
11. Godzilla, Oz and the Guiding Light: journal adventures of a New York actor Wiley Wisdom

January 16, 1997

It is through writing that I get most of my work, and when not working on a regular project, I send twenty or so postcards out every week to casting directors. Occasionally I write to agents, but they are tougher to crack, especially at the ripe age of 40. I have several different postcard photos, and I try to choose the right postcard for the job, though I rarely send my big toothy grin shot. At an agent seminar a few years ago, three reputable agents told a crowd of mostly thirty-something Actors Equity members that their ideal new client is between 17 and 21 years old. "Because at that age, it's easy to get them appointments." After acting consistently for 25 years (10 in New York), I have yet to get an audition for a speaking role in a major film.

I've supported myself totally as an actor for the past three years, excepting a brief part-time job selling T-shirts for Jerry Lewis' Broadway show *Damn Yankees*. How I've managed remains something of a blur. At one point I tried to jump-start a rusty waiter career, but, like acting, the restaurant business thrives on youth. Written applications for waiter positions in decent New York City restaurants rival college entrance exams. One nice man at the Union Square Cafe told me they receive about five applications per day and hire about two people per year.

January 28

Got paged yesterday at 4:57 p.m. and went to the nearest pay phone to call at 5:00. Reportedly lost an under-five (under five lines) on *All My Children* for today by 30 seconds. I last worked the show as an extra just over a year ago, and I last had an under-five in 1990. "Ah, well, thanks for calling," I said. "I'll try again," plugged the assistant casting director. He said that once before, and I heard from him again about two years later. I used to get more frustrated by these lost opportunities, and that's why I purchased a pager.

February 13

Worked as an extra today on *Devil's Advocate*, my first day of work in 37 days. I

worked one day on the film last November, as a client in the law firm, then another day in a party scene on Long Island somewhere. That day I also was dubbed as stand-in for one of New York's state senators, but since the senator reportedly enjoyed his time under the lights, I was never called to set to stand in for him. After he was "wrapped" (released), I was put in later party shots as an extra. The production people try not to use the same people several days unless it's all the same office, bar, hospital, etc.; or, in this case, if they can justify people being in related locales. So I was a client in the law firm who went to a big party and today to the funeral of someone who worked at the law firm. When I first got paged to work today and tomorrow, I told them when I had worked, and I was put on hold for them to decide whether it was acceptable for me to work. Often the question will be, "Have you worked this film?" If the answer is yes, they say *We'll call again* and hang up. There are devious extras who make an effort not to be seen, so that 1) people won't think of them as extras, thus increasing self-esteem and the prospects of a blooming career, or 2) if casting calls to ask whether they've worked, they can truthfully say *But I was never on camera!*, hopefully securing another day of work. I just try to be quiet, observant and available.

The set was in a beautiful Catholic church in the East Village, a run down part of Manhattan, with mostly a mix of artists, drug addicts and elderly eastern Europeans. The church was an ornate neighborhood surprise, and we were told that we were on Fifth Avenue, a much more expensive location than East 2nd Street. Presumably they've already shot Al Pacino and Keanu Reeves entering some fancy Fifth Avenue church, then they'll cut to the more affordable interior location.

Tomorrow is supposed to be their last day of shooting in New York, and producers always start screaming about money late in a shoot. The first 100 extras in a day of shooting are supposed to be members of SAG, the Screen Actors Guild. Beyond that they can hire non-union extras for less than half what we make. The rule says, however, that the non-union extras have to be "wrapped" before the union extras. Otherwise, on a low budget film, they'd wrap the union workers when we hit overtime, keeping the cheaper non-union extras. So if they throw a non-union extra into a place and have to keep him for other shots in that corner of the room, they can't wrap the union guys until they wrap him. This peculiar little rule, which only recently has become enforced, can add thousands of dollars to a production's expenses in a day. When they only have SAG members working, it's not an issue.

February 26

I worked four days on the television show *Law & Order*, standing in for the wife murdering defendant, plus serving on the jury. Though the days were long, I was grateful to be inside, escaping the February cold. Courtroom scenes always seem to take forever to shoot because most people just sit there, and they do so much "coverage," i.e. they shoot the same moment from many different angles. They shot the defendant from two or three different angles, the lawyers in action from a couple angles, the defense listening to the prosecution and vice versa, the jury listening, the reactions of the dead wife's parents, the judge, and so on. Usually the entire five page scene would be re-enacted for each shot. The jury reaction shots were saved for last. They wrapped the principals and the sound department, and we responded to the stand-ins who read the lines and moved to the appropriate spots for us to look and respond. In a major film, the scene might have been shot in three days; but for television the five page scene was not even the entire day's work. There's not much time to nurture an actor's preparation, and for an emotional scene, solid preparation is essential to achieve real depth.

Just saw *Secrets and Lies* last week. Apparently Mike Leigh conducts improvisations for months around the characters before shooting, and in *Secrets and Lies*, that kind of preparation shows. After all that preparation, however, Leigh reduces coverage to a bare minimum. There is one long take of the two women in the coffee shop that lingers beautifully forever, it seems by comparison. I wonder how many takes they did of that shot, and the long shot of the barbecue. Lingering shots with no coverage can be liberating, since you don't have to match previous takes. With lots of coverage you have to pick up the fork at the same time in the same way on each take, rather than picking it up when you feel like it, potentially clashing with the acting rule: don't do anything unless motivated to do so. You can do things a little differently, and you want to give the editors choices. But if the choices become too inconsistent, they'll often piece together what matches rather than the best takes. Lots of coverage also reduces the likelihood of overlapping dialog, something people do in real life. Unless a scene is intended as "a oner," intended to be kept intact in one shot with no additional coverage, overlapping dialog complicates editing and is generally against the rules.

Most scenes are shot from at least two points of view, however. In *Secrets and Lies*, that might have meant placing the actresses on opposite sides of the coffee shop table, rather than next to each other, and shooting over-the-shoulder shots. Overlapping dialog could work if it was shot simultaneously with two cameras, and

the same take was used; but the cameras could not be placed in their most powerful positions without being in view of each other. Leigh avoided the need for coverage by having the two women sit next to each other, showing both of their faces at once, giving the audience enough stillness to compel the eye to wander from one to another. American eyes have been trained to crave rapid cuts, but I savor well executed lingering shots.

I've noticed that Hollywood films often try to "cheat" the off-camera actors as close to camera as possible, especially for romantic looks. They'll get as close to the lens as possible, so the actor on-camera is almost looking into the lens. The script supervisor keeps track of whether an actor is looking camera left or camera right. In an across the table conversation, one actor looks camera left and the other camera right. Otherwise it just doesn't look like they're looking at each other. Lots of discussions and effort can go into getting the "eye line" right. As stand-ins, we're often used for off-camera eye lines. When Bridget Fonda pitched at Yankee Stadium in *It Could Happen to You*, I was her real off-camera catcher. There were moments in *One Fine Day* when Michelle Pfeiffer was really looking at me. Ah, the little joys of standing in.

March 5

Got paged while I was in the shower this morning for work tomorrow on the television show *Law and Order*.

March 8

The day on *Law & Order* was pleasantly painless. They used me briefly as the stand-in for Sam Waterston, and they tossed me in a couple shots in the squad room, moving away from camera. The team spirit there is possibly unparalleled. The regular stand-ins are given day players at least once a year. The main director of photography sometimes directs, and so does the sound editor and even the script supervisor. It makes so much sense to me in many ways, but it seems so rare. I don't know what it's like in Hollywood, and I don't know whether they have to join the Directors Guild when they get an episode, but the concept of swapping around has its appeal. It also gives the camera operator the opportunity to serve as director of photography, and the camera assistant often takes over as operator. One television director told me that directing episodic television is like substitute teaching. Everyone else is always there, and you pop in for a week or so.

I stood in last night for Ethan Hawke for reshoots for *Great Expectations*. I'd

worked with the camera team before on *One Fine Day*, a particularly friendly bunch. Hawke was only in a couple MOS (“mit out sound,” reportedly from a German’s English, for “without” synchronized sound) night shots. In the first shot he emerged from a subway station in the rain. They brought in the traditional rain making cranes and trucks for the shot. Fake rain apparently has to be enough to make Noah nervous for it to show on film, so working in the rain can be uncomfortable. Thankfully they didn’t test the rain with me in the shot, though on several occasions I’ve had to stand in a torrent while the bigwigs discuss problems under big umbrellas. SAG does have a bonus for “wet pay,” however; and a crew member mentioned that Michelle Pfeiffer has in her contract that fake rain must be heated. Nice perk, and sensible, though expensive.

The second shot was an extreme close-up, apparently revealing only a portion of Ethan Hawke’s face, plus some of the street. They set up a dolly track, had me sit on the camera operator’s seat, turning the camera around on me so that I was less than a foot from the lens. The challenge was to move the shoulders and bob up and down enough to simulate walking. Had they actually had him walking, focus in that light at that close distance would have been a big problem, since it would have been nearly impossible to keep a constant 8 inches from camera. For the focus puller to adjust inch by inch would be a nearly impossible task to do well. Ethan Hawke shook my hand as I exited the dolly. “Hey, looks good,” he said, having watched on the monitor. “I like that bobbing up and down bit.”

March 17

I had dinner with an old friend last night. He was hired out of Chicago to promote some computer gadget through character work, using the *Back to the Future* scientist as the basis of the caricature. He says that agents in Chicago tend not to get involved with theater. There’s not much money in it, but I suppose it can be about building a career. Film is a different world. It’s rare, I believe, for film directors to allow for the kind of immersion into character that stage work can sometimes foster. The film process is generally very slow and disjointed, like limping along compared with the sprint of theater.

April 2

Taped my first “under-five” this year on the soap opera *One Life to Live* as the circulation manager for the Sun, one of the local newspapers in Llanview, the fictional town, supposedly in Pennsylvania. We start the day with the “dry

rehearsals” which take place in a generic room with tables and chairs filling in for the fancy sets upstairs. Several hours later we “dress” and shoot the scenes. The main difference between dressing and shooting is whether tape rolls. Though there tend to be plenty of problems with the dress rehearsals, it is not uncommon to hear a director say, “We should’ve shot it!” Actors anxious to get home to dinner are prone to say, “Can we shoot the dress?”

A writer for the competition was painted as a lush, and we were instructed to trash the competition. “But he can still write,” my colleague said simply. “Which makes him a threat to our circulation base,” I said. My first line on the show in over five years.

How many times can you say a line before you absolutely kill it? I tried to lay it in smoothly, stressing the operative word “threat,” without going overboard. Jim Sayegh, the director wanted more. “This writer is going to decrease your circulation, and this guy is going to think it’s your fault, and even though it’s not your fault, he’s going to fire you!” Up the stakes, as the saying goes. I’ve seen actors physically pushed to the point of rage by directors trying to evoke greater response, but I still think it’s best to start simple. This is a fairly campy soap, and they all set their own styles. They also often want the tiny role to push the buttons of the bigger guys, which I think happened after I “upped the stakes.” The contract player can then remain cool and in control. Though it felt a little pushed, it seemed to set the ball rolling. There’s always a balance between seeking to satisfy the director’s vision while trying to maintain your own integrity as an actor.

April 5

I went to another SAG open call for extra work on the upcoming *Godzilla*, one of those big budget blockbusters by the producers of *Independence Day*. The notice in the trade paper *Backstage* said that those attending the open call should be expected to work in smoke and rain and be prepared to run through the streets screaming. They were also looking for people with police uniforms and military experience. I’ve never worked for this extras casting agency before, and I didn’t even see him look up as he took my picture and decided which pile on the cluttered table to put my picture. “Everyone, please go out the door to your left. The door to your left!”

April 17

Read for a couple possible day player roles in the upcoming film *Godzilla*. An old

college friend is working as production manager for the New York portion of the shoot. I wrote him a note and a week later I heard from casting.

Only a handful of us crowded a small hallway at any one time, mostly ordinary looking men with dark hair, myself included. "Sides" showing brief scenes were on a table by the sign up sheet. A paper note was attached to a door stating "Casting" and another "Quiet, please. Taping in progress." I arrived about a half hour early and waited about an hour, tossing the few line possibilities in my mind. Eventually Stephanie Corsalini, the casting director, invited me into the small room with a video camera and small light with reflector. She had me "slate" myself (give my name) plus add my height. "Directors always want to know how tall people are." "And then you have to scramble to find the headshot," I suggested. "Some people don't list it!" She picked up my picture and resume, finding my height listed. My college friend had sent along my headshot, I'd noticed. We taped my couple of hopeful lines, and she said that they are only casting about 8 tiny parts in New York. I said I'd be grateful for any of them, thanked her and made my exit. I felt pretty relaxed about it, well focused. Small as it was, it was my first time reading for a big film.

April 28

In the past week and an half, I've worked four days as a prison guard (two also as stand-in) on the upcoming HBO prison show *Oz*. Though the title conjures images of the Wizard, it refers to the Oswald State Penitentiary, presumably in upstate New York. Produced by the team making the television show *Homicide: Life On the Street*, *Oz* is dark and gritty, with more emphasis on energy and movement in the photography than on beauty. They built a massive prison interior on the sixth floor of an old industrial building on the corner of Ninth Avenue and 15th St. in Manhattan, but I've spent most of my time in the cafeteria, which usually functions as the extras holding area.

One nice thing about playing a prison guard is that my required wardrobe is merely black shoes, black socks and crew neck t-shirt. They provide the uniform. When I do upscale party scenes, I sometimes spend an hour after dinner picking ties and ironing shirts from which to choose, and then I carry a hanging bag a half mile to the subway and beyond. They always want lots of wardrobe choices. As anyone might imagine, the extras holding area on an upscale party is vastly different from a prison holding area. I had a holding area in the Plaza Hotel in which their contract did not allow outside caterers, and our coffee was served out of a beautiful silver

goblet. There was another holding area in an abandoned police station in a remote corner of Brooklyn. We were held in an empty second floor room with a hole in the floor giving us a good view of the first floor. For *Oz* it's been fast camera moves and dramatic lighting. I've frisked a couple prisoners on camera, but there's little show of emotion. The harsh words that fill the script leak into the everyday language of a virtually all male cast and crew.

I got paged a few hours ago about the possibility of standing in for Sam Neill on the New York portion of *The Horse Whisperer*. I called the extras casting office for *Oz* before calling those for *Horse Whisperer* to give them first shot in case they needed me for tomorrow. They said "go ahead, take it," but when I called about *Horse Whisperer*, they wanted me for day after tomorrow and possibly more. They asked height, weight and hair color, and after I described my hair color as medium to dark brown, rather than the requisite light brown, I was put on hold for a long time. Somehow I didn't lose out due to my honesty, and they plan to submit my photo for consideration. Then I got called from the agency casting extras for *Oz*. "Did you take that other job?" "Yes and no. It's for Wednesday." "So you're still available for tomorrow?" "Yes." He asked about my hands. There are a couple possible shots on *One Tough Cop*, hand double shots, pouring wine and opening a letter. Call back at 5:30 for more information.

April 30

Worked yesterday as photo double on *One Tough Cop*. Most of the film has apparently already been shot in Canada, and I just worked a few "insert" shots which will be edited in to show a closer view of photos and a crime scene. I photo doubled for three different actors. We briefly viewed videotapes of the master shots of the scenes, and I had to match the hand positions of the actors as they flipped through photographs of the bad guys. Though they probably saw little more than my fingers, I had complete wardrobe changes with each character change. We also did an insert shot of bloody rosary and nun's habit, which I picked up with rubber gloves and deposited into an evidence bag. They sent the bloody rug used in the master shot down from Canada to use in the insert shots. One of the assistant directors is a member of the Screen Actors Guild, and she handled an insert shot of the opening of a bottle of champagne. The prop mistress joked about how cheap the champagne was. "They only let me spend three dollars a bottle. They spent all their money in Canada." It's fairly common for films to come to New York for just a few days to shoot enough to try to make it look like New York. The unions have made

some concessions in recent years, and more film is coming back to New York. Still, it's an expensive and complicated town to shoot in.

May 7

I've worked a few more days as a prison guard on *Oz*. They're only shooting the third episode, and it already feels like an efficiently run machine. One thing that makes it easy for them is that it's almost all interiors. They escape the burden of having to plan around the ever changing weather. On *One Fine Day*, the entire film was supposed to take place on a cloudy, rainy day; and making sunny days look like rain involves a lot of studying of sun and shade patterns, blocking sun with enormous and elaborately hung tarps, and making adjustments as the sun creeps across the sky. (Not to mention wetdowns to make the street shiny and making fake rain.) A "cover" set is usually kept as a back-up, an indoor scene to do in case of poor weather. They used up their cover set and had to do with what mother nature provided, often shooting tighter shots in an attempt not to reveal blue sky.

The current episode of *Oz* is being directed by a man who generally works as director of photography. He and the D.P. for the episode both carry hand held wireless monitors with screens approximately 2 1/2 inches by 3 inches. Most film directors sit and watch takes on a larger monitor possibly 30 or 40 feet from the action. The travel time from monitor to set and back reduces efficiency, and if the director wants to talk with an actor between takes, the actor will often be summoned to the monitor area. Video playback of previous takes can be discussed, which also takes time. During the last scene of the day yesterday, a Muslim African-American prisoner was taken out of the cafeteria during breakfast, and several reaction shots of various prisoners were taken. The director moved about the room, directing the camera operator and the actors from a few feet away, staying next to the operator during the takes and viewing them on the hand held monitor. Some directors apparently direct from a trailer and never talk directly to the actors, but this director stayed closer to the actors than anyone I'd seen. Never had to raise his voice, never had to run frantically from monitor to set and back in a race against the clock. More coverage would have been taken, but at 7 p.m. the producer said, "That's it. It's 7 O'clock," followed by an A.D.(assistant director) announcing, "O.K. Everybody, that's a wrap. Good day, crew. We shot over 11 pages." The down side of such an efficiently run machine is that there is rarely much overtime, and the only time an extra makes a reasonable wage is after the 10th hour of the day. Though I appreciate the efficiency, I secretly hope for a touch of mayhem.

May 10

Worked *Oz* again yesterday, a full day of shooting in the large open interior section of the prison known as "Emerald City." Apparently there were two upgrades given this week; i.e. lines given to extras. Having a prisoner end a confession with an "amen" increased his earnings over 500 percent. Reportedly the following day seven extras were cut from the list in an effort to balance the budget. We shot a scene in which a few of us were instructed to break up a fight in the prison weight room. "Break it up! Hey! Back off!" we adlibbed, storming into the room, pulling one prisoner off another. They brought in a fourth guard, making our numbers significant enough to be considered a group response without specific lines, thus avoiding having to pay us more money.

I got paged a couple days ago about upcoming work as a jury member on the soap opera *Guiding Light*. I haven't been sending postcards to the soaps lately, trying to see how *Oz* develops and focusing on qualifying for another year of SAG medical insurance. Soap work is under AFTRA, a different union, with a separate medical plan, which seems totally out of reach. To qualify for medical insurance, one must earn a set amount per year, which gets higher almost every year. I said "yes" to what looks like about 10 days of work. Concerned about my prospects on *Oz* due to the soap work, I mentioned the work to Lee, who works for Sylvia Fay Casting, hiring extras for *Oz*. Perhaps as a result, I was told, "We won't be needing you on Monday." "It happens every spring," my wife Marta-Elena said at dinner. Conflicts of opportunities. Though they suggested that they wanted the same guards in the same places, and they have designated different "*Oz*" guards and "Emerald City" guards, it gets fuzzy when the shooting starts. I said from the outset that we'd have to take it "One day at a time," knowing that casting wants a blind commitment to the project without offering enough work to guarantee survival.

May 13

I pulled an all nighter last night on *Godzilla*. There were lots of familiar faces: guards and prisoners from *Oz*, production assistants I'd not seen in years, the stills photographer I've worked with on several projects, whose wife shot our wedding. "I'm here for a couple of nights," I told him. "So we'll suffer together," he added in good spirit. The good news was that they were only going to wet down the street, saving the fake rain for tonight. I'd been reluctant to heartily pursue this, partially because I'd read for a small day player and hoped that they'd call me in at the last minute, but also because it has been a tough shoot. Even one of the SAG field

representatives talked about how tough it was, how some of the extras ran for hours and hours in pouring rain, and it was like pulling teeth to get a little extra money to compensate for not having a break every two hours. Shortly after we were checked in, we were herded down to the wardrobe, props and make-up and hair area which was filled with large boxes. "Can you move this out somewhere before I stab somebody! Can't you do this someplace else?" one of the make-up and hair guys yelled. "This is where we are. Now let's work together on this."

We were distributed army green T-shirts, pants, belt, boots, shirt, and a waterproof shirt and pants. We were given "vouchers" when we signed in, and they collected our vouchers as collateral for the wardrobe. We were then instructed to take various prop pieces. A very heavy vest, an outer vest with various compartments, a belt with canteen and more, and a helmet. "We put the rain gear on top of this?" I asked from the middle of the crowd, sensing the obvious answer. "Yes. Don't ask me why you have to wear all this if you're not going to see it. You're in the army now." After struggling in the dressing room, we were shuffled to a prop truck in groups of ten. Each man stated his name and was given a fake gun, mostly automatic rifles. I got one of the heavy metal ones, though some were of plastic and rubber. "O.K. This is the speech. None of these guns are real. Any one caught f—ing around with these guns will have the gun taken away, and you will not be paid. Do not leave the set with your gun. If you have to leave the set, give your gun to a P.A., and don't tell me you couldn't find one. Don't put your gun on the ground. Any gun we find on the ground will be taken away, and you will not be paid. Treat the gun as your buddy."

We wrapped when dawn's light became too bright, and we went through the reverse procedure with props and wardrobe, before standing in line to get checked out.

May 14

They made rain with their seven story towers, jutting from truck beds like metal zigzags with a large water hose, each with four circling sprinklers able to immerse the street in temporary downpour. The fake smoke trucks were back, plus smoking manhole covers, smaller smoke machines, and special effects artists who wafted the smoke in the proper directions, using something like a wooden pizza scoop. I wasn't a major victim, and I didn't have to do much major running, so last night was better than expected.

I said "yes" for tonight and got home about 7 a.m. I was awakened 10:48 a.m., by my pager, and asked about my availability for 25 days of stand-in work for Scott

Glenn, having been recommended by someone in production. (Tonight will be my 25th day of work this year.) Unfortunately, I have already been "booked" for one day and "cleared" for about 10 more as a jury member on the soap *Guiding Light*, so it looks as though I'll have to decline my best opportunity this year. I was paged again at 11:30, regarding *Oz* tomorrow. I told Lee I was working *Godzilla* tonight and could work if he was in a pinch, "though I don't like to work when I'm not my best, and I imagine you could find a more alive guard for tomorrow." He said he'd call again.

May 20

Glad I didn't go to *Oz* that day, because *Godzilla* almost defeated me the previous night. Lots of running in smoke and rain with gear and weapons feeling heavier every take. "Reset!" was the word we heard so often. I've learned to stir at the sound of "Check the gate," the cue to see if there is debris close to the passing film, generally the cue that a new shot is imminent. The camera crew opens the "front" for careful examination with a small flashlight. Rarely, there is a "hair in the gate," forcing a reshoot of whatever has been shot since the gate was last checked. No one ever gets released until after the gate or gates are "clean." Howling "Everyone come back" to 350 extras on a crowded New York street would be frustrating and very expensive. Most of that night is a blur. I remember running through the rain towards a very bright light which for moments in each take seemed to blind my vision. There were soldiers running in several directions, and before each take I reminded myself to stay alert. We were told not to run through a specific area in the street, where *Godzilla's* foot will be digitally inserted.

I got home around 7 a.m. and I was still in a daze the following day for jury duty on *Guiding Light*. Courtroom scenes can easily induce sleep, and you've got to struggle to stay alert. Contract players, tossed in a scene in which they may have little to say for days while sitting as spectators, fight the tedium by reading the newspaper and doing crossword puzzles. Some make jokes or flirt with other cast members. There doesn't seem to be as much division between principals and extras in the soaps as on films, but actors don't as easily get bored in films. Soaps are full time; films are part-time. However, when you're working, films have longer hours. All the soap stars have to stay on set while the shots are being set up, but the film stars are sent away, while stand-ins jump in and the camera and lighting crews take over. The actor has time to prepare for each shot. The soap actor often has to shoot as much material in a day as a film actor shoots in a month. Watching the difference

between the two has given me an appreciation for soap actors. Though the technique can be too geared towards commercials and the meaningful gazes that just precede them, the volume of memorization scares me a bit, imagining the job of today's lawyers. The judge struggled with some of his almost repetitious "objection" 's, and the memorization dilemma briefly filtered through the cast. When I moved to New York, they still used cue cards on some of the soaps, just for the times when an actor's memory slipped away; but they've been abandoned here on the soaps completely.

They've been using four or five cameras, including a "jib," a camera on a crane at the end of a rolling tripod, which snakes around our heads into the most advantageous places. One operator moves the jib from the weighted rear while another operates the camera from a remote monitor. As a rear corner jury member, I was hit in the back of the head once today, but we're expected to avoid the jib while pretending it's not there. With five cameras, there's inevitably a conflict of their getting into each other's view, with each camera operator trying to follow instructions while seeking the best shot. At the end of the two days so far, they've released most of the cast, and rolled the jury box over to a corner with the proper wall for "insert" reaction shots from the jury, either with the original actor crossing in front of the camera or with the director reading from the script.

Back on *Oz*, waiting with a handful of guards and prisoners in the cafeteria holding area. Some sleep, some read. Talking is discouraged when they're shooting nearby.

We're on lunch break now, and construction rumbles in the distance. During lunch they can hammer uninterrupted. Otherwise they have to "hold the work" when the bells sound three times, just before the cameras roll. Though only eight episodes of *Oz* are committed, they keep making this prison bigger and more complicated. Unlike a soap opera where small unrelated three walled box sets often sit side by side in a double row (and get swapped and stored daily), the rooms in this "prison" have walls intact and all connect in a way that makes sense. "With all the money they have invested in this set, they have to do more than eight episodes." Later, we shot a scene in which we arrested one of the head guards as he gave drugs to an inmate. We stormed through the hallway, slammed the head guard up against a gate and turned him back towards us. One of the prison hotshots threw the guard a punch before we dragged him out. We went through the physical part several times with the stunt coordinator before rehearsing on camera. "Don't grab my arm so hard. Act it," the arrested guard told my partner after one of the takes. Invariably

macho blood stirs on this set, and people can get tossed around a bit; but the stunt coordinators try to help the actors maintain focus and have specific tasks. I've seen less challenging maneuvers labeled as "stunts," but the stunt club has tough but fuzzy membership requirements. Stunt men all seem intense and a little crazed. So when the stunt supervisor patted me on the shoulder and said, "very good," after one of the takes, it wasn't lightly taken. Though I never aspired to be a stunt man, the work isn't always too dangerous, and the pay is several times what I made today. Typically, we shot the scene from several different angles; and there was an edge we'll never see on tomorrow's *Guiding Light* jury.

May 29

Jury duty on *Guiding Light* has been easy but hardly awe inspiring, and I lament the loss of the stand-in job. They tend to pull out the back row of the jury early in the camera blocking rehearsals, since we get in the way of moving cameras and booms. They bring us in for reaction shots after the other courtroom scenes have been shot. One director just asked for "nervousness," while another asked for us to decide whether we were for or against Reva. (Did she or didn't she push Annie down the stairs, thus causing the death of Annie's unborn child?) The directors don't read the lines with much feeling, and our reactions would be stronger if the actors read them. I often view how an actor works off-camera as a test of the commitment to craft, but no one seems to think having the lines read to us by the actors playing the roles really matters. Even on *Law and Order* the stand-ins read the off-camera lines to the jury, but the *Law and Order* stand-ins read better than the *Guiding Light* directors.

May 31

"One: chest judge. Three: you can lose the judge, just give me the lawyers. Two: behind the jury." The director calls out the camera numbers while the actors filter in their lines under the camera blocking rehearsals. "Two gets a bust of Reva. Three gets a bust of Annie." In a film the actors would generally be protected from this battery of camera jargon, but in soaps there is no time. During the camera blocking rehearsal they have to act enough to facilitate the process, while trying not to be distracted or dragged down by the whirlwind. In a film, a stand-in's job is to protect the actor from those distractions and the drudgery. The director of photography would rather work with the actor because invariably adjustments need to be made, no matter how closely a stand-in might match the moves and posture of a star. But

in film, the star's time is precious, and the director of photography will often gingerly request a big star's time to help set up a shot. I once heard a child actor, possibly seven year's old, say in reference to an off-camera moment, "Why don't you get my stand-in to do it?"

They kept the back row of the jury all day but decided not to use us for reaction shots. They could pop in shots from previous days, if necessary. I spoke with the president of the Guiding Light International Fan Club, who was hanging out in the lounge, visiting from upstate New York. She said there were members in Germany, Italy and parts of Africa. The show is celebrating its 60th anniversary, having started out on radio, and she's been watching since the late 50's. She talked about the fans. They like bad guys, but they don't like it when villains get away with everything and never have to pay the consequences. They don't like it when a character becomes heavily involved in a story line, and after the story line is complete, they get rid of the character. They don't like having that emotional investment taken away from them. "The audiences are smarter these days. You can tell from the beginning if someone's going to get killed off at the end of a story line."

Back on *Oz*, yesterday and today. Shot a family visit scene. Drugs were smuggled in a small balloon, pulled out of a baby's diaper, then swallowed by a young inmate. They used a doll to set up the shot, then brought in a beautiful young baby. When she started to cry, they gave her a pacifier. "We'll pull the pacifier when we roll," the first A.D. announced. Though they recorded their adlibs, the scene is intended to be shown under a voice over. Maybe they'll let us hear the baby cry, edit it into a choice pause in the voice over. The "wife" was presumably an extra, the inmate a principal. The first A.D. asked whether the wife had a problem being kissed by the inmate, and she said "kind of," so they settled with a kiss on the cheek. It's certainly a challenge in acting, trying to reveal intimacy with someone you've just met.

The morning was quiet. Yesterday there were about 80 extras in this echo filled gym; today there are three guards, plus one female social worker. The madness of yesterday's collection of inmates has dissolved into silent readers, until the stunt team and one of the principals started a basketball game during lunch. I received a message from the *Guiding Light* assistant casting director to call ASAP. They wanted the back row of the jury today and tomorrow for reaction shots. "I'm already working *Oz*, here on set. I can't ask to be released early. I could be available for tomorrow." "Wiley can't make it!" she announced to the room. They needed the whole row for the go ahead, and she was relieved to get the first firm "no." I then

returned a message for work tomorrow as a photographer on *Another World*. After accepting that job, I was asked by production to call casting, and I had to turn down work on *Oz*. It happens every year from time to time. Slow winters, but turning people away at other times.

June 6

Another World was a brief and pleasant breeze as a news photographer working with other photographers and reporters, hounding a mayoral candidate who's involved in some kind of scandal. Yesterday we completed the trial on *Guiding Light*. Word had gotten around that I wasn't available on Tuesday, so I'd lost a day of work for the back row of the jury. "So if I miss my health insurance by a day, I'll know it was your fault," a woman suggested, "though I know you couldn't help it." Later the stage manager announced that they were going to do reaction shots for at least two episodes, "So the back row will get paid for at least two days, so the front row should get the back row to take you out to lunch." Mark said to me in the hallway, "You know, you really should thank me for this." "Oh, why is that?" "Melanie called my service, wanting me to call back ASAP, and I knew what it was about, so I didn't call back, and then she left another message, and I waited awhile, and by the time I called back it was too late. So you should thank me, and there was someone else . . ." "I was the other guy. I was working on *Oz*." "Oh. I can't believe you. Working again on your day off." "My day off? I don't have days off; I have days I don't get work."

June 27

Yesterday I went in for a stand-in "interview" for *Meet Joe Black*, but they didn't get around to the intended scene, so we were back today. They lined the three potential new stand-ins up beside Jake Weber, and though I've worked with many of the crew members and have lots more stand-in experience than the other two combined, this D.P. wants the closest match, and I wasn't the lucky one. I'd heard that I might be a shade shorter than Jake, so I picked up a pair of black Converse All-Star tennis shoes yesterday, took them to one of those funky East Village shoe shops and had them add two layers of black rubber to the soles, giving me an extra inch. The stand-in's stock in trade. I can now be 6'1". I hope to get another day on *Oz* before they wrap, but I'm moving on. There's work out there. I've just got to find it.

Wiley Wisdom is an actor based in New York City.