



DISAPPEARANCES –TALES OF CASTING

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There is a saying in the film business—that directing is the work you do to make up for your mistakes in casting. There's some truth to it.

The wrong casting decision can derail an entire picture—while the right actor can breathe vivid and distinctive life into the film. Good casting makes it impossible to imagine anyone else in the role. But the wrong actor can appear to be working in another film altogether. It's not always easy to figure this out in advance, given the fleeting few minutes you spend with an actor during their audition.

I love working with actors. After developing a script through repeated drafts, actors finally give characters life and shape. Once I cast someone, I start making small changes to the script, based on the particular qualities I see him bringing to the part. Even a limited actor requires these changes, to adjust the script to perceived limitations.

During auditions, there may appear to be two or even three good prospects for a single part. In those cases, you may call the leading contenders back two or even three times to work scenes further.

Fifteen year-old Charlie McDermott plays Wild Bill Bonhomme opposite Kris Kristofferson's Quebec Bill in the upcoming release of "Disappearances." Although Charlie had worked for us before, as Young Garald in our "Windy Acres" comedy series, he nearly didn't get the new part. Charlie auditioned six times and he competed against 130 other kids, many of whom had credits in films like "Mystic River," "Alexander," "Pieces of April," "Elephant," and others.

The Wild Bill role in "Disappearances" required much more from an actor than Young Garald in "Windy Acres." Wild Bill needs to embody the time and place—and carry the emotional through-line of the whole picture, really, as the point-of-view character.

During our first New York audition and call backs, I noticed immediate problems. Charlie showed contemporary mannerisms that I associated with his life as a kid living in suburban Philadelphia. He seemed too contemporary. Unsatisfied, I mentioned to him that Wild Bill was a 1930's Northeast Kingdom kid—without TV, the internet, or video games. In fact, I said that he probably did several hours of daily woods and barn chores and rarely even got to town. Charlie looked at me but I couldn't tell if he "got it."

Charlie also showed signs of being "too rehearsed" by an acting teacher. He knew in advance exactly what he was going to do for every beat in the audition scenes. It's understandable that a young actor would want to prepare like this, but it cut him off from his own fresh instincts and masked possible spontaneous or "discovered" moments.

Privately, I doubted that we'd cast Charlie. Several weeks later, we held a second New York session and callbacks. Charlie was more relaxed but still not quite right. He was helped by the fact that several other kids we'd liked brought nothing new to their second auditions. Several fresh prospects were either too old or too urban.



As he was preparing to leave the studio, I mentioned to Charlie that, during Wild Bill's journey in "Disappearances," he was surely afraid. I asked him to tell me about some time in his life where he'd felt fear. Charlie paused and thought. "I haven't really ever been afraid," he said. "Things have always gone pretty well for me." I joked that this might be the result of having loving parents who take such good care of him. But I saw this as a problem. Charlie needed to go deeper, emotionally.

I told Charlie's father to expect that Charlie would not be cast. We had no strong choices and it was now mid-January. We were to start production in eight weeks.

We expanded our search and reviewed dozens of additional casting tapes. We traveled to the Sundance Film Festival to audition one actor and look for others. We came home empty-handed.

Unbeknownst to us, Charlie was hard at work in Pennsylvania, hoping for another chance to audition. I called his father to discuss the possibility for a third round of auditions.

His dad said he wanted to share an inside secret with me. He said that, unexpectedly, Charlie had asked him to take him out, during the middle of the night, into a local forest. Blindfolded, he found his way out of the woods. Charlie was responding to my earlier comment about fear and the unknown.

His dad said that Charlie was, just then, outside (in early February) chopping down a tree with an ax. He said that his son had already supplied the winter's supply of firewood and had also taken a weekend job at a local farm. He was reportedly offering to do regular chores around the house.

"Could you postpone this casting decision another couple of months?" his father joked. "From our point of view, this is going pretty well."

I was surprised that Charlie was working so hard since there was no indication that he'd be cast or would even get another audition. But lacking any stronger candidate, I asked him to come to Vermont for a screen test. Charlie and his father flew to Manchester; my Marlboro students managed camera and sound; and Rusty DeWees stopped by to stand in as Quebec Bill. It was windy and ten degrees below zero when we put Charlie and Rusty in the front seat of my Subaru for a crucial father/son scene.

The bite of that frigid morning brought out new edge, textured and fresh emotion, and unpredictable character inventions. Charlie discussed ideas that showed a new layer of understanding. For the first time, I felt that he could play Wild Bill.

I FED EXed the audition tapes to our LA and Boston producers. They were lukewarm and unwilling to commit to Charlie. They insisted on an immediate Los Angeles casting session. It was now early March. Production was slated to start in a bit more than three weeks.

We hired casting director Penny Perry to help wrangle young LA actors. Penny had worked with us on "A Stranger in the Kingdom" and other films including "Ordinary People," "Young Guns,"



“Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid” and “The Jerk.” I knew that the other producers would respect her thoughts.

We received tapes on sixty young actors and chose fifteen we’d see. Several days before I flew to LA, Charlie McDermott’s father called and asked if it would be OK for Charlie and him to come out for the LA audition. I was surprised but said, “OK.”

I saw a half-dozen promising kids in the LA. My questions centered on whether one teen, who’d flown in from Texas, could lose his southern accent. He couldn’t. For another, it was whether he was too tall or had the “right look.” It’s not fair, but film acting sometimes comes down to this.

Late in the auditions, Charlie walked into the room and auditioned for the sixth time. He was natural, and even more emotionally focused. He’d processed comments from his earlier auditions—and he didn’t let continued rejection get to him. He’d moved the character to a new level.

After the session, Penny Perry turned to me. “Why haven’t you already cast Charlie? If you don’t take him, I will. I have a film that shoots in three weeks.”

“We’re taking him,” I said.

“Are you sure,” she asked.

I was sure, especially since I was about to lose him to Penny’s other film. I still had to convince three reluctant producers, but I did.

Charlie worked hard and explored new dimensions of Wild Bill’s character during the entire shoot. He held his own with Kris, Genevieve Bujold, and other actors. He was fearless and prepared for the physical demands of the part.

During the final weeks of editing, I showed the film to about twenty Marlboro students, a few faculty members, and the sound editors. The first words from viewers after each of these pre-screenings have been the same. “The kid’s great,” they say.

Kris Kristofferson called Charlie two weeks ago, after he’d attended the Toronto Film Festival for premiere screenings of “Dreamer,” in which Kris plays child superstar Dakota Fanning’s grandfather. I saw Charlie and his father for dinner shortly after Kris called.

“Kris told me he’d been to a big Toronto press conference where reporters asked him what it was like to work with Dakota Fanning,” Charlie said.

“Kris says he told the press that he’d now worked with the two best kids in the business,” Charlie said. “Dakota Fanning and me.”

Charlie smiled. He earned the compliment—and he knew it.