

Warning: how to spot the online 'castings' too good to be true

Offer of a film role out of the blue? Skype 'audition' making uncomfortable requests? Actors are too often targeted by online scammers – experts and those who have been stung tell **John Byrne** how to stay ahead of the fraudsters



Having started his career with walk-on parts in commercials, Duncan Walters was delighted to receive a text from an agency that had seen his photo online, worked with major Hollywood studios and felt he was right for their books. The following weekend found him in a hotel room, along with 20 other aspiring actors. After a 'motivational' video presentation, he was told he fitted the brief for a featured part in an upcoming superhero film, but needed more 'American-looking' headshots. Fortunately, the agency had a photographer available and could include the shots in his joining fee, but only if the fee was paid on the same day.

When Walters phoned an actor friend to borrow the money, the more experienced actor pointed out that not only were upfront fee requests never made by reputable acting agencies, but also that the film supposedly on the table had actually wrapped production the previous year.

Beatrice Gomez, an actor based in the UK, replied to 'an LA producer' via a popular casting site. During a Skype audition she was concerned when asked to strip "as the character was an exotic dancer". A follow-up message requesting her to attend an in-person audition "wearing just a basque, suspenders and stockings" under her coat led her to alert the casting site, which immediately removed the ad and deleted the user. Gomez remains worried that the Skype footage will find its way online someday.

'Actors are often a soft target for scammers due to a need not to miss their big break'

Although their names have been changed, both experiences are sadly typical of the kind of ploys to relieve actors of money and dignity that have been in existence almost as long as the profession itself, but have more recently migrated online.

Helen Raw is an actor, singer and producer who has acquired an industry-wide reputation for taking on scammers and defending the interests of victims. She explains: "Actors are often a soft target for scammers due to a need, sometimes a desperation, not to miss out on something they think could be their big break. I learned quickly that due diligence is the name of the game."

"Back in the late 1990s, I flew from Edinburgh to London for an audition. I got picked up by a guy's mum and taken to their house to find it was just a wee guy with a keyboard masquerading as 'a band needing a lead singer'. He wasn't dodgy, just woefully inexperienced and bigged himself up so much in the casting that I put my hand in my pocket for the flight. Since then, I've done my due diligence on every single thing – whether it's an acting role, an actor-training gig or a corporate engagement. I can now spot a dodgy casting at 10 paces."

Currently up for re-election to Equity's Online Branch Committee, suspect schemes that Raw frequently comes across include: "Agents", who have sprung up out of nowhere, asking for upfront fees – reputable acting agents do not take an upfront fee at all".

Another one doing the rounds, which Raw has seen updated to target actors, is that you are "booked" for a role (usually with minimal info from you – they say they've seen your headshot and want to hire you on the spot) and sent part payment up front 'to show they are above board'. Then they get in touch to say they made a mistake, overpaid you and need you to repay some of it. By the time the money has bounced out of your account you've already sent them 'the overpayment'. You'll never hear from them again. This type of scam is as old as the hills."

Promising special access to prime castings in exchange for payment is another 'carrot' that regularly resurfaces, usually targeting new and young actors who envisage themselves on Netflix or other digital platforms.

"A certain individual is currently asking for anything from £95-£295 depending on the size of the role," says Raw. "I have spoken to Netflix and confirmed this is not how they cast – they do not have an in-house casting service. All Netflix original productions are produced via external production companies that cast the projects themselves. I know at least one actor who paid this guy a lot of money. Working with me, she got her money back."

John Peerless, the Chartered Trading Standard Institute's lead officer dealing with scams,

agrees that acting-related opportunities should be judged with the wariness one would apply to any other overly attractive offer, especially when the initial approach is made by the other party.

"Just as with timeshare scams, you are often approached out of the blue and find yourself subjected to exaggerated and high-pressure sales pitches from people determined not to let go until they get money out of you," he says. "Common sense can go a long way, but these people know you have dreams and that can make you vulnerable. If an offer seems too good, relies on 'shortcuts' or is accompanied by excessive selling, that is always a bad sign."

Raw feels that casting sites could do more to prevent potential rip-offs and scams. "I do think sites who take money from actors should be more proactive in vetting castings rather than being reactive when they get phone calls or emails from the likes of me. So long as actors are shelling out money left, right and centre, many businesses seem content to just take it without considering their own level of duty of care and how they are, through lack of proactive vetting, complicit in helping the scammers continue to thrive."

In the meantime, she strongly advises actors to do their own research before signing up to any arrangement. "Ask questions, google these folks – anyone professing to be experienced in the industry will have some sort of digital footprint."

As for actors who fall victim to such schemes, both Peerless and Raw agree that shame shouldn't stand in the way of seeking support. "Tell others," advises Raw. "We've all fallen foul of something or someone in our lives, so no one will judge you. However, if you asked for advice beforehand, were warned it was a scam and chose to disregard the advice because you think you know better, then don't expect lashings of sympathy. I'll still help you try to sort it out, though."

Peerless adds that "if money changes hands and your decision to make that transaction was directly the result of information or guarantees you were given that turn out to be false, you can contact us (via Citizens Advice) to investigate. Regardless of whether the transaction was related to acting or not, your consumer rights may have been violated." ■

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Citizens Advice consumer helpline*

Telephone: 03454 04 05 06

*will refer case to Trading Standards if appropriate

Equity

equity.org.uk/contact

Bectu

bectu.org.uk/contact-us

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