peepers”.

Now there is, without a doubt, a caste system in film production and like it or not, film crews do derive a lot of entertainment from the more outlandish characters who show up to work as extras. This particular extra was a real doozy. Like my friends on the current day Disney show, we stood there, back in 1999, reeling with gales of silent laughter at his antics.

At one point this animated extra turned and said something to a couple of nearby extras. They looked at him as if he'd grown two heads, and politely eased back toward their designated car, watching him from over their shoulders.

My curiosity got the better of me. I had to know what Mister Peepers was telling the other extras, so as soon as the 1st AD called "cut" I strolled to the back of the line of period 1970s cars, pretending to inspect our fake license plates along the way. The vehicles were turned sideways to camera, and the plates could have never been seen in the shot, but nobody was really paying attention to me anyway.

As I reached the next to last car I squatted down and pretended to adjust its license plate, but my real intent was of course to eavesdrop on my new favorite extra. I had to suppress a huge grin when I spotted Mister Peepers because he was coaching nearby extras on the finer points of expressing their outrage at Washington's character.

"You've got to gesture GESTURE!" he scolded, holding his hands in front of his face, palms turned skyward. Each time he said "gesture" his neck would sink down and his hands would push up. His physical expression of outrage looked more like a Monty Python skit about an inept recruiter for the Marcel Marceau Academy of Exaggerated Pantomime.

Concealed from the camera by the car, I stopped trying to hide my grin and stayed crouched down, watching the action unfold from up close as we rolled on the scene again. The initial misgivings of the other extras were apparently giving way to acceptance because one of the women nearest to Mr. Peepers began bobbing her head up and down like she had a chicken bone stuck in her throat, and an older man one lane over started scowling and waving a fist in the air in a figure 8 pattern... and I could have sworn that he was saying "Robble, Robble!!!" over and over again, like a crazed Hamburgler from a 1970s McDonald's commercial.

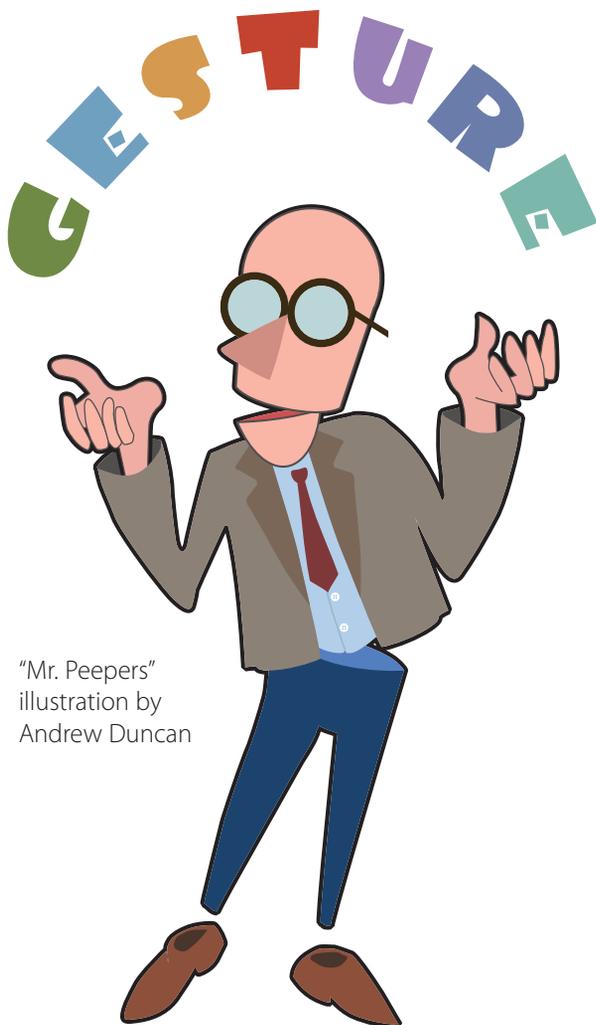
Mister Peepers was proving to be quite an effective coach. His style of "acting" was catching on like the Bubonic Plague, and it was infecting the other extras.

We finally had to rat out our favorite extra to an assistant director, who checked with camera to make sure that this expressive extra was sufficiently buried in the background of the scene to prevent the editors from being forced to abandon any important footage featuring our main actors. Nobody likes to do a reshoot.

But don't feel bad for Mister Peepers. He showed up again a few weeks later, this time as a photographer for a press conference scene at Grady High School. Waving his giant press camera around in the air, he began to extol the virtues of physical mannerisms to the other fake reporters gathered around him. When the second assistant director finally realized what was happening he instructed me to swap Mister Peeper's big shiny camera for a small reporters notebook and a worn down pencil, then they quickly moved him to the back row.

Our time with Mister Peepers had been all too brief, but it was fun while it lasted. Over the years I've wanted to thank him for the entertainment he provided us on that very tough project, so I'd like to dedicate this article to him wherever he might be. Consider it my gesture of appreciation.

I'm doing it with my hands and my neck.



"Mr. Peepers"
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