

Educator's Column

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I make my Hollywood film debut this month as an extra in "Public Enemies." The experience of being part of the production has made me a better teacher. The film, starring Johnny Depp, tells the story of John Dillinger and the efforts of the FBI to stop his string of bank robberies and jail breaks throughout the Midwest in the early '30s. Crews filmed all around Wisconsin -- in places like Madison, Milwaukee, Manitowish Waters, Wisconsin Dells, Columbus, Darlington, Beaver Dam and Oshkosh.

In my scene, the Wisconsin Capitol stands in for the nation's Capitol in Washington, D.C. Actor Billy Crudup, playing J. Edgar Hoover, is trying to get money from Congress to go after organized crime and crooks like Dillinger. I played a member of the gallery attending the congressional hearing -- or as I like to call my character -- matron No. 4. When I looked in a mirror -- with my hair in finger waves, wearing a somber navy blue dress and brilliant red lipstick -- it was like seeing my grandmother staring back at me. Being an extra was exciting but awfully humbling.

As one of the lead instructors at Madison Media Institute, my opinions are sought out and valued. As an extra, my job was to show up on time, do what I was told and shut up. For example, after a few dozen takes Billy Crudup started improvising his lines -- but his ad lib was grammatically incorrect. The lead instructor in me wanted to point out the flub to Crudup, or perhaps call over Director Michael Mann and make some script suggestions. I wisely forced my self to keep my mouth shut and eventually the subject-verb agreement got straightened out. But the powerlessness I felt was overwhelming. Normally, I like to take charge, and I had to stifle all my natural tendencies.

It made me think about our graduates and how as new hires they'll likely have some great ideas or suggestions. But because they are coming in at entry-level positions, they may feel uncomfortable speaking up. I hope employers give them a chance to be heard. I also hope Wisconsin's lawmakers retain the film-industry tax incentives. No doubt they can be tweaked a bit: I think Wisconsin residents should be used whenever possible. On the day I worked all the caterers, drivers and electricians were from Chicago. One of our van drivers got confused driving around the Capitol Square. "Take a right on East Wash and then right again on Patterson," I told him as we headed back to base camp. He radioed in for directions anyway. "Take a right on East Washington and then another right on Patterson," the dispatcher squawked. Like I said, I'm a take-charge kind of gal. A proposed bill to alter the incentives gives a bigger carrot to hire state residents. Perhaps next time a crew films around the state Capitol a local driver will be able to ferry the actors around without having to ask for directions.