

Oookay. I've caved. I'm writing about the CD workshop issue after having avoided it quite a bit. Of course, I haven't avoided it entirely. I wrote about CD workshops in the [July 18, 2005 Your Turn](#) (in which I likened CD workshops to playing the lottery and called upon the facilities to disclose the odds of winning with purchase of a lottery ticket, along with disclosing how much money was going to workshop facility owners, AKA "the real winners," which yielded vicious emails to me and phone calls to Breakdowns about my column) and then compiled your feedback about [CD workshops on August 15, 2005](#), in what I thought was a fairly balanced account of the culture of CD workshops, something that no one will argue is *big business* in Los Angeles.

I've also debated the issue many times at the [Yahoo Group](#) for [Hollywood Happy Hour](#), talked about it in interviews (most recently [here](#) and [here](#)), and even dedicated an entire chapter to CD workshops in [Self-Management for Actors](#). I've not buried my head in the sand entirely. But I have refused to get too into the debate because I really, truly can see both sides on this topic, and everyone likes to say that's a cop-out. It's not. I really do hear you. I get it. No matter how far pegged to one side or the other of this issue you may be, I see your point.

A little context: My first experience with a CD workshop was as an actor in Atlanta. It was 1992 and my agent told me I should attend this weekend-long event with two casting directors who had flown out from Los Angeles to scout talent and do a workshop in Atlanta. I paid \$35 for two five-hour days (lunch and parking included) and met two top casting directors of that era, [Jerold Franks](#) and [Al Onorato](#). It was awesome. I learned more about what to expect in Hollywood in those ten hours than I had been able to soak up in reading dozens of books previously. I did some cold reading, did a monologue, got some notes on my work, but most of all got a ton of questions answered. I knew what steps I needed to take to get ready for a career in Los Angeles. I'd heard it right from the mouths of those who'd been doing major casting for decades, that weekend.

I first arrived in Los Angeles in August of 1993. I met a fellow actor at a networking event put on by the Hollywood Creative Directory just three days after unpacking the U-Haul and that actor told me I had to get in on some CD workshops he and a group of actor friends did weekly. My new friend and I each spent ten bucks a week, did a prepared scene for one casting director, and then each of us and the ten other actors would get one-on-one time with the CD of the week, going over our resumés, scene choices, primary types, tips tailor-made for us, etc. It was at one of these CD workshops, in fact, that I first met the most vocal of all CD workshop opponents, [Billy DaMota](#). He and another couple dozen CDs I met in 1993 and 1994 were *A-listers*. Some still are. People casting great projects and/or folks who really had amazing guidance to share. They gave great advice, we shared a few laughs, there was a spread of coffee and donuts, and the actors' \$10 per week (a grand total of \$100 collected, weekly, as the two actors who led the workshop group got to showcase for free) went to rental of the space (a meeting room in the basement of a Unitarian church) and purchasing of the aforementioned coffee and donuts. These CDs did not get paid to show up. They either needed to see actors or wanted to share tips with us. That was the agenda. Period. The business model we now know had not yet been created.

Cut to: 1998. I return to Los Angeles after having gone back east to get a master's degree in journalism. I track down my old gang of workshopppers and am told CD workshops have changed. They're no longer small gatherings costing actors a few dollars. Workshops are now something I'll have to pay thirty bucks to be a part of. And I can't choose my material or my scene partner. I can't prep in advance. It's now called a "cold reading workshop" and I'll be doing sides on the spot in front of 30 other actors and someone who "works in casting." There will be no one-on-one face time with a CD and there will even be a wrangler whose job it is to make sure I don't annoy the casting person with any silly "all about me" questions. The CD (or assistant or associate) I'll see will get \$150 and that means the rest of the money (\$750 of the \$900 collected each night) is going to the facility. They say it's for operating costs, but I can do basic math and realize that the wrangler is an actor whose paycheck is a free slot in tonight's class, the rent on this dump in the Valley isn't exorbitant, and the only one getting rich is the guy who owns the facility, in which sometimes *six* of these workshops are going on every single night (to the tune of over \$30K/wk. for the facility owner).

I learn at this time that the Casting Society of America has taken a hard line against workshops and the casting offices that want to participate are intentionally keeping one CD on staff as a non-member of CSA so that there is someone who can go earn an extra \$150 a night, shop for talent without having to sit through a boring play or long open mic night or an in-office general, and come back to the office with some folks to pop in the top shows, which need a dozen or so actors each new episode. CSA members are not allowed to do CD workshops at this time. I contact DaMota who catches me up on what I missed, away from LA for just over four years.

Definitely, things have changed. And they're gonna change more. It's getting to the point where full CDs aren't even doing these workshops much anymore. They're almost always conducted by associates and assistants. These folks are underpaid as it is, so they're supplementing their income, seeing actors of vastly disparate talent levels, while helping facility owners get richer. Heck, at this point, there are even people working in casting who have learned they can sell actors' [headshots on eBay](#) for a tidy bundle (especially photos of kid actors to suspected child predators in private auctions). It's ugly. And it's about to get uglier.

Another two years in and CSA has relaxed its stance on workshops. I'm no longer an actor, but I'm a columnist for *Back Stage West*, so I'm staying aware of this issue. I'm interviewing CDs weekly for my column "[Casting Qs](#)" and I'm asking them about workshops. While top casting execs and the CDs whose projects shaped our industry over the past decades won't *touch* CD workshops, there is a new generation of CDs who think workshops are great. More and more casting directors, associates, and assistants are lobbying for the right to use workshops as a means of finding new talent, efficiently. Actors are clamoring for the "right to workshop," and it's becoming clear that—absolutely—actors who are TV-ready, the right type, and choosing the right workshops (as some are no-audition-required facilities at which CDs do nothing but collect a check, watch scenes without giving feedback, and dump a stack of headshots in the waste bin upon leaving, because they have exclusive deals to call in actors from the "better" workshops) are getting an edge over those who can't afford the same opportunity. Some actors who can afford the access are getting opportunities they're nowhere near ready for. They have no business being seen by people who cast work at any level above copy-credit-meals gigs or student films as they're building up their craft and their consistency, but because they can buy the opportunity and are *sure* they're right about their readiness, they're keeping workshops in business while the one or two actors who are *truly ready* to be seen at the level for a network co-star are becoming the major success stories the workshops are using when advertising their companies.

A CSA member who owns a workshop becomes president of the CSA. (Full disclosure: It is former CSA president and former AIA owner [Katy Wallin](#) who would go on to hire me for several of [my first jobs in casting](#), as casting coordinator on three shows for Fox and casting director on a show for E! in 2003 and 2004.) At this point, there is no more CSA-related opposition to workshops, and as the CSA slowly evolves into a union, it welcomes with open arms the casting employees who work at the associate level, and that's the biggest population of folks working in casting who regularly do workshops. They are the most vocal of the casting folks who want workshops to continue. Workshops are an efficient means of getting to see actors outside of the office. No one wants to go back to generals or seeing plays or scouting at showcases—not when there's money to be made, using the workshop model.

Workshops are the subject of [a story on 20/20 in late 2002](#). The state introduces [workshop guidelines](#) about how—since workshops *are* going to happen—they must be advertised, marketed, conducted. Within weeks of these guidelines being adopted, they are only occasionally stuck to, and most of the "reading of the disclaimer" portion of the night is done while eyes are rolling, as everyone gets that "we can't call it a job opportunity, but we all know the only reason anyone is plunking down now nearly \$50 a night is to get access to a job opportunity from this casting office someday." Casting folks are now getting about \$200 per workshop, which means our math now goes to \$1500 collected per workshop night, \$200 going to the casting person, and \$1300 per room in which there's an event happening going to the facilities. Big business. Big, big business. No wonder emotions are high!

Cut to: Now. Over the past 17 months, a bill got introduced, debated, refined, and voted into law to protect the "not ready" from spending thousands of dollars on many "too good to be true" opportunities, CD workshops included. "The Krekorian Act," [AB 1319, The Advance Fee Talent Services Scam Prevention Bill](#) (PDF), became law in January of 2010 and it's only in the past few months that some folks seem to have gotten really vocal about their dislike of the law. More on that below.

As for me, since becoming a casting director in 2003, I've preferred to attend CD workshops put on by the [SAG Foundation Casting Access Project](#) (my first one was in 2004, before the program was even called "SAG CAP;" my most recent one was [just two weeks ago](#)), visit ongoing acting classes when they invite industry in to watch their work-in-progress material, hit all of the league school and independently produced showcases I can each season, do sessions with AFTRA's senior and diversity initiative, and donate my time to the Industry For Charity workshops and events produced by the [Life Through Art Foundation](#).

One of the major targets of the new law is the "talent convention" model. I was approached in 2003—just three months after my first casting gig—to do one of those "talent conventions" in Florida for a few grand. Yup. All-expenses-paid trip and five-star resort accommodations, plus a few grand cash in exchange for a few hours of watching several hundred actors (mostly kids, whose parents had paid thousands of dollars for the opportunity) as long as I pledged to "call back" a dozen or so of the kids, so they could say their program works. "No, thank you," I said. And that's when I knew that it was simply my name appearing in the Breakdown Services' *CD Directory* that made me "qualified," in the eyes of this major corporation. They weren't looking for CDs to come demystify the process in their minor market. They didn't care what wisdom I could impart. They were looking for folks they could call "real Hollywood casting directors" in their expensive radio ad campaign. This is why the new law exists.

Just two months ago, I was asked [to go undercover](#) for a major international news magazine show, in their exposé of similar "conventions." A most vulnerable population of actors—kids whose parents don't want to deny them an opportunity and may not truly research the legitimacy of it before plunking down thousands of dollars—is being targeted the hardest by these conventions. But it's also happening outside of the United States. Case in point: I was contacted in 2008 by the [Australian Institute for Performing Arts](#). They wanted to hire me—and a couple dozen other LA-based CDs—to work with actors visiting the States. Immediately, my spidey sense started tingling, and then I started doing some research. Turns out, to combat the skeezy "convention" programs that have started going to Australia (selling \$6000 weekends with a casting assistant who has worked in a half-dozen major TV offices in the past few years), the Australian government is subsidizing programs for its top-tier talent with our top-tier casting directors, people to which you cannot get access via the CD workshop model. I see what's happening here now as a step in the right direction: Stop the bottom-feeding workshop facilities from exploiting totally ill-prepared and possibly wholly untalented actors while refining the process of putting the best-prepared, most ready actors in front of buyers who are actually interested in getting a problem solved via the connection. Allow the top of the pack to continue to operate while pushing out the "back room, no audition required, your check clears so you can get in front of someone who answers someone's phones" type operations.

Is it a perfect solution? No. And I'll get to that. As you can see by skimming this page, this is going to be a long article. It already is and all I've done is share an overview—a very brief overview—of my relationship with CD workshops in a span of nearly two decades. What I'd like to ask you all to do right now is take a breath. I'm almost positive that nearly everyone reading this piece has already gotten their hackles up, be those people pro-workshop or anti-workshop. So, please, before you read another word, if your emotions are high, do us all a favor and breathe. I know folks are passionate about this issue. Here's something I hope will help: I am not going to try and tell you that you need to be on any other side of this issue than the one you've already chosen to be on. I just want to introduce all of the data coming at us, all in one place, hopefully peeling back the noise so that we can remain focused on the issues. And, in the end, I hope to encourage all of us to do the most self-empowering things within our reach as artists in this industry.

Why We Need This Law

At the core of AB 1319 is protection against advance-fee talent scams. There is no question that there are seedy, skeezy scam artists out there scheming millions of dollars out of starry-eyed hopefuls (or their parents, in the case of kid actors) while selling promises that simply can never be met.

Those who created and lobbied for this law included [Assistant Majority Leader Paul Krekorian, LA Deputy City Attorney Mark Lambert, SAG, AFTRA, the MPAA, Disney, Warner Bros., Sony, Universal, MGM, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, the RIAA, and the BizParentz Foundation, with cooperation from the Better Business Bureau and local law enforcement](#) (PDF). I was told by a source, "We have never seen this kind of cooperation from all the entities involved. Enthusiastic support is an understatement. The studios sent lobbyists. They begged legislators to pass this."

Paula Dorn, of the [BizParentz Foundation](#), said, "The opportunity for abuse of consumers in our industry is significant, and occurs more frequently than most people realize. BizParentz has assisted thousands of consumers and wholeheartedly supports the California law, which regulates all businesses that offer services to actors for a fee. In addition to providing law enforcement the tools they need for prosecution of the violations, we also hope that consumers will be better informed of what business conduct is appropriate and legal."

As opponents of the new law are realizing things are changing at their favorite workshop facilities, they're getting vocal. I've been asked by one of the lobbyists where the most vocal opponents of certain elements of this law were during the months-long process of shaping this law before it became law. "If actors really care about their careers so much, they might want to pay attention to laws in the works that affect them. This law was debated for about a year and there were multiple news articles and union notices all during that time. The vote occurred last fall. I was in Sacramento over a year ago, testifying in the Senate. There were no workshop companies complaining then. No actors. Nothing. Business 101: Pay attention to current events, people. Debate time is over," says my source who was a part of bringing this legislation into being.

From another industry source who was in the room for every element of the development process for the new law: "At the hearings for AB 1319, the only opposition to the bill was an entity called the Association of Talent and Modeling Agencies—and it doesn't even really exist. It's just a name made up for the purpose of opposing the bill. It was the John Robert Powers' corporate lawyer, a JRP franchise owner, and iPOP organizer who showed up to testify at the hearings. The law pretty much spells it out for the schools. They were fighting to have an exception for the competitions, but couldn't even do so under their real identities and had the nerve to title themselves *agencies*. They didn't succeed and will have to change some of what they do. As you are aware, the CDs and agents and managers and posers who go to the schools and competitions make up to \$5000 for a weekend."

My source continues: "In the vein of making exceptions for certain types of businesses (which is what I think some people are wanting to happen here), one exception in the law is for non-profit organizations. We already have the biggest scammer in town ([Pat O'Brien of O'Brien/Rottman fame](#)) claiming he is a non-profit and the \$4000 people are paying him for classes and pictures is merely a donation. Of course it isn't true, but that doesn't stop him from trying. Experience has proven that you just can't leave wiggle room in laws related to consumer protections if you intend to stop abuses." So, this is why the law is so specific and why CD workshops are required to follow guidelines and be bonded by the state to operate legally.

"Yes, the businesses have an expense to be bonded, but it isn't prohibiting their business model, just adding very minimal regulations that are consumer protections. I understand that the situation specific to a headshot changing hands is frustrating people right now, but it seems it can so easily be remedied. It might be a little too real for actors though when they realize that many of the CDs 'just aren't that into them' enough to exchange good contact info." That is for sure! If the actors knew how often we're writing, "No. Not good. Not ready. Only okay. Fine. Non-pro. Meh," and the like on their resumé's, they'd realize we really don't need to hang onto their headshots, we don't need their contact information *yet*, and when we do need that information, we can get it! Actors are findable and, truly, most offices are doing paper-free campaigns like we've been doing at [Cricket Feet Casting](#) all of 2010. Yup, over 10,000 headshots all shredded after my amazing team of interns entered my casting notes into a private wiki-based database. The idea of no longer being handed headshots after seeing an actor's work sounds good to me!

As casting legend [Marci Liroff](#) says, especially regarding the [California Workshop Guidelines](#) (PDF) issued by the Casting Society of America after [discussions between CSA president Pam Dixon and Deputy City Attorney Mark Lambert](#), "I think the CSA's interpretation of the new law and their guidelines are *very* good! This *rocks*. What it is doing is making the CDs actually *teach*. A class lesson, *not* just a hit-and-run. Workshops aren't being shut down; workshops are actually being enhanced and made *more* valuable for the actor by this move. If the CD likes the actor enough, he or she can contact the workshop after 24 hours and request the actor's contact info (not a headshot or link, but simple contact info). *So*, if you're good enough and talented enough, WE WILL FIND YOU. People are freaking out over nothing! This headshot thing is not such a big deal. As I said before, if you're really talented and I want to find you... I will!"

What the Law Does and Doesn't Say About CD Workshops

Another of my sources, who was instrumental in the development of AB 1319, wanted to be clear about this: "There really shouldn't be a debate about whether CD workshops are legal. Actors who are freaking out are, as usual, not even reading the source material (kinda like not reading the script, only the breakdown, and then trying to do your job). The new law does *not* make CD workshops illegal; it just pulls out the *behaviors* that the scammy ones are consistently using and makes those behaviors illegal. It requires CD workshop providers (the ones who are

raking in the dough) to post a bond so that if they run with the money—and they have—the actor has some recourse. Posting a bond, by the way, is no big deal if you aren't a criminal to begin with."

Okay, wait, so there have been CD workshop facility owners who have run with the money, without providing what they promised? "After looking at dozens of scams (the biggest took about \$20M from actors over a six-month period, and he is now in bankruptcy—listing 2500 families as 'creditors'), we identified certain behaviors as 'bad.' Those behaviors were things like false advertising, claiming successes that were not their own, promising jobs, promising job interviews, promising agents/managers, etc., and we set about creating language that defines behaviors. These behaviors are wrong no matter what venue they happen in (if you want to call it a competition, a CD workshop, an acting academy, a talent listing service, whatever). In writing the law, we never intended to make CD workshops illegal. No business model is illegal. It is their *behaviors* that are being regulated."

One of the AB 1319 lobbyists told me, "I really value educational workshops done by CDs. I wanted to preserve them. I think most people involved in this law didn't see the need for CD workshops at all. There was just so much corruption that the scale had tipped toward 'eliminate the problem' as we debated. I think actors are lucky they can still do them at all. We could've shut them down, but there is value, within the guidelines."

So, let's go back to the above-mentioned CSA guidelines for CD workshops. According to one source, "The City Attorney met with the CSA, and they came up with more guidelines *together*. They are the ones who came up with the headshot thing (it's actually not *in* the law). The CSA recognizes that paying for a job interview is against the law and that their employers (the producers) do not want them to get paid for giving job interviews. CD workshops are still legal. End of story."

In fact, producers *so* don't want CDs to be paid for giving job interviews that it is standard language in our casting contracts (yup, indie film CDs all the way up through studio CDs have this in our contracts) that once we are being paid by producers to secure cast on a specific project, we—and members of our staff—are not also being paid by anyone else to consider actors for those same projects. Producers *so* don't want CDs to do this that they—via the MPAA—lobbied hard for AB 1319.

Why People Are Scared

Well, the big money earners here (the workshop facility owners and directors of these "talent scout" programs worldwide) have a lot to lose. Just like in the weightloss industry, there is a never-ending parade of customers showing up, ready to plunk down money every day. Limit their ability to sell 'em "an edge" and you get some folks very angry. I've seen the hate mail, I've read the threats, I've heard about the creepy folks following people to their cars after speaking out in support of this law, I've heard the disgusting voicemail messages. If you're looking at the end of what has seemed like a never-ending revenue stream, you're scared. I get it.

It's not just the workshop facility owners and talent convention folks who are scared. Actors who love workshops are scared that—if workshops are shut down, or even just changed into something compliant via a bond and a series of practices adhered to at each of the workshops that do continue—they'll lose their access. No way. First, access is not your *right*. Access to people at a certain tier of any profession is limited with good reason! There are far more actors than roles and that will always be true. And far too many actors are sure the only missing element is that they haven't been seen yet, when truly, they may need loads of training still. Second, if the workshops are compliant, that actually improves the quality of the workshops and ensures the access is worth something more than it has become in some facilities (the above-mentioned "your check clears so you can be in the advanced group" ones). So, for the best actors in the bunch, the idea of getting into workshops that are compliant, with people who will actually have to do a little hoop-jumping to follow up with those they're most inspired to cast later should be exciting! It's like getting signed by one of "the bigs," when you're hunting for the right agency. There's prestige to being sought out by the best. Reaching that status should feel much better than sitting in a room filled with desperate newbies who actually need to ask, "What are your pet peeves?" for the hundredth time.

A recognizable character actor said to me on the issue of the CSA guideline on headshots, specifically, "I do laugh at the ludicrousness of all this headshot and resumé stuff. We all know that CDs take notes on our headshots. Are they supposed to give them back with the notes on them? Or do they just make a list for notes? For heaven's sake, our headshots are our business cards just like any other business." True. But do you actually believe you are more likely to be called in if we *have* your headshot and resumé than if we have your name on a piece of

paper and then, the next day, ask for your contact information because we're still so enchanted by your performance?

Actor [Ayman Samman](#) called this "yet another obstacle the actors have to overcome. Now, since CDs cannot leave with the actor's headshot and resumé, chances of the CD remembering the actor after the workshop are slimmer. Yes you can follow up and mail your credentials but what are the chances of it being seen by the CD? Now instead of them leaving with my headshot and resumé and the follow up being only enforcement to that, it is much less effective." Oh, I wish I could agree that your chances of being remembered are improved upon by the *having* of your physical headshot. It's just not true. If you think about the hundreds or even thousands of headshots that workshop-circuit CDs toss out each year, I think you'll agree it's not the *keeping* of the headshot that gets the actor remembered. It's that the actor did a great job and when that actor is submitted electronically on an appropriate role through the breakdown, the casting person remembers that actor in a positive way due to the relationship that started at a workshop (or wherever else) and brings him in. The workshop launched a relationship. That's all.

Honestly, I'm kicking auditions "iPad style" from here on out and taking my notes about actors right in my casting wiki. I talked about this a bit on [a podcast interview a few months back](#). As more CDs go green and are more comfortable in the use of electronic databases, you can bet there will be less and less need for physical headshots and resúmes anyway. One of my sources for this piece said, "There is nothing in the law or CSA guidelines to say that a CD can't give their business card to an actor at a workshop. If they are that impressed with you, they can do that and ask you to call for a real audition or email a resumé or whatever. This would be a normal networking opportunity and a consequence a CD who accepts cash to watch actors should be willing to accept."

Let's Be Clear

You can put whatever shade of lipstick on the pig you'd like, but it's still a pig. Casting director workshops did not evolve as a means for actors to learn the ins and outs of specific casting offices, discover the dos and don'ts of auditioning for current projects in those offices, or receive craft-oriented feedback on performances. Sure, those things sometimes happen *too*, but it's because doing a scene in front of a person in a position to cast you someday started leading to *getting cast* in that office that CD workshops became big business. The very simple CD workshops I described going on here in the early '90s organically led to actors getting cast. Someone saw a way to monetize that process by *adding a middleman* to the experience. A pimp, let's say, who takes the lion's share of the money that used to exchange hands from John to working girl.

Back to Liroff, from a heated conversation at [her Facebook fan page](#): "These CDs and casting assistants and associates rationalize their behavior saying, 'But I actually hire actors from workshops!' Right there, they've just validated that they have charged the actor to audition for them. If you want to take classes to actually learn something where there is a class lesson, a syllabus, and actual teaching going on, then congratulations! That will help you further your game. The argument of, 'Workshops are the only way I can get seen,' just doesn't fly. It's a shortcut and usually a dead-end. Get out there and act! Be it theatre, classes, self-produced stuff, we'll see it! If you keep going to these workshops, they'll keep having them. Stop going; the workshops will be empty."

Working actor [Kate Rene Gleason](#) had this to say about workshops: "Here's what I think, and this is coming from an actor who has had almost *all* of her TV auditions—and has booked work from said auditions—via workshop-met CDs. Workshops rock. And they suck. And because no one stopped the trend in time, they are now an almost-necessary tool for the small-resumé actor. Workshops rock because there truly is the potential for gleaning an audition and perhaps even a booking via that contact with the CD, no matter what the required disclaimers state. And workshops suck because they are yet another way that actors are convinced to part with their money, just to get the sliver of a chance or a tingling of hope that maybe, just maybe, this is the thing that will help. There were a few—very few—people back when workshops really started getting common who were very outspoken against the practice. 'You don't pay for a job interview; why would you pay for an audition?' and I'm pretty sure most actors feel that the disclaimers everyone has to issue about it not being 'an audition or job interview' are just legal CYA hooley. I feel pretty confident saying that we probably all feel like it's a general audition. So why would we pay to audition? Because there weren't enough actors with the confidence to refuse to engage in the practice. We all know this business and much of this town operate out of and prey on fear and

desperation in many instances. This is yet another industry sideline that has taken advantage of that fear and desperation found in most actors (even those who hide it well, especially from themselves). The good news is, there are casting people who actually do use workshops to find new talent *and* actually have the necessary 'say' to recommend them to come in for auditions. The bad news is, I'm pretty sure that percentage is very small. I've been luckier than most in this arena, and I still do workshops when I can afford them. But you can bet I do my research, and I am very selective about which ones I do and where I do them. This is a town where one minute with the right person at the right time can change your entire career. I'm still one of those so-called 'suckers' that believes it can happen to me. And if it costs me \$40 to get that one minute, so be it."

Be Smart About It

I have always said that if you're going to do workshops, you must do your research. Hell, I say that if you're going to do *anything* in this business, you must do your research (yet every day, countless thousands of actors put absolutely zero thought or time into their business decisions and that's simply disheartening). I [suggested years ago](#) that actors create a database in which CDs who do workshops are ranked, rated, and discussed, so there's open information about whose rooms you most *need* to enter, after all. I've talked before about the level of research required when [targeting casting offices for submissions](#). Let's say that goes for workshops too. So, you're sure you've properly targeted your key shows and the people who cast your type on them, consistently. And are you also *ready* for this level of opportunity? I did a workshop for SAG Foundation's Casting Access Project two weeks ago and actors were asked to self-assess their level. Looking over the list with the representative from SAG Foundation, I knew most folks were being way too generous with their assessment of their own talent level. I was told they would be re-ranked based on observation and feedback, if they were wrong in self-assessing at first. Think about the CD workshops you've attended: Would most folks in 'em say they're at an "expert level" of talent, ready to book top of show if given the chance? Yup. And you know—c'mon, you *really* know—that's just not true. They're not even ready to do a one-line co-star much of the time.

But dangit, they want their access and they're gonna pay for it and they know they could book if they could just get seen. Liroff and I share frustration on this issue. She notes: "It is certainly your choice to pursue your career in any way you feel is right. Since this workshop practice isn't shutting down anytime soon, I urge you again to do your research and ask your friends about the specific workshops you're about to plunk down a huge membership for, to see if you're *learning* anything. Is there a class lesson? Or is it just a 'hit and run,' you did your scene, got a minor adjustment, and were out of there workshop? Classes are good. Getting up there in front of your peers is good. Keep your instrument tuned. You're actors. You have to act! But these laws are set in place for *your* protection. You may feel that a short cut of 'buying your way' into an audition is your right, but it does affect everyone in the long run. What about the actors who can't afford doing these 'pay for access to a CD' workshops?"

What about them, indeed? Brilliant and talented actor [Ben Whitehair](#) had this to say in a recent post at the [Hollywood Happy Hour Yahoo Group](#) which he cross-posted at [his amazing blog](#): "It seems the core of this issue is the idea of paying for a job interview. To me, that it's illegal is almost beside the point, because so is speeding and tearing that tag off my mattress, and I don't find the legality of either activity particularly compelling reasons to avoid them. The issue here, though, is that if anyone in a field is allowed to *pay* for a job interview, the playing field suddenly becomes very lopsided, and unfairly so. At that point, we are no longer looking at merit (or even connections, social intelligence, whatever) as a reason for hire. Suddenly the well-to-do are able to (ostensibly) move to the front of the line simply because of money. Restricting this practice does not come from a motivation of restricting choice, but rather to protect large portions of the population as well as attempting to have as level a playing field as possible. It's the same reason why politicians are allowed to buy advertising, but not actual votes."

I was asked by a producer friend whether it would be a good idea to offer workshops that are free to actors, where he would pay the casting directors for their time, and that'd be that. Good idea, yes (even though producers are *already* paying CDs for our time, to cast for them), but I participate in free-to-attend workshops with SAG Foundation and AFTRA regularly and they're really under-attended. I've talked to fellow CDs who report the same experiences. Yes, the workshops will fill up, but the number of folks who sign up then drop out at the last minute, meaning wait-listed actors get added in just hours before the workshops, is very high. When CDs have done totally free events for the unions or various non-profit groups, we've seen much lower attendance than at

events that required even a low fee to attend. So, could there be a "fix" to the system? Maybe. But inertia is a tough beast, and now that actors are so dang sure it's their right to buy access to certain offices via CD workshops, it's not just a tough fix but one surrounded in loud opposition to *being* fixed.

Whenever we talk about alternatives to CD workshops, they are concepts that cost time, not just money. And as with the weightloss industry in the analogy I used above, most people would rather throw money at an easy fix than throw time and energy into a long-term, harder-to-do, but ultimately more rewarding and more rewarding at a higher level alternative. But this goes back to a quote from *Harry Potter* that one of my sources included in an email she sent me today, "There comes a time when each of us must make a choice between what is right and what is easy. Here's hoping you choose correctly."

Let's Explore the Alternatives

I've already mentioned SAG Foundation's Casting Access Project. This is free (although frequency-restricted) to paid-up members of the Screen Actors Guild. Director of Communication for SAG Foundation, [Rufino Cabang](#), had this to say about the CD workshop controversy: "The Screen Actors Guild Foundation—which is a separate organization from the Screen Actors Guild and fully funded by grants and donations—has been offering free cold reading workshops with established casting directors to SAG members since launching the Casting Access Project in 2004. The casting community has been highly supportive of CAP, visiting our workshops in LA and New York to meet and work with SAG members at no cost to the actor. Some of these visiting professionals teach paid workshops elsewhere, some do not, but all have been happy to offer their services through the SAG Foundation on a regular basis. We emphasize to attending actors that no promise of employment is made through CAP; yet at no charge the benefits of meeting, familiarizing, and working with our casting director guests are consistently felt. We value the friendships we continue to make with many in the casting community who generously give their time to our no-cost alternative. It may therefore be impossible to form one simple, general opinion regarding the paid-workshop industry and those who participate in it."

As much as I adore and support all of the initiatives put together by SAG Foundation, they're just not as well-attended as they should be. Heck, even their super—and free—[streaming series that launched this year](#) usually has live viewership of dozens, not hundreds or thousands like it should. But this supports what one of my sources said is true of actors, "They don't want to learn from anyone. They want to be seen. They'll spend fifty bucks to do a two-minute scene in front of someone who answers phones in a busy TV office, but not attend a free Q&A with a person who cast decades of film and television, to learn about her world. Idiots."

I'd like to celebrate the handful of actors who *do* take advantage of the free Q&A, the panel discussions, the streaming video series, the amazing amount of information that *is* out there and available to them at no cost, rather than focusing on those who would rather pay to play. [Actor Darwinism](#), baby. You know I love it!

For more celebration of that type of actor, let's go back to Whitehair's excellent treatise: "The bigger question for me is how we want to be viewed as an acting community. Why is it that we demand for our right to pay for what used to be free? We claim to be a community of creatives, and yet when it comes to the business pursuit of our careers we often become myopic, doing the same things as everyone else. We live in a time where there are more ways than ever to get on the radar of anyone with the ability to hire us. From social media to self-submitting to self-producing to webseries to networking events to more television shows on air than ever before to good ol' fashioned phone calls—there are so many myriad ways to get ourselves and our work in front of people on the other side of the desk, I worry when there is an uproar over not being able to pay for the privilege. In a day and age where an email or even a tweet can deliver a reel of our best work to anyone instantaneously, I am reticent to think that actors cannot get their work seen by CDs in any other way than a workshop. Get together the 20 actors who were going to go to the workshop, pool the \$40 apiece, and take that \$800 to hire a full crew (DPs, writers, editors, the whole nine) for a day to film reel material for everyone. Or take the \$800 from everyone's next workshop and produce a showcase, or a webseries, or a play, or whatever... all ways to get your work seen. Or hell, if it really is about the educational experience, then take all that money and hire one of these CDs to come direct scenes for two hours, or see a play, or critique demo reels, or be filming something and have the CD show up to direct/critique. What better way to get casting directors to know your work than to invite them onto a set to see how people work?"

The Bottom Line

Workshops are still legal; they just need to be compliant. So, people who want to be upset that their rights are being stripped away need to get educated, as there are in fact already CD workshop facilities operating at a fully-compliant level. Don't know if your favorite workshop facility is bonded? Ask 'em. Get proof. They should be proud to say they're obeying the law, and that's who you'd want to do business with anyway. There are now consumer protections in place for things like false or misleading advertising, contract abuses, and violation of labor laws, while creating financial recourse (via the bond) if the facility owner fails to keep the contracted obligations. That the CSA has taken it one step further to be sure that the "violation of labor laws" part of things keeps folks from basically paying for auditions is even cooler. It shows a change in the way things were back in 2002, when we were staring down the barrel of some of the darkest days of the casting profession since the casting couch, in my opinion.

Everyone wants an edge and some people define that as something attainable via workshops. Since, even with AB 1319, CD workshops are still totally legal, we know workshops are going to continue to happen. And that means that I will continue to recommend that actors be *smart* about it all. Research the people. Research the facilities. Target the shows. Target the people. Go in with a great attitude, be on-brand for what the buyers need, and when it's your turn to read... *be awesome*. If you're not allowed to leave your headshot behind, big deal. Are you telling me you wouldn't remember or jot down the name of someone *you* met somewhere who solved a problem you had or thought you might have, down the line? Casting directors remember amazing performances. We know how to find you when we need you. And more importantly, you're starting a relationship with us whenever you get an opportunity (whether it be at a workshop or in an ongoing class or at a panel discussion or at a networking event or during a film festival or while starring in a play) and that's more valuable than any other element to this whole debate.

Back to Whitehair: "If I've learned nothing else in my year in Los Angeles, it's that the community of actors truly is brilliant. People are smart, supportive, and caring. Whether we decide to do workshops or not, I just hope that we can take a hard and honest at look at why we do them, and if they are indeed the best thing for our community *as a whole*. We're all in this together."

In the end, actors don't *want* CD workshops, they want *access*. That access is most valuable when it is earned through hard work and discipline over time. Build relationships. Yes, you can start building a relationship with an encounter in a workshop, but it's also possible to start building relationships in many ways that don't cost actors a penny (and in many ways that do, like producing your own content, which I also encourage).

I say, do what feels *good* to you because you love it and it's feeding your art while building your business. And stop judging others for what they do that you don't agree with. I could get mad at everyone on the freeway who speeds or I could just enjoy my journey and stay out of their way, enjoying the ride.

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