



Why the Business of Child Actors Isn't Child's Play

6:33 PM PDT 10/27/2010 by Todd Longwell

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Photo by David Strick

Young thespians audition for a Target commercial at Ross Lacy Casting in September.

Twelve-year-old Ciara Bravo was just about to give up.

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It was September 2009 and she had spent the past two summers in L.A. with her mother, Tammy, auditioning for acting parts. There had been some close calls, including a shot at a regular role on CBS' "Gary Unmarried," but no bookings.

"We knew there was something there, but no one was biting," says the elder Bravo. "So we went back home to Kentucky and said, 'It's time to throw in the towel and be a regular kid.'"

That was when Ciara's manager, Frederick Levy of Management 101, asked her to videotape an

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audition for the role of younger sister Katie on the Nickelodeon series "Big Time Rush." Producer Scott Fellows liked what he saw, and had her do a second read with him on Skype. Satisfied, Ciara left on a two-day field trip to Amish Country in Ohio. Then at 10 the next morning, Levy called Tammy and told her they wanted Ciara to read again with new direction.

"I said, 'Are you kidding me? She's 250 miles away,' " Tammy recalls. "He said, 'You have to go get her.' So I jumped in the car with my Flip video camera, drove to Amish Country, and filmed her in an Amish grocery store with flour and cornmeal bags in the background."

Tammy sent the video to Nickelodeon and Ciara booked the job. Within 48 hours of their Amish adventure, the duo was on a plane to Los Angeles to start shooting the first season of "Big Time Rush."

It's a fantasy scenario for the thousands of child actors around the country who have watched Miley Cyrus or Miranda Cosgrove and dreamed they could be the kid in spotlight, with millions of fans, a fat TV contract, record deals and studios clamoring to create big-screen roles for them. Now, with new Hasbro network the Hub and the Cartoon Network branching out into live action, there could be even more opportunities than ever for young thespians and the people who rep them.

"Every year, this area of talent gets more and more exciting," says Mitchell Gossett, an agent at UTA specializing in young actors like

Victoria Justice, star of the Nickelodeon series "Victorious" and a Sony Music recording artist. "Also, these are challenging economic times.

If a child has a distinctive talent, it could potentially help the family with some revenue. There's a fine line between exploiting and delivering for your child, but I think that these days it's OK, because families need help around the country."

California law (namely the Coogan Act) states that a child actor's income is 100% theirs, making it difficult for parents to use the money to support the family. But the issue is largely rendered irrelevant when one examines the earning potential of the typical "successful" child actor. According to Anne Henry of the nonprofit support organization BizParentz Foundation, it's not nearly as much as one might think.

A child booking a handful of movie roles and TV spots every year, along with a voice-over spot every month, might make \$50,000-\$60,000 a year.

Kids who are regulars on a Disney Channel or Nickelodeon series don't fare much better, typically making \$5,000-\$7,000 a week on a 22-week series. On top of that, Disney and Nickelodeon usually have clauses that block kids from working outside the series.

Then there are the expenses. Lacking the classic adult deductions for home ownership and dependents, kids often lose as much as 40% of their pay upfront to taxes, on top of the 10% that goes to their agent along with 15% to their manager and 5% to their attorney, if they have them. Then there's all the money spent on union dues, head shots, acting classes, gas for driving to auditions and, for those from out of town, rent for a hotel room or an apartment.

In the end, "The kid is being paid \$5,000 a week and taking home \$500 to live on," says Henry, a former city administrator who has three kids in the business. "So, if you moved here from out of state, good luck to you, you ain't living on \$500 a week. That's why we tell people, 'Don't sell your home in Dallas and hope that you're going to make it in L.A. Your odds aren't really great and even if you do "make it" and get on that Disney series you so covet.' "

Children on a network series working under a SAG contract (an increasing rarity) will make more, and while there are rare exceptions like Angus T. Jones of CBS' "Two and a Half Men," who is reportedly earning \$250,000 an episode, the glory days of the 1980s when young sitcom stars like Kirk Cameron were regularly pulling down \$100,000 a week are long gone.

It's a problem for agents and managers as well as the children themselves. To compensate for the reduced earning power of their average, non-superstar clients, reps have become volume dealers.

"The Internet and other things have allowed them to take on a thousand clients, where they used to have 200," Henry explains. "They're throwing masses of kids at the wall and hoping one or two stick."

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