

Are You a Self-Aware Actor?

From Backstage by Secret Agent Man

Right after Thanksgiving last year, one of my clients (let's call him John) told me an interesting and revealing story. John explained that he spent the first part of Turkey Day volunteering at a shelter serving meals to the homeless. I always saw him as your typical narcissistic, self-involved actor, so I was impressed that he had a charitable side.

John went on to explain that during a break, he started talking with one of the other volunteers, and that guy turned out to be a successful showrunner who produces two shows on the air.

This sort of thing happens all the time in L.A. The industry is everywhere, and if you play your cards right, you can make connections in the most unexpected places. I once became good friends with a casting director during a visit to the Magic Castle.

Anyway, John really hit it off with the producer. The two of them bonded while the homeless waited for their meals. Sensing an opportunity, John started suggesting different roles he could play on the guy's shows. Impressed, the producer promised to have him in soon.

Here's the thing. Every story has two sides, and John's take on this encounter didn't ring true. He's always been the kind of client who makes everything about himself, and he never sees anyone else's point of view. So here's what I think really happened, and I'll bet my last 10 commissions that I'm right.

The producer was trying to do something charitable on Thanksgiving Day. He was probably feeling really good about himself. The business wasn't even on his mind. Then some actor he's never met came up to him and starting shoving the industry down his throat. Being a decent sort, the producer smiled and pretended to give a damn. But he just wanted my client to get lost, so he made a vague promise about having him in on his show. And then the producer went home, shared the story with his family, and they all had a good laugh at John's expense.

Think I'm being cynical? Well, here we are 12 months later, and John has never been in to audition for one of those shows. I've even dropped the producer's name to his casting director, but that got me nowhere fast.

I'm sharing this holiday story for two reasons. First, my editor rejected my original idea for a column where I time travel to the first Thanksgiving and convince the pilgrims they need representation. And second, there's a valuable lesson here that every actor has to learn if he wants to succeed.

You need to become self-aware. You have to understand how you come across to other people, especially those of us who work in the industry. You can't be the clueless dope at every party who thinks he's funny while everyone else just wishes he'd leave.

I've had clients make a great impression by thanking me for an audition. Then a few seconds later, they ruin that impression by complaining about not having more auditions. And they never even realize what they've done. They just wander off to take more bad headshots, not knowing they've just alienated their agent.

So examine your actions and choice of words. Understand the impression you're making. Take a moment to consider how the world sees you. In this business, doors open when people like you. They close if they don't.

The greatest gift I can give you this holiday season is the gift of self-awareness. So use it wisely. And if you think this column doesn't apply to you, trust me—it does.

Secret Agent Man is a Los Angeles-based talent agent and our resident tell-all columnist. Writing anonymously, he dishes out the candid and honest industry insight all actors need to hear.