

Interview: Nancy Bishop



Motiv: Nancy Bishop
Credit: Petra Ruzickova

The **Emmy**-nominated Casting Director **Nancy Bishop** earned her MA in Theatre at the **Northwestern University of Chicago**. After that she worked as an actor, director and drama teacher. In 1993 she moved to Prague where she started working as a Casting Director. Nancy Bishop cast European actors for more than 50 international TV- and film productions. She is holding Casting Workshops for actors throughout Europe, the United Kingdom, and the US. Our Team Member **Ruth Fröhner** met her.

How did you become a Casting Director?

I started as an actress and never thought that I would work in Casting. In fact, I was turned off by casting directors very early in my career. It was funny, I was in training and they brought some Casting Directors into our course. I thought these women were disgusting, you know they were saying "If you've got a big nose, get a nose job! If you're overweight, loose weight!" And I just thought "Oh god, I really don't want to be a product like this!" They actually scared me away from the whole business. Later, when I was directing theatre, I was invited to Prague to work with the **Black Box Theatre** which I eventually took over as Artistic Director. We were performing in English and touring. But after several years I got really burnt out on it. But I knew all the talents and that's why I got into casting. It was a natural progression: the production companies would call me, because I knew the actors that could speak English. I was really pleased, because I realized that as a Casting Director I could actually use all the skills that I had developed as a theatre director. So that's how it happened, quite by accident, I never planned it.

You were fortunate, because Prague actually became one of the biggest film industries in Europe.

I was in the right place at the right time. I got there in '93 and it took off in the mid-nineties.

Why did you stay in Prague?

There was too much work; it would have been foolish to leave. And also I like Prague. There were other reasons too, you know, I developed a life there and a professional career.

What kind of parts do you cast?

Usually supporting roles, but it depends. The joke I always make is that for big US Studio Productions the guys who live get cast from L.A. and the guys who die get cast from Prague ("Alien vs. Predator", "Hellboy", "Blade II"). So if somebody gets pushed over the cliff in the first scene, you can pretty much guarantee he was cast in

Prague. But recently there have been some independent films where I did all the roles ("Queen Libussa"). Or I have coordinated all the European Casting ("Last Holiday"). Also in TV Mini Series they sometimes have so many roles that they are open to seeing locals even for larger parts ("Dune", "Anne Frank", "Zhivago").

Where do you cast German actors for Prague?

Productions always try to keep their money. So they want to cast out of Prague. So I always look there first. And then sometimes when there are specific needs for German actors, the Production uses a German Casting Director so I'm not involved. But there are exceptions, when they are asking me to cast in Germany ("The Illusionist").

When you cast in Germany do you experience a different Casting process?

Most of the time I do the casting myself. So of course there is no difference because I do it the same way I do at home. It's funny, we were talking about this yesterday at the casting directors' meeting. How we all work differently but we don't really know in what way. So it would be interesting to visit somebody else's Casting Session.

Then how do you find German actors?

I talk to the agencies I know. I don't have a database per se. Because I think that it is more of an agent's job to have a database. I do have an unofficial one, of course. I have a box of CVs and a box of show reels, and actors that I've known over the years and that sort of thing. And I go to the agencies' homepages. Although I think databases are much better. Because I have to find every single homepage and click my way through. And actors change agencies. I hope **e-talenta** will take off soon, it would change my life actually. **Spotlight** in the UK is fantastic, **Breakdown Services** in the US is fantastic and it would just be so great to have a really comprehensive database in Europe.

A System like Breakdown Services does not exist in Germany. It often feels like Casting Directors are even trying to not let people know what they are casting until they are already done.

It would be good for Germany to have a breakdown service. For example, there was a Casting Director who put out a breakdown. The way she did it was really great. She wrote: "I'm posting it, because if I don't post it everybody is going to find out about it anyways and they are just going throw in tons of unsolicited resumes. So here it is: these are the roles. And the first five or six roles she was like: "Star names only! Star names only!" and she was very clear about what she wanted. So people wouldn't waste their time and I thought that was good, to be really clear and open about what was happening.

Is there anything special about the material actors will send you from Germany?

Concerning headshots and CVs it doesn't seem that there is so much of a standard formula over here. In America you always got your picture on one side and your CV on the other. One picture with your name on it and that's it. Over here people will sometimes send me a lot of pictures. One time - and I'm not even kidding - thirty pictures! You know, that's obviously extreme. But often I receive a lot of pictures in different sizes without the name on them. And obviously if you are sending your CV to a casting director who isn't German it should be in English. No one in America would know what "Fernsehen" means. It seems obvious but apparently it's not.

I found that very few Agencies offer English CVs on their Website and even the biggest German Database "Filmmakers" is only in German.

I know, they should have it in English too. Especially because usually when you call

you will find somebody speaking English.

So did the internet change your job as a Casting Director?

Absolutely! I just cast this film in Prague. It was a very unique project, because it was a Czech story shot in English. We wanted eastern European actors who could speak English. We ended up casting a Hungarian actor who was living in NY. I found him on Breakdown Services. He did a self casting. He put it on his webpage and I saw it. He happened to be in Germany, when we were visiting Germany. So we could meet him there and we only had to fly him in from Germany, that was great for us. Then there was another actress who was Croatian, who had an agent in London but was living in Berlin. She put herself on tape there, she sent it to London, and they sent it to Prague. That was a little silly because that was **FedEx**. If she had figured out how to put it online I would have gotten it instantly. But she got the part.

How exactly does a self-casting work?

Sometimes the production does not fly me around. So I have to ask people to do a self-casting and send in tapes.

I give them the lines. And they have to tape the scene themselves, basically at home. I think actors are just learning how to do that. I just did a seminar yesterday on how to do a self-casting. I have to say I got some rather hilarious tapes from Germany. They would do a whole production. They would produce a short film. I'm not kidding. They got costumes and sets and props and they edited it. I felt bad because they probably spent a lot of money and they didn't realize that I really wanted something very simple. Just the actor in front of the camera, reading with someone off-camera.

It seems that in the States they are more affectionate to the internet and they are using its opportunities more.

American Productions have something called **Cast it** now. Casting Directors and Directors have their account access. As soon as I do a casting I convert it to QuickTime and just load it right up. It's fantastic. I'm doing a casting today in Prague and when they wake up in L.A. they already have it. The internet makes things cheaper and that's why I advise all actors to have a website, so they can just update their photos online. They don't have to have them printed each time. Just have one thing, like a postcard with your picture and your website on it and send that out. Or you could e-mail it and say, "Here's my website".

Is there anything in particular that you noticed about German actors?

I noticed about German actors that they always feel compelled to learn the lines, they feel that that is something very important. But you know, I was doing a seminar one time with Anja Dührberg and I asked her: "Don't you sometimes make a mistake, and people get the wrong page or you just change your mind and just give them the scene right there?" And she said, "Sure we do." So German actors still need to be flexible, and open to receiving a script right there and be able to sight read it or cold read it.

In Germany you are not allowed to hold the script in your hands and often they cast two people at the same time for different parts. So if one of the actors doesn't know the lines it gets very confusing.

You'll get the wrong cues, right. And you're not allowed to at least hold the script in your hands, I know. To tell you the truth I do not really understand the philosophy of that. I always encourage actors to hold the script, even if they know the lines. Unless it's a call-back, if the director wants to see you. Because of two reasons: it tells me that it's not a finished product, it's a reading. And Second: a lot of times you know the lines very well. But if you get into a different environment and you're nervous you

forget them so you just have it there and glance at it occasionally. There are techniques you can use for sight reading. It's a skill you can learn like anything else. And it's perfect for situations like that, because then if the other guy messes up you can follow along. But I always tell actors to memorize the scene not the lines. If you remember the scene it does not matter if the other person says the cues wrong.

How do I get into international productions?

There is no road to success. But my general advice for actors is "work gets work". So don't sit around and wait for your phone to ring. Make your own work. You can do a play and invite agents, invite casting directors. And in that way you are training your skills and you can invite an audience. You can also put yourself on tape. Every actor should own a camera. First for the Self-Casting and second for practice. You can't get better unless you know what works in front of a camera. Or you can make a film and put it on **youtube**. And then anybody can look you up. Everybody has that opportunity of free publicity on the web.

You will soon be publishing a book called "Secrets from the Casting Couch"!

Yes and I'm very excited! It's based on the idea that there are so many good actors that are bad at castings. And they'll say it. As if there's nothing they can do about it. And there's actually a lot you can do. Like acting, casting also is a craft and something that can be learned. You have to learn what the skill is and then you have to practise it and get better. So any actor can be good at castings. That's what I teach in my classes. Casting Technique. Very few people teach that. You can go to a great training program and they don't teach Casting. One of the problems with castings is that actors will come in and they haven't figured out what the scene is about. I know, that sounds so obvious! Because anybody who goes to acting school is taught how to break down the script. Who are you, where are you? Who are you talking to, what do you want? But for some reason they forget it at a Casting. They just think about memorizing the scene. Great, you memorized it! What's it about? I don't care if you even get the lines a little bit wrong but I want to see an interesting interpretation. I want to see something central, a central action that's taking you through. The actor should think about what is the objective of the character. But what the actor thinks is: "My objective is to impress the Casting Director". No, that's not your objective! Actors get so thrown by the Casting Process, they start making all the classic mistakes. They play a character instead of an action. And so they think "oh this guy is a jerk" and they come in and play a jerk. Or "This person is sad. So I'm going to play a sad person." I put in hints like that in my book. The book is going to have exercises and I try to address the reader directly. Many people think they know, but I could guarantee they'll make the classic mistakes.

Sometimes you are lucky if you even get a description of the character so you really have no idea what they are looking for.

You never know what they want. You have to make your own choices and they have to be based on the script. And it's true: sometimes you only get one or two pages. But you can get a lot of information from these pages. But you can't really know what they want. And that's why you have to get a hook on the scene. Nine out of ten times that's the problem that actors have when they come in: they haven't got a hook on the scene. You have to make your own choices. Or you can ask. But if you make choices and then you go in and ask, you have to be prepared to change what you've practised. Because they might give you something different. There is no wrong interpretation. Of course occasionally it happens that a director can't see through that. But if he or she is smart, he'll see "that's not the interpretation, that's not the way I want the role played but that's an interesting actor" and then they'll call you in.

Vom 23-26. Juni gibt **Nancy Bishop** einen **Workshop** in München.

Die Workshops finden Sie auf www.casting-network.de | Rubrik: Workshops / linke Seitenleiste im offenen Bereich.

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Das Gespräch führte: Ruth Fröhner

Die Schauspielerin Ruth Fröhner hat in München Kommunikationswissenschaften studiert. Während ihres Studiums arbeitete sie bei zahlreichen Film- und Werbeprojekten, u.a. als Regie- und Produktionsassistentin. Seit ihrem Abschluss konzentriert sie sich auf die Schauspielerei während sie weiterhin frei als freie Journalistin und im Produktionsbüro arbeitet.