

Background Performance introduction

Becoming a Background Performer is a great way to start in entering the film industry. It is an easy way to have an extra “side gig”, Travel, socialize, or even test the waters of a new full-time career. It’s also a great way to absorb the Set culture and set etiquette by observation whilst doing a low responsibility job, which could lead to moving beyond Background Performing.

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE?

A background performer is hired by production as a non-verbal, actor whose role is to act as a nonspecific character in a scene. Background characters are not mentioned specifically in the script by name and often are just fuzzy moving bodies walking in the background of the scene. When you sit on a park bench and you watch people walking down the sidewalk, that is what in most cases is what you are hired as a performer to create for the scene.

WHAT IS YOUR JOB?

- Show up to their location on time
- Be well groomed, polite, and prepared
- Be prepared to stay potentially 16 hours
- Provide clothing options for Costume and wear what they pick
- Take direction on set by the Assistant Directors and keep continuity
- Stay Quiet while rolling or “Blocking” on set
- Stay in “background holding” unless reported to the assistant Directors

1.2 Things you should NEVER do:

- Walk up to cast, crew, director and have conversations.
- Bring family and friends who are not working on set to visit. - leave set without telling an AD
- Yell “action” Or “cut” or say anything onset when not spoken to
- Take Pictures of you, your costume or the set and post it on social media. You sign a N.D.A at the beginning of the day that will get you in big legal trouble.

- Ask what time and location the shoot is. All that information will come at the last minute after you are booked. Productions schedule things based on what time they finish the night before. You must be available for anything.

How to be Bookable

Being a background performer is not like a regular job. There is no schedule. You are an independent contractor. It is not ideal to jump into being a full time BG performer, it takes time to develop a reputation with casting and background agencies. Make sure that you have another part-time or casual job to fall back on, because the film industry is very unpredictable, no matter how bookable you are. You can do all the right things but still there might not be a lot of work for your type at any given time.

Photos

One of the most important things to have to get booked is a good photo of yourself ready to attach and send to whoever is looking for background performers. Here are some examples of good photos and bad.

GOOD HEADSHOT	BAD HEADSHOT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -lighting is good and clear -dressed well -groomed well -can see facial features and body proportions -recent, selfie, minimal makeup 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -cant see face (wearing sunglasses) -wearing hat -lighting blurring the face -not looking at the camera -in photo with multiple people -old photos where you do not look the same anymore 

Social Media Presence

There are many posts in many social media groups online for background jobs. Most agents have Facebook pages. When you sign up for an agency immediately like and follow their pages. Look for other groups to join that have postings for casting opportunities. Being on social media will also give you a sense of what is going on in the film industry.

Access to Email and text

The competition is very high out there. “Waiting for the phone to ring” is now an obsolete term. You cannot miss that email or text from an agent because they

will book the first person who responds to their group emails and texts to fill the order. You must be proactive and get yourself out there to get jobs.

GETTING PAID

This is where we get to the good part! You get paid for this fun job!

This PayScale is subject to change, you can see it updated on the ACTRA Toronto Website:

2022 - 2024 Independent Production Agreement (IPA) RATES IPA Article Number C101 Minimum

Category	Hourly Rate 2025	Hourly 2026
Stand In	36.75	37.50
Photo Double	34.75	35.25
Special Skill SSE	45.75	47.50
Background Performer	34.75	35.25
Non Union Performer	Minimum wage	Minimum wage
AABP	Minimum wage	Minimum wage

What is a UNION/ACTRA? How do you join?

A.C.T.R.A the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists

Actra is the union representing performers in the film, radio, television, and new media industries. This is the union that protects the standards of all performers. Being a member of ACTRA will secure you higher wages and offer health benefits. It is ideal to join this union but there are requirements to join. Here is a short overview. For more info: www.actratoronto.com

Method 1: Become an AABP performer.

It is the first step in one method of becoming an ACTRA member, which allots you some extra protection and gets you involved in the union.

<https://www.actratoronto.com/performers/starting-out/joining-actra/actra-additional-background/>

Method 2: Land yourself an Upgrade On set.

Getting an upgrade means the director decides to give you a speaking role on set spontaneously which would count as a credit toward your ACTRA membership. If this happens you must inform your agent immediately so that

they can help ensure that you get your deserved contract and pay raise, and to do the paperwork for you to get your ACTRA credit.

Method 3: Go for auditions for Principal roles.

You can get a principal agent. If you get at least 3 principal roles then you will become a full ACTRA member. Principal Agents are different than background agencies. Some of them will advise you not to do background at the same time as auditioning for principal roles. That is your decision to make, and you can discuss that with your background agent and principal agent to determine what is best for you.

Method 4: Have a post-secondary degree in theatre acting or film.

You can present your diploma to ACTRA and they will award you a credit to be part of the union. If you are studying acting or film industry related subjects, there's a fast-track program if you're coming out of an accredited institution.
<https://www.actratoronto.com/new-graduates/>

TIP:

In the meantime, if you are non-union you will have limited protection. It is always very good to research the rights and responsibilities of productions through the IPA (the independent Production Agreement) on the ACTRA Toronto Website.

An Overview of Production Management

As much as there are strange rules on movie sets, there are different unions and organizations such as ACTRA that protect the rights of performers on set and the standards would not be where they are without ACTRA. The relationships between the different entities in the industry have dynamic relationships and it is a good thing to understand them to conduct yourself professionally on a film set.

Production

The office of the producers of a TV show or film hires everyone who works for the film. They employ everyone who is on set or works for production including the casting director. Production is your employer, they are who manage payroll,

they are also the employers of the Casting Director. Your agent does not work in production; they are the entity that gets you the connection for the job the production hires you for.

Casting Directors

The casting director is employed by PRODUCTION. They are the people who make the final decision on who gets to be in the film. They send orders for background performers to AGENCIES. They have seen your Photo a hundred times being on a database or set to them by your agent. They know who you are, but you may not know them. So always be presentable when on set and always be kind to everyone. They oversee finding hundreds of people a day and that is why they have their own staff as well as delegating the work to Background Agents to book all the Background Performers.

Background Agents

Background agencies work for you! Background agents DO NOT work for casting Directors, or the production companies they work for the talent and are there for the talent's best interest.

You are paying them for a service of connecting you with casting directors for employment. You do not work for Background agents. They also do a bit of negotiating on your behalf with the casting director and help facilitate errors that occur with your payment from production. It is an industry standard that Background Performers can choose to be with multiple agencies.

Communicating with Agents

There is no time to waste! All the precise details will not be sent out to you until the very last minute! Please be patient. The information will come to you in its entirety or in parts. Agents, like casting directors, have a lot of people to communicate with. So please keep your inquiries to a minimum. Even on the day of shooting the schedule is very unpredictable, you should never ask what time anything will be. It is just the nature of the industry and that is the way it is, so you must have full disclosure of your availability and ready for any changes.

Questions not to ask:

What time do we start? What time do we finish? What is the shooting schedule? Will it be a long day? Where do I go?

Questions you may ask:

Is it interior or exterior? Day or Night shoot? Are there shuttles available?

It is very important that production provides this type of information and if is very much in your right to ask these things before you decide to agree to a booking.

The booking process:

Now that you know a bit about the structure of how your part of the industry works and a bit about how to be bookable, here is the essence of Background Performer booking process.

1. First Contact

You receive an email from an agent, or you see an ad on social media looking for people who fit a certain criterion that are available for multiple dates that include Fittings and shooting dates.

2. Respond/Confirm Availability

If you are fully available for all the dates listed, and fit the requirements of the booking, you can respond to the agent. Make sure to read the ad or the email carefully, if it requires you to send a photo, or your sizes, union status.

TIP: It is acceptable to have multiple Background agents, however if you see the same ad or get contacted by multiple agents for the same gig, only pick one agent to respond to. Casting Directors will see your name from multiple agents for one gig and that does not reflect well on your professional reputation, because it creates conflict. It is LOCAL BG TALENT's biggest pet peeve!!!

3. The agent submits you to casting

Once you have confirmed your availability then your agent can submit you as a candidate for the role of approval to the casting director. Sometimes they will ask you to “hold” your availability while casting takes a bit

longer to decide to cast you. At this point you are still in limbo and waiting to be CONFIRMED BOOKED.

TIP: At this point in time, If you suddenly are no longer available you must let your agent know right away. There is no confirmed commitment, however communication sooner than later will be well appreciated.

4. Casting approves of your look.

If the casting director will approve you for the role and tell your agent to book you officially. At that point they will give them as much information about times, locations and dates, however things can still change at this point

5. YOU are BOOKED

Your agent will send you an email stating that “YOU ARE BOOKED” and provide as much preliminary information as possible. It is very important that you check your email often so that you can confirm immediately.

6. CONFIRM your booking!

If you do not respond with confirmation immediately, your agent may replace you so it is very important that when you are waiting for a booking confirmation to stay close to your email inbox to be able to respond as soon as possible.

6.1 FITTINGS

If you are a specialty character that requires a costume or prosthetic makeup “fitting” you will be required to go to the production office for those as well. These usually take 30 min-2 hours depending on the production. You are also paid for your time which is why it is very important that when you say you are available for the listed dates that you are fully available for the whole day for fittings.

7. Confirm “CALL TIME” and “LOCATION”

The final schedule for your shooting day is never confirmed until the production wraps the day before. If the crew goes over the shooting schedule the night before, your estimated call-time will be pushed ahead. Your agent might send you a “draft” or a “tentative call-time” and location. Once you get the FINAL CALLTIME you must respond to the email as “CONFIRMED”

WHAT SHOULD YOU BRING?

A PEN- one of the most important and valuable tools that you will need. If you always have one you will always have friends. It is the key to being paid because there is a lot of paperwork to fill in and if you don't have one when you need it you will delay your ability to be home sooner.

A fold up chair- Background holding is usually very cramped, and the chairs are not comfortable. It is your preference, you will see the of veteran Background Performer with their own chairs that they brought.

Your Own snacks- Productions provide food as a courtesy, but as a background performer the quality of food might not always trickle down equally to you. If you have dietary restrictions, it is always a good idea to bring something. Think of it as being in school again and bring lunch!

A book, knitting project- You may be sitting around for hours. Being a BG performer is a great way to meet people but sometimes there is nothing interesting to talk about. It is a good idea to have something to do in the downtime.

What to bring for COSTUME HAIR/ MAKEUP

A rolling suitcase- You will notice that it is the preferred choice of expert background performers to bring a rolling suitcase and sometimes garment bags to carry their clothing options for Costumes. Customers will always be happy if your clothes are neatly folded and do not require much de-wrinkling.

Nude colored Underwear/bra- It is a good idea to have a good set of nude-colored bras and undergarments in your possession. Sometimes you might be required to wear white or something that you may see through your clothes. The costume department will always appreciate that you are not wearing bright neon undergarments.

Extra Long underwear/socks- Especially in the winter you do not know what kind of costumes the costume department wants you to wear. It is always a good idea to have extra undergarments to wear under your costume to keep you warm if you need to be outside for longer periods of time.

Nude Colored Nail Polish- If you have fake nails and shellac, then at least bring a nude-colored nail polish to cover it up. It may not be period correct for the production although agents will be reluctant to book you if you have some kind of extreme nails, you should at least have a plan if you need to cover it up.

Makeup- it is not ideal to arrive to Background holding with a full face of makeup, unless otherwise instructed by your agent, however it is always good to at least have with you your own shade of Foundation, a couple neutral lip colors as well as your own mascara. The makeup artists will be very happy that you have those basic things, because it will help them keep things sanitary and they can spend more time beautifying your look.

Bobby pins/hair products- If you have a particular product you prefer to use in your hair for styling, then bring it. Also bring your own brush to avoid the hairdresser having to keep sterilizing their own brushes. They will be very happy about it.

WHEN YOU ARRIVE TO SET

If you see pylons and signs with the name of the production on them then you are probably in the right place.

If you need to park, look for the signs that say BG parking. Sometimes you may get away with parking in “Crew Parking” otherwise, make sure that you give yourself plenty of time for parking because productions usually rent out parking lots that are not very close to set or Background Holding.

SHUTTLES - If it is the case that background parking or crew parking is far away from where you need to be there may be “shuttles” that are transport Drivers who will take you in a Minivan to Background Holding. Shuttles are also provided for background upon booking if there is a long distance on location shoot that will leave from the Toronto Studio at a certain time.

Background Holding

Background holding is the place that you must report to as a background performer. It will always be well labelled. And you will be greeted by a table of people with paperwork.

Background holding is often the base that you are to be waiting all day long before going to work on the film set. It is also often, but not always the place where you will be processed for Hair, Makeup and Costumes.

PAPERWORK -How you get paid

There is a lot of paperwork involved with being a daily background performer. The film industry has a special tax credit system, so therefore it must have all its employee paperwork in order in the event of audit. If it is your first day on a particular production, you will have to fill in a lot of paperwork that proves your Residency of Ontario. There are 3 components to your paperwork.

1. **Your Residency Declaration Forms** : These forms must be filled in to declare your residency along with some basic information for the production to have. It is repetitive but when you fill it out once for one production you will not have to fill it again.
2. **Your Supporting Documents:** These documents should be copies of your driver's license, and other forms of proof of residence, such as a bank statement or a utility bill. It is always wise to have extra printouts or photocopies of these on hand, however having a saved copy of these on your phone that is ready to email to the production accountants is also a good handy tip.
3. **Your Voucher:** Your voucher is a carbon multiple copy document or digital copy that you fill in your SIN number, address, phone number, your work hours and information about the production.

RATES/Commission

Many Background agencies require you to pay a fee to join up, many do not. The standard for Commission for Background agencies can range from 10-15% of your earnings, not including certain deductions/contributions from your paycheck such as Pension, Vacation pay, rrsp and Hst. **Local BG Talent** has a **Pre Paid Flat rate Option**. For more information about that please see our COMMISSION POLICY.

BEING ON SET

Now this is the fun part! Being a background performer gives you a chance to appear on Film and TV shows that you, your friends and family may recognize you in! This section is going to explain to you what is expected of you when you are on set.

12.1 Safety on set

It is very important to remember that regardless of the location, whether it be an empty school, a park, a church, and abandoned old factory building ALWAYS be on alert for your safety. You are on a live active workplace. There are crew with large heavy and complicated equipment. Always be aware if you are standing on a laneway for passage of carts, dolly for lifts and cranes. Do not block doorways, do not linger in hallways without leaving a space for everyone to walk past you. You will annoy the crew it is very crowded and sometimes very loud. The Crew need to concentrate and to be able to communicate for things to run smoothly and safely. Spatial awareness is key on a film set. Stay out of the way. If you have any questions about safety, always ask your A.D. (*Assistant Director)

Assistant Directors

Assistant Directors- or “A.Ds” are usually a young or energetic person who will have a walkie talkie and will be shouting announcements in the room. (They are your manager/boss) Those are the people who are listening to everything that is going on set. They are the people who will directing you where to go and what to do all day long. They will also have other friends on set who are also A.Ds that will tell you what to do. A.Ds work under a hierarchy going Director-->1st AD--->2nd AD--->3rd AD and so on. Always be kind to this person. They are usually at the bottom of the hierarchy. Time is tight and you must do what the Ads say unless you believe it is unsafe.

Costume/hair/ makeup continuity- Once you have been established by costume, even if the weather changes you must remain in the same clothes unless instructed. There are moments in-between shooting that you can put on or take off a sweater for comfort, but you must always maintain continuity. Same goes for hair and makeup it must always stay the same for that day.

The lunch line:

When lunch is called, you are going to hear every yelling that the CREW and Cast are to go first, Then ACTRA Members, and then NON UNION background are at the back of the line. Don't be shocked by it it is just the way it is. Sometimes they will have multiple catering lines and then it doesn't matter.

Signing out:

At the end of the day or when the A.Ds tell you that you are **WRAPED**. That means you are done for the day.

You must change your costume if you borrowed it from Costume department and return it on hangers to the Costumers to get paid.

The Ads will also ask that ACTRA members come to the front of the sign out line because they get paid more overtime and they want to sign out sooner.

Make sure all your information is filled in **BEFORE** you enter the lineup to sign out. You would hold up the line if you missed something so you will be sent to the end of the line if you don't fill in all your paperwork.

ON SET LINGO

The shooting crew have some strange lingo, you may have heard of the most famous "Action! "Or "CUT" never shout that out! But jokes aside, here is a bunch of other terms that you will hear to help you understand what is going on set.

HOT SET- do not Touch anything on the set, including plants, posters, set equipment or even what might appear as garbage on the ground. You are walking into what is called a **Hot Set** and that means that that set must maintain its Continuity.

Continuity whatever is done on set must be maintained. That includes your hair, Makeup, costume, and even movements that include props. The A.Ds will give you a position and an action. Continuity is important because the cameras have to always move to another position or angle and the scene has to match on the other side.

Establish When the camera has already shot part of a scene whatever was seen on camera is now established to match the rest of the scene, or sequence of scenes.

Background ACTION! The director and the Ads will shout this as a cue for background performers to start their actions.

Tileing: The term refers to a large group of background performers placed in a crowd divided in sections, rolling on the scene, moving the crowd into a different section, then shooting the scene again so that the editing can place all the background like laying tiles to appear that there are more people in the crowd.

BANANA: The term refers to the shape of a path that you walk toward or away from the camera when you are walking across the set while rolling.

First Positions: The position that you must start the scene when the Director says **Background Action**. When the director says cut, you may be asked to go back to your First position.

Check the Gate: Is an old term used from the time we used film to make sure that there was no dust that got in the lens of the camera It just means that the director likes the shot and that the D.O.P should review the shot one more time before we move on to another shot.

10-1 Walkies term for going to the bathroom. Always tell the Ads if you need to go to the washroom, they must know where you are at all times! or

they will get in trouble. You may be seconds away from rolling on a scene and it could hold up production which will draw bad attention to you.

N.D.A. Non-Disclosure Agreement. This is an agreement that you sign when you do your employment paperwork that you agree not to disclose verbally, photographically, or digitally anything related to the production to anyone or anything online, on radio etc.

Background Holding the allocated area or safe space that BG are to report to and serve as a home base.

A.D. : Assistant Director- they are in charge of managing the set as a representative of production. Everyone can report to an AD for any information about set. They are the people who can sign your contracts. There is usually 1 specific AD who oversees and manages all the Background Performers

Blocking Before the shooting crew does the lighting, the director and the DOP and the actors have a rehearsal of the scene on set to figure out what the scene actions will be. This is when the lighting crew can decide how to set up the lighting for the shots. When you are on set for any blocking you must treat it just as you would as if the sound is rolling, being quiet so the director and actors can concentrate.

Rehearsal After the blocking and crew have set up the lighting, the Assistant Director might bring all the background performers out for a rehearsal before you do the actual shot. You must treat this as if camera and sound are rolling and proceed quietly.

Call-time That is your start time. That is the time you must report to Background holding, as instructed by your agent.

WRAP: When someone or when the whole set is finished for the day. People may be individually warped. This is the magic word that everyone wants to hear at the end of the night.

ABBY: The Abby is the third most exciting thing to hear on set because it is used to describe the 2nd last shot before the set wraps.

WINDOW: Depending on if it is an American or Canadian set these terms are used to describe the last shot of the day before WRAP. It is the most exciting things to hear second to Wrap.

“Watch Your back”- This is not a threat; it is an accepted polite way of saying “get out of the way!” It is something that you will often hear from crew members if you are standing in the way of them, and their equipment, or while they are rolling equipment across the workspace. We are all used to hearing this on set and is not meant to offend. It is imperative because it is important for safety reasons to keep clear. When you are set, you must have very good spatial awareness. Try to stay away from entrance pathways, that you can see crew trying to maneuver.