

MPTD Interview with Dagmar Wittmer of Central Casting

Leslie Green: Welcome to Real Talk with Film DC. This is your host, Leslie Green, senior communications manager with the DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development, also known as the DC Film Office. We're sitting here today with Dagmar Wittmer, the president of Central Casting, one of the top casting agencies here in the District of Columbia. She has provided extras casting on a number of blockbuster projects such as "Salt," "J. Edgar," "Forrest Gump," "No Way Out," even "The Exorcist," and we're really excited to have her here today. She's going to talk to us about the casting experience, and what some of you as aspiring actors and actresses can do to get your break in the industry.

First of all, Dagmar, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to join us today.

Dagmar Wittmer: Hi, Leslie. How are you?

Leslie: I'm doing wonderful. I'm doing wonderful, thank you. Before we get into discussing what aspiring actors and actresses can do to get cast in the next big project in DC, tell us a little bit about how you got started in your career.

Dagmar: [laughs] It's actually very funny. I used to be a model, and it was many, many years ago. I'd hate to tell you how many years ago back it was, it was like in '60s, and there was really not a modeling... There were modeling schools, and they had little agencies, but there was not an agency which didn't have a school. One of the big schools closed up, and they said, "Why don't you just start your own agency?" We said, "OK," and it was my partner, Carol Ness, and me. We were both models here in Washington, and then the union approached us.

At that time, it was just actors, and there was no Screen Actors Guild at the time, and they said, "Why don't you get into casting? The only thing you have to do is give up your membership to the union and you can do casting," and we said, "We don't know a lot about casting," and they said, "Oh, you can do it. We need somebody and nobody's doing it."

We said, "OK," so we started it, and strangely enough, I gave up my union card because I never missed it again. I never wanted to do anything again because I just was so fascinated by the modeling agency, and building that up, so we just started.

Then one of our first movies, which was nice, the first big one, one of the first big ones, was "The Exorcist," that everybody knows, and that was very unusual. Then they did the second one of "The Exorcist," and we did that one, too. Like I said, it was many, many years ago, and I never missed the modeling again or anything. Then we just kept on trucking, and everything was just fine.

Most of the movies which come to this area, we do, and we have a wonderful film commissioner, Christopher Palmer, and Washington, as you know, is just the greatest city. I love Washington.

Leslie: It is. It definitely is. Tell me, Dagmar, what goes into determining the right actor or actress for many of the projects that come into the district? What are your criteria?

Dagmar: The thing is that there are two different sides to it. One of them is that they play a role, a speaking role, which you just see for a short time, so that is one, and those people, those actors, really have to be top-notch. They have to have a degree in acting. They have to have a fabulous look. Most of the time, it's a Washington look. Everything is Washington, DC, so we have Secret Service, we have police, we have a mayor, we have all the wonderful staffers on the Hill, the congressmen, senators, and the "fat cats," we call them, in the old days, these very successful-looking people. This is usually what they cast, and they all have to be great actors. This is one side.

The other side is the extras, and they always tell us what they want also in the extras, but most of the time the extras, again, is police, Secret Service, senators, congressmen, again, the same thing, again, as the extras, or just people walking down the street. They don't really have to have a lot of qualifications except to have a wonderful snapshot for us, and look good.

Be obviously well put together, bring a change of clothes and remember to wear the makeup, wear great hair and Washington is not a big city on facial hair. Just be very clean cut and put together.

It's not a big deal. It's like what you see in Washington. We are very lucky that Washington has such an abundance of wonderful looking people. That's usually what we have. Occasionally something a little bit out of the ordinary, but most of the time, it's something very regular.

Leslie: We actually already started to go into this, but what advice can you give to aspiring actors or actresses and even models out there who are trying to break into the industry.

Dagmar: That gets a little bit more complicated. Let's start off with the models. A model should be at least 5'7" and she should have a good clean cut, nice look. We have a lot of people call us and they're too short. That's kind of a problem for print. They should be like a normal size. They should be a size eight, size six. A lot of people come to us a little bit heavier, and occasionally we have a call for that, too. But most of it is like a six or eight to be really a model.

The thing is, it is costly to be a model, because you need to have the right pictures. You need to hire photographer. A good photographer understands the look you're after. By the time you have all of that together and get enough pictures, you have to spend at least \$1,500 to \$2,000.

I'm obviously honest to everybody, and more discourage them than encourage them. I don't think they have to go to any modeling schools. I don't think that it's necessary, because they can really do most of the work on their own and I help them.

If somebody has really a wonderful look, I don't mind if they bring good snapshots in. We have an open call usually once a month. Then I can guide them and tell them what they have to do and where they have to go so they don't waste all that money and get ripped off. Because, as you know, there are so many con artists out there who tell them just about anything.

That's about the models. The same thing with the men. No facial hair. Not this look like you haven't shaved for three or four days. No. This is Washington, DC. Very clean cut looking. When you come to the office, don't give me the torn jean look or the jeans and cumbersome terrible looking sandals. You should really always come very well put together so my imagination gets going.

When you don't look good and the women don't have makeup on -- they should have makeup on. The men should be well put together like they are models. Then my imagination gets going and I can help them better.

For the actors, the actors really should have a degree in acting. But if they don't have a degree in acting and they're getting a little older, I just usually see what potential they have and if they're serious. If they're serious, then I send them to places where they can go.

We have some wonderful theaters in Washington. One of my favorite ones is Studio Theatre, because they are just so devoted in teaching. Woolly Mammoth is a fabulous outfit. They're really two good theaters which really teach very well.

I think it's very important first to get into the acting. The acting is like the main core. From there on, you can get some commercial training. For example, there's an outfit called OCT -- On Camera Training, Brenna McDonough. She's very good with on camera training. She even teaches on camera narration. She's very good.

But there are some other good ones, too. For voice over, there are some good people for the voice over.

There are different angles all these people can approach. If you're not a pretty face and you want to do something, you can get into the voice over business. There's always something for everybody.

Leslie: That's really interesting and helpful, I'm sure, to a lot of people who are looking to break into the industry. What's the biggest mistake you've seen made by aspiring actors or actresses?

Dagmar: The biggest mistake I see, for example when we have so many exceptional universities around our Washington area and they all have the theater program. These kids, they get out of schools, and bless their little hearts, they don't know where to turn and they spend a lot of money on the education. And everybody says, "What are you going to do now?" But there's so many young people running around and they really are kind of lost. They usually think, "OK, what I have to do is I have to go to New York or I have to go to LA." But that is to me absolutely the worst mistake they can make. I think when they finish school, for their graduation present they should get a good on-camera course.

They should have interned at some place like Central Casting so they understand the industry. And see what's all involved and what they have to do. Then they should get good on camera training. If they are nice looking, maybe getting some pictures for print, and get a little bit more well rounded.

If you, for example...Audition everywhere. There are so many wonderful big audition places where they can go. They do it twice a year. You just bring your pictures and résumés and all the theaters, we have about 60-some theaters in the area. They all come to these big mass auditions and they see your monologue. So you get invited to a lot of auditions for theater. That is number one.

Number two, if you get the good commercial class, as you rehearse for play, you can always do like maybe a voice over or an industrial on the side. And so, you can really make a living at it. I think one problem I have, that most of the universities and places don't give them enough guidance, so these young students have more of a goal.

Where they can go and what they have to do. I think that is always one of my big complaints, that we don't help them enough to get somewhere.

A lot of them end up to be waiters and waitresses, but they don't really have to. When you go to New York, it's the same thing. There are so many people running around that you don't have a chance. You get so discouraged that you never pursue your profession, which you really should have done.

We had, in New York, one of our talents decided to go to New York, but she has done it since she was little. She has been very good. She went to an audition. She was planned to be there at 9:00 AM in the morning. By the time she got there, at 9:00, they all ready had over 200 people already signed in for one part.

Thank God we don't have that here. They should just stay here, just bully themselves through. Have a great look. Have a good picture. Good résumé. Have your act together and just go everywhere and audition and do it. And take directions and they will get there. But don't go to bigger places, like to New York and LA until you're absolutely ready.

Until your résumé's extremely strong. You have the confidence and you are ready to bite the bullet and get into a different market.

Leslie: I think that's some great advice. Dagmar...

Dagmar: Washington is such a great market. Tell me, in New York, in LA, there are very few theaters. They don't have 60-some theaters like we have here.

Leslie: That's true. Dagmar, can you tell me what the most exciting project you've worked on? Tell us a little bit about that.

Dagmar: Oh my God. Most exciting project I ever worked on? I won't even go like to the biggest or whatever, but it's just the experience you had with wonderful people. I have to tell you a very wonderful story about Forrest Gump. Tom Hanks was the nicest man God has ever created. He talked to people. He was nice and when he won the Academy Award, he stood up and he thanked the extras in Washington. Because it was so cold and he thanked them. What a nice man. To me that made everything I worked so hard for, made it worthwhile. It was great. It just made all the difference in the world because a lot of movie stars are not very nice. Or not as nice as I hoped they would be, let me put it that way.

"Wedding Crashers" was one of the best experiences. Finding all of these elegant people and everything. Their producer, their team, was so helpful, so nice. It was just exceptional. The other thing in Washington I have to mention which really helps, a lot of areas don't have, we have the best location people. The people help to find location to film is success.

Really, it's like mind boggling how we can have such good, good talent here. They have been here forever. I remember Carol Fleisher. She works her little ass off. She's so wonderful. Peggy Pridemore, she used to be one of our actresses. So wonderful. They do everything to please our Washington market and I think we should be so grateful what great people we have working here.

Because I know that a lot of cities don't have as many devoted people as we have here.

Leslie: Dagmar, tell me what's been your most challenging project so far?

Dagmar: I have to tell you, every job now is getting so challenging. We just did recently quite a few projects and we had to find a lot of handicapped people. Like people who had been like in the war and had an arm missing, leg missing, or whatever. Something was wrong with them. Now, I want to say we find it in the long run but it's extremely challenging finding handicapped people. But, on the other hand, when you find them they're usually so nice that it's again very rewarding that you can do them and give them a different spotlight. But everything is a challenge these days. It doesn't matter what...Everything seems to be like a challenge. But if you're as crazy as we are and you're in the casting business, you love the challenges. Don't ask me, otherwise we get too bored.

We love challenges, and film productions are always challenges, always challenge. They always want something, something new you haven't even heard of or you don't know, and you just go out and you just get it, and you do it, and you make your phone calls, and you always find it. You always find it.

Every challenge is always wonderful, and always very welcoming, because we love them.

Leslie: That's certainly a good thing. Tell me what types of roles you're currently casting. What projects are you working on now?

Dagmar: We always have a lot of industry training films. We always have voice overs, some commercials here and there, print work, some photography work. There's always, hopefully, something going on, and it's like everybody wanted everything yesterday, so whenever the phone rings, that means, "Get on the stick and do it now." [laughs] Everything is exciting, so everything is nice. We have a wonderful facility where we can put people on tape and send the auditions directly to the client. Having computers now, and the new technology, it's very helpful.

Once a month, we have open calls, so we can help people, and hopefully send them in the right direction so they don't waste their money, because sometimes you really could cry when you see the money people spend than what they get in return, but that's nothing I can help unless I know people way ahead of time and can guide them.

We have a very lucky area. It's a wonderful area.

Leslie: It sure is.

Dagmar: I would never do the business anywhere else than Washington.

Leslie: That's wonderful to hear. Tell me, where can people go to see about new casting calls?

Dagmar: We have a website, which is CentralCastingUSA.com, and they can go on there. The first of the month, we always announce on the website when our next open call is. Oh yeah, if they want to submit their pictures to be an extra, they can go, and it's ccsubmissions01@gmail.com.

Leslie: CC Submissions01?

Dagmar: Yeah, ccsubmissions01@gmail.com. It makes it easier, so everybody submits their pictures on there, and their sizes and their height, and then when we need something, we go on there and we call them up or we hire them. Anything like that, but they should be always current snapshots, like a headshot and a full-length shot, so we see what they look like.

Leslie: Thank you so much for sharing that information with us, Dagmar. It's really, really helpful, I'm sure, to the people who are listening on the line, who are looking to get into casting.

Dagmar: Oh, Leslie, thank you so much. If you have a lot of response back, and people have more questions...I've been doing this for so long, I always forget what people really want to know. Do call me anytime and we can do anything you want to do.

Leslie: Excellent. Thank you so much.

Dagmar: Thank you, Leslie. Bye.

Leslie: Thank you. Thank you for tuning in to Reel Talk with Film DC. This is your host Leslie Green signing off. Don't forget to check us out on the web at film.dc.gov, like us on Facebook at facebook.com/filmdc and follow us on Twitter at [DCFilmOffice](https://twitter.com/DCFilmOffice). Catch you next time.