

SMFA International Actors in the States

Please enjoy this bonus content for the 4th edition of *Self-Management for Actors: Getting Down to (Show) Business*. And always enjoy your journey!

Once upon a time, Gabrielle Mazza wrote in to me at my Actors Access column requesting an article devoted to the issues facing international actors in the States. I asked for help from the community of international actors who read my column each week and received great responses from some folks who shared on—and off—the record. I'm presenting that goodness for you here.

Recon

I first came to LA in February 2003 for three months to learn about the business down here. I did not have any visa or green card; I just came to learn about the business. I came down as a visitor. The following summer, I sent 100 mailed submissions from Canada to LA agents I had researched online. Then I received several phone calls to set up agent meetings in LA. I came down for one week in October 2003 to have those meetings and signed with an agent and manager. They knew that I had no visa or permanent resident card, but they were willing to take me on based on my resumé credits, demo, and audition. — Tracy Thomas

It is absolutely imperative to have a demo. I found, the first time I came to LA (in 2004), I had no demo and the response from every single person (agent, manager, casting director) that I met with was: "We think you're great. Go back to Canada and get some more credit and a demo." Which is what I did. And all the while I put together and filed a petition for an O-1 Visa. The entire process from the time I started collecting documentation to file, to when I actually had the visa in my hot little hand, took two-and-a-half years. I think it is strongly advisable to hire an immigration lawyer for this process instead of trying to do it yourself. — anonymous

Fitting In

As a true Israeli-American, I will just point out a few issues that I've dealt with since moving to New York eight years ago. I am originally from Israel, but as my father is American, I am lucky enough to have an American citizenship, hence, not having to deal with the trials, tribulations, stress, and expense that come with visa concerns. Also, my parents and siblings live in the States, but a huge part of my extended family, and many many friends, live in Israel, where I've spent most of my life. Israel is a Jewish country: We go to school on Christmas, but have Rosh HaShana off. Moving here, and having to make a conscious effort to preserve home traditions ("Does Zabar's sell Channukah candles?"), was a concern I had when I moved here. It all worked out, though. — Maayan Schneider

The biggest challenge in my opinion for an international actor/actress is language. If he/she has an accent, they are very limited in the roles they can audition and book. I also do voiceovers and have worked very hard (still do) at eliminating mine. It is almost gone; people with good ears will

detect something but usually can't place me. Because my English has an almost undetectable accent *and* I can do a German, French, and Italian one (or speak those languages, more or less fluently), it opens me up to any types of roles, not just "Swiss" or "European" ones. — Silvia McClure

The best thing I could have done when I landed was doing Bonnie's classes. I'm not just saying that because this is Bonnie's column; I say that to everyone because it was exactly what I needed. It bridged the gap for me between the two countries. I was blown away by how much I didn't know. I arrived with training and work behind me but what I desperately needed was knowledge of the business over here and how things worked. It's hard enough to jump in a car on the wrong side of it and the wrong side of the road facing impending death for those first few seconds, let alone navigate a whole new industry! There were a billion differences in how everything operated—from what was expected in terms of headshots and reels, to how auditions are run and to the fact that there are over 600 casting directors here in this city as apposed to about 6!! I learnt how to market my own unique brand, get up on Actors Access, and book my own work as well as work from my rep. — Stef Dawson

Ah, my name: "Maayan? Uh... how do you pronounce that?" The very first part of a conversation, my name is often an issue. It is common enough in Israel, but not here, and has the added bonus of an unusual (for English) emphasis—it goes on the last syllable (ma-a-YAN). The best way I've found so far to explain it is, "Say it like a curseword!" — Maayan

Community

Another great reason to join a class! I knew *one* person when I came over here but jumping into a class gave me an instant friendship group which remain life long friends. It can be very daunting leaving your family and friends behind and it does seem like worlds away at first. — Stef

I'd say in my case, the reason I have work in the US is that I found a great community. I'm lucky because I always felt very welcome. Right off the bat, I found a great group of supportive friends and colleagues that have always cheered me on. I always make a point of nurturing the relationships I have, and of supporting my peers as much as I can. I work hard, and I found that makes people want to help me and work with me. Ultimately, I believe that if you stay open and curious, if you're always improving your craft, and if you surround yourself with people who do the same, you're always going to have work. This, of course, doesn't only apply to international actors, although I'd say community becomes additionally important when you're away from home. — Mariana Vily

Join Facebook groups to support you in the move. For me "Aussies in LA" and "Australians In Film" were such great support networks for me. Everything from buying a car, renting a house, and asking questions that might seem silly. "Australians In Film" provided me with a peer group of other filmmakers and also great networking. — Stef

Visas

I am from Vancouver, Canada, and live in New York working as a professional actress. It took me five years of living here under my spouse's work permit (he is Canadian too) before I finally got my own work permit (9/11 made the process back up significantly and we are still processing the green cards, sigh). Although I finally have a completely legitimate work permit and Tax ID number, some larger studios (Disney, as an example) require me to have a green card to work with them. However, in talking to the casting office, they informed me that for many projects they just need my work permit/Tax ID *earlier* so they can fax the proper paperwork to the studio's HR department. I do often question if that little inconvenience prevents them from calling me last minute for something, although I like to think I'm worth it! — Helene Taylor

Most foreign actors/filmmakers are required to get an O-1 Visa where you become an "Alien of Extraordinary Ability." This is no easy feat and requires a lot of time and paperwork. Some people assume it can be done quickly and it is possible with a job offer looming, but for the most part, it takes time. There are many fantastic lawyers in LA who are willing to talk you through this process free of charge and get you started. I could talk for days about this process! If you are eligible, even with an O-1 Visa in hand, enter the green card lottery!! This is a miraculous lottery that gives out about 5000 green cards to Aussies every year (as well as many other countries) and may not be around forever. Not all studios take the O-1 Visa so a green card is ideal. There is a process involved after you have been selected but it should be free to enter. There are many scam websites out there asking you to pay, so avoid that. Not every country is eligible (sorry Brits) but worth checking out. — Stef

I was told at the time that with an O-1 Visa I would be able to work legally in the States in any capacity associated with performance, since that's what my visa was specific to. An O-1 is officially titled "Alien of Extraordinary Ability" and then there are several different categories to apply for—mine is for Extraordinary Ability in Performance Arts. So I can't work at Starbucks for a day gig or anything. But the real kicker has been finding out that many studios are completely unwilling to look at Canadians with O-1 Visas. They will only look at you if you have a green card. They claim it's for legal reasons, but I've had many, many discussions with my lawyer about this, and she has said that with an O-1 I am completely entitled to work as an actress here, at ANY studio. However, if that's a decision that is made by the studio then there is nothing I can really do about it. They can call it whatever they want, it doesn't really matter, the point is that it's their stand and it's their final decision. Some studios with this rule will make exceptions and see actors with O-1's for pilots. Now, this is not to say that ALL studios share this viewpoint about O-1's. I have had a fair amount of success at other studios. — anonymous

I know that it takes a *long* time to get a visa or green card in this biz, and you have to be pretty lucky to either book a job here, or fall in love and marry an American, or try to file for one on your own merit and credits (the *long* way). I was very blessed to have met my husband here, fell in love, and eventually got a green card through our marriage. So, I don't know how much longer it may have taken me to get one just through possible acting gigs. I know several Canadian actors

who, while in LA, petitioned for a visa or green card on their own merit and got one. (It can take three to five years!) Sometimes actors have applied for a visa in Canada before coming down and have been successful. I also know a lot of Canadian actors who were not so fortunate. — Tracy

Representation

I had some tape on myself and a few voiceovers. A good friend of mine gave me a referral to a voiceover agency. They took me on. Now I had to find an agent or a manager. I asked friends, actors, writers who they were with and would they give me a referral. Some did, some didn't. — anonymous

A referral is always best when approaching rep overseas. A lot of foreign actors come out here with a body of work, so many have an agent from their own country who can refer them to managers and agents here. I wasn't even sure what that meant when I first moved here but it is either an email or phone call from someone who believes in you, pitching you to rep over here. I think people are interested in foreign talent over here with the current track record of foreigners doing really well. People really do take a look at you but you must be ready. Make sure your accent is flawless and you feel ready to compete in the mecca of the entertainment industry. Embrace your uniqueness; it is a gift! If you don't have rep back home, a good idea is to do casting workshops and get a feel for how things work here as well as getting to know casting directors. Do your research as to what shows/films you feel are a good fit for you and target those casting directors. — Stef

I was born and raised in Switzerland and came to the US as a high school senior, met my hubby a few years later, and have been living here for over 20 years. I never acted in Switzerland, and started my career in my mid-30s with no training and experience whatsoever. I was so lucky to get an agent right away, but knew that I was the one who had to do the work! I took classes (commercial, improv, cold reading), did extra work (for set experience), submitted myself (and worked on a lot of student films, etc.) to build my resumé, and when I joined the union, was confident to compete with all the talented actors in SAG. — Silvia

Have a kick-ass reel, great headshot that is right on "brand"—something I learnt from Bonnie, know your type and where you fit in, and don't be afraid to be confident! Us Aussies like to downplay everything, but over here a bit of optimism and swagger is not a bad thing. — Stef

Auditioning

I used Actors Access and scanned it every day for something I might be right for. I auditioned for everything including Equity waiver things. I did a bunch of skits on the Jay Leno show, played Edgar Allan Poe to rave reviews in an Equity waiver play. It was tough going still. I went abroad for a while. I felt I needed to regroup after some near misses. On my return, I decided not to take anything personally; that it was a business and there is enough work for everybody. — anonymous

If you have an accent, a thick Aussie one like me, it's always a good idea to walk in the room as an American. Stay in the US accent throughout the audition. That way they are not listening out for your accent while you are auditioning and instead focusing on the performance. It's always a bit of fun at the end to break out into your normal accent and have a chat, shocking them in the process. — Stef

As far as Breakdowns go, I am pretty sure that as long as you can work in this country, have a legitimate work visa to do acting work, and your visa will not be expiring soon, you can audition for those breakdowns that mention you have to have a green card. I think it's only reality-based TV shows that often require resident status. But if you have a visa and can legally work here, then there should be no reason that you can't audition. — Tracy

I have been advised to put "FOR LOCAL HIRE" on my materials, essentially so LA is aware I'm willing to fly out and find accommodation on my own dime in order to get the roles. I also audition through my computer now—I have a great system on my Mac that permits me to upload and send auditions to LA. Worth it even for volunteer opportunities that are interesting. — Helene

Resources

In terms of resources, I'm exploring HOLA <http://hellohola.org>. I'm quite new to it, but I know other Latin actors find it useful. Their resources are definitely worth looking into (casting notices, casting database, workshops, events...). — Mariana

A brilliant book written by my mate Kym Jackson, for not just Aussie actors but other foreigners wanting to make the transition, is *The Hollywood Survival Guide for Aussie Actors: Your Handbook to Becoming a Working Actor in LA*. This book covers visas, auditions, what happens in auditions, marketing, and the transition in day-to-day life in the States. — Stef

Thankfully, there are people who help with the particular social networking questions and challenges that Gabriella Mazza mentions. When looking for help, one might search for terms like: "social media, virtual assistants" or "social media consultants," etc. Most are available for over-the-phone/Skype sessions for a fee. Some do the work for you and some teach you how to do it for yourself. — Gerialin Thomas

Balance

I have a lot of theatre, TV, and film experience outside of the USA so coming to Los Angeles and floundering was very humbling. Taking J-O-B's. Casting directors and directors not knowing my work. Augh! A working British actress in the States once told me, "Don't go to Los Angeles unless you're invited." Hmm.... — anonymous

Many actors in New York are away from home, but that is usually no more than three hours' time difference away (or a five-hour flight). Israel is seven hours behind EST, and an 11-hour flight away, which makes it harder to share good (or bad) news with your friends and family in real time, consult about decisions, and generally keep in touch. Thank God for Skype! — Mariana

I find that focusing on my work and training helps me deal with the emotional aspects of living abroad. Having clear step-by-step goals, and being in the moment (as in, "what do I need to work on today?") has helped me stay in the journey, especially at the beginning. — Mariana

In Closing

These are but a few challenges that international actors deal with, in addition to the "normal" acting challenges. Luckily, NYC is such an international (and internationally-aware) city, that finding kindred spirits, both American and non, is magically easy. And without a doubt, worth it!! — Mariana

Without being glib, my top tip: "Be talented, be young, be super attractive, be wealthy enough to engage a good lawyer, and/or be in love with an American you can marry". None of the above will keep a determined actor from her dream, so even better advice: "Be brave." — Frances Uku

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