

Backstage.com, March 23, 2008

“Top Casting Directors for Films of 2007”

Laray Mayfield (Los Angeles)

Critical Pick: Zodiac

Select Past Projects: Fight Club, Panic Room, The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys

Upcoming Projects: The Incredible Hulk, The Killing Room, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

RR: How did you get started in casting?

Laray Mayfield: I was working with (Zodiac director) David Fincher as his assistant. I met David the day I came to Los Angeles, 22 years ago. I moved here from Nashville. I came out to work in production but I knew nothing about it, so I went to work, met David, and within a year or so I was the first assistant he ever had. Over the course of the first few years that I worked with him, the casting process was just something I naturally gravitated toward. I cast a couple of small jobs to see how it went, and that was that.

RR: Was David directing at the time that you met him?

LM: Yeah, music videos. That's what we were doing back then. First thing I ever cast was a Jody Watley video. So I've been casting for a long time — I met David 22 years ago, so I probably cast my first thing three years after that, so, maybe 19 years, 20 years almost. But I take sabbaticals from time to time. I moved to New Mexico for a few years, or take off to Tennessee for extended periods of time. I'm a bit of a gypsy.

RR: What is the most challenging aspect of casting?

LM: Well, it's different on every movie. The more unusual a character is then the harder they are to define. But it's the same process every time you cast — or a very similar process, you know? What the story calls for, as far as characters, is what determines how difficult it's going to be. For example, children are difficult to cast. I cast a tremendous amount of elderly actors for Benjamin Button, which was — well, I will not say that that was difficult at all. It was fantastic, but it was a big job! Sometimes you'll have something that seems like it should be easy to cast, but all the other actors that you've cast around that character determine how you need to fill in who is missing. So sometimes for me, that is how it becomes difficult to cast certain roles.

RR: What are the most enjoyable aspects of casting?

LM: Well, I absolutely love what I do so it's always enjoyable for me. Even when it's difficult or stressful I think that I'm one of the luckiest people in the world to get to do what I love and also work with people that I love. So I think the tradeoff for that is that once in a while I have to have a bad day. It wouldn't be fair if it was all fantastic! I love actors, so the thing for me is just being able to spend the time to find amazing actors who bring these incredible characters to life. That's really fun. When somebody comes into your office and you realize, "Oh, my gosh...that's the person! That's the character! That's not an actor," then that actor has transcended themselves and created the character. And that's really special because it's very intimate. It's you and the actor, and often you get to see that transformation happen for the first time.

RR: Do you feel that the film industry overlooks, or undervalues, the importance of casting

directors as part of the creative process?

LM: You probably couldn't ask a worse person that question because I'm just not somebody who motivates from that place in my life. I don't even think about how they look at me, because in my little world I am treated incredibly well, and with a lot of respect and a lot of regard. And I also know that it's a very collaborative effort. I think if you do great work, and the directors you work with are happy, actors love you and trust you, agents and managers love you and trust you, then you have everything you need as far as support.

I'm happy in my little spot in the world. I'm a very competitive person, but I only compete with myself. I'm only interested in if I can do a better job — not in doing a better job than somebody else. And I have tremendous regard for other casting directors. I don't like the fact that some casting directors take on so many movies at one time and have an office staff of 10 or 12 people who are actually doing the jobs, but that's an ethical thing for me. So I'm different in that way than other people. I love my little niche; I'm very protective of it, and I am very grateful for it. Very grateful. I just don't look at anything like I'm not getting my due. I've got more than I ever dreamed I'd have in life.

RR: When you're watching a film that's been cast by somebody else, what, if anything, do you specifically look for?

LM: I look for things that are what I consider to be inspired: Casting an actor in a role that maybe you normally wouldn't see that person cast in, for example. Or casting somebody that you haven't seen in a long time. Or putting together a beautiful ensemble, like the movies in the '70s. But when I walk into a world I just don't want to find somebody who doesn't belong there, you know? There are some talented casting directors who inspire me each time they work on a project.

RR: How do you go about selecting the projects you work on?

LM: I'm very selective. And I'm very fortunate that I do get things sent to me. What I look for first, of course, is the director. That's always a big draw for me — and it doesn't have to be a huge director, either. It's just the sensibilities of the director are the first thing. Also, the producers. I love great producers because they keep everything together for us. I also look to see if it's a story that I think is important to tell on some level, or inspiring or motivating. And then the big thing for me is if I can say, "Will this attract the caliber of actors that I aspire to work with? Am I going to be able to populate this world with people that will make me proud of what I've done?"

RR: And did you find that on Zodiac?

LM: I always find that on everything David sends to me, but on Zodiac I found that very much to be true. I had a bit of a history with the Zodiac project. I worked on a movie in Phoenix years ago with (Zodiac producer) Brad Fischer, but that movie fell apart. Brad knew my work because he was fan of David's. So as Brad was developing Zodiac, I was sort of in the loop with what was going on. Once David got it and started working with Jamie (screenwriter James Vanderbilt) and Brad, it became the movie that we all see now — it just became even better.

I thought it was a great story. I love the obsession, and how relentless these guys all were. The characters are fantastic, the time period... You know, it was a horrible thing that was going on, but for me, the thing that was so interesting about it on certain levels was how much trouble they had back then solving a case because of the lack of technology. Even now, with as much as we have, it really hasn't gotten a whole lot better.

RR: Was anybody pre-attached to the film?

LM: No. When David got the project there were no actors attached.

RR: Was there anyone in particular that you were seriously hoping to get?

LM: Every single person that we were hoping to get we were fortunate enough to get.

Every single person that you see in this movie is a person that we were absolutely overjoyed to have in the movie. And it all worked out. There were a couple of times where we had groups of actors working that we had had scheduling issues and things like that that come up, and I would go to the set just to see them all and think, "Oh, gosh. We got them all here at the same time! I just needed to see them all in a room together!"

Because we shot over such a long period of time, sometimes actors would come in and work for two weeks and then they'd go away and then come back. And some of the actors had other jobs going on, so you would try to accommodate their schedules — you just always want to do that. But you do spend some sleepless nights walking around wringing your hands worrying if it will all fall into place! I have sort of a one-track mind, and when I really get something in my mind, I can't see beyond that. I get really attached. But sometimes things change and schedules don't work out, and so you work with other people, and that's always fantastic, too. But this was a case where we were very, very fortunate. We got to have everybody we hoped for.

RR: Given that this was a film based on actual events, and real people, and horrible, horrible crimes — as well as two books — did that present any unique casting challenges for you?

LM: Yeah, it did. It presented a lot of challenges because we were portraying real people, especially with the detectives and the cartoonist. Many of these people David actually knows (and I got to meet a lot of them), so you want to portray them as close as possible to reality. That was a big issue. Also, dealing with such sensitive issues as these young people being killed or being attacked by this guy, you want to handle that with the most tenderness and care and respect that you can for the family members, so we kept things very private. No matter what age you are, with or without children, I think you can imagine what a devastation it would to have your child murdered. It's a very easy thing to be sensitive about. What you have to say sometimes to people is, "You know what? Don't make a joke. Don't make light of this. We don't want to talk about this because there are family members out there still whose lives will never be okay because this happened."

RR: Did any of the families see the film?

LM: Yeah. A lot of the people saw the film, and they loved it. They were never isolated. Everyone who was alive, who had been involved in the story, and who wanted to be involved in the film, was welcome and encouraged to be involved.

RR: Were any of the detectives involved?

LM: Yeah. Mark Ruffalo spent a lot of time with Dave Toschi. And I know that some of the guys, like Donal Logue (Captain Ken Narlow), James Le Gros (Officer George Bawart), and Elias Koteas (Sgt. Jack Mulanax), had contact with their real life characters, too. Robert Graysmith was all over the place. He was everywhere. And he was hilarious! He wrote a book about the making of the movie. (Ed. Note: Robert Graysmith was the cartoonist obsessed with the case who eventually penned the two books upon which the film was largely based. He was played by Jake Gyllenhaal in the movie.)

RR: Did you have to find any new talent for this film?

LM: Yeah. Lots of those children, and then of course a lot of the kids who played the victims. I mean, they've all worked, but a lot of them you hadn't seen before and you certainly hadn't seen them in impressionable roles yet.

RR: How do you go about doing that, finding new talent?

LM: I do it through agents, through breakdown. You send out the breakdown and the agents submit actors to you. You look at lots of pictures, lots of resumes, lots of talent. I'm one of those kinds of people who cringes when I hear somebody say, "Oh, I discovered so-and-so." It's like, "Okay. I had the opportunity to cast Kristin Stewart in one of her first movies. I had the opportunity to cast Emile Hirsch in his first movie. Those kids had been working long before I ever laid eyes on them. They had agents/managers. They'd done some commercials. They'd done a little TV or something, but rarely does anyone discover somebody. Not at the stage that we're all working at.

In Benjamin Button, I had to cast a character from Africa. We found the perfect actor. He's a dancer, and works quite a lot in theatre, and he's represented by an agent. It wasn't like I went into Africa and just found a guy that could act, you know? I did it through agents all over Africa.

RR: What advice would you give to actors who want to audition for you?

LM: Well, the thing I tell all actors is that they need to be prepared when they come in. Be prepared, be comfortable, and leave it in the room when they go. Do your best job, put forth your best effort, and when you walk away, you leave it. As long as you do that, you've accomplished something positive. Whether or not you get that particular role, the chances are you're going to get another job or you're going to get another reading. But that's the problem I see, is that many actors worry too much.

RR: What's up next for you?

LM: Right now I'm working on a beautiful movie called Bend that David Arata wrote and is directing. He wrote Children of Men. I'm also working on a little comedy called

Barry Munday, which is fantastic. Chris D'Arienzo adapted it and is directing. And I'm developing two projects with Vincent D'Onofrio, which he will be directing. (I cast a short film for him a couple years ago that got into the Venice Film Festival.)

I am also reading new scripts, thankfully! I also have several of my own film/television projects I'm developing. I have a book that I optioned years ago that I'm am seriously developing right now, which is extremely exciting for me.