

Cheering for Churchill as an MP Extra

Guy, an old friend and the father of my Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts-trained godson emailed me recently. Wouldn't it be fun, he said, if a group of us became extras in *Darkest Hour*, the new Churchill film.

Apparently, lots of men of a certain age were required to play MPs in the House of Commons in 1940, and he was convinced we fitted the bill.

Fast forward two weeks and I was registered with the casting agency 2020 and on my way to be fitted with a pinstripe suit. Then I was sent to get an era-appropriate haircut - for £12.50, I was told. As I scrabbled around for change – should I tip, I wondered? – I discovered my first misunderstanding about the world of movies: I was to be paid £12.50. The perks of being a film extra!

Some of our fellow extras – or 'supporting artists', to use the correct film terminology - got a second haircut and naturally tried to reclaim a further £12.50, but the bean-counting producers were wise to that!

And so, I was ready for action.

One of the worst things was setting the alarm each morning for 5.45am to get to the studios at Watford in time. (The same ones where the Harry Potter movies were filmed.)

Some colleagues had travelled huge distances, one bloke from County Durham! Many were already there, in costume, which was all a bit surreal before 8am.

Much to our chagrin, there was no sign of the stars: Gary Oldman (who plays Churchill and Kristin Scott Thomas, his wife Clementine).

Duly checked in, I then queued again for my costume, and later went back to the breakfast queue. (Be warned: there's a lot of queuing as a film extra.)

Although there was what at first sight believed was a silver lining - a full English breakfast, it was, in fact, a mirage. The food on the menu didn't taste as good as it might. Indeed, I was reminded of the Army cookhouse and my days as a recruit.

Next was the queue for make-up, which for me meant an itchy moustache and copious dollops of Brylcreem!

I won't bore you with the filming itself as it was all terribly repetitive and tedious.

It seemed that every shot had to be repeated up to eight times. That was before you consider the acting rehearsals and then camera rehearsals.

So much for Hollywood glamour! It was a life-draining rigmarole.

To film a speech by Clement Attlee (played by David Schofield) took *all day* - even though in the finished film, we were told it would only be three minutes long.

That was Day One.

Day Two was Churchill's Blood, Toil, Tears & Sweat speech (13 May 1940, since you ask) - maybe five minutes' worth in the finished film. But again, it took all day.

Playing an MP, sitting on the Commons green leather seats, I began to sympathise with their modern-day successors who are sometimes caught napping by the cameras on the parliamentlive.tv.

By the end, I felt I knew Gary Oldman's lines as Winston better than he did.

How on earth, I pondered, do professional actors put up with such stultifyingly boring work?

There were several major stars (such as Ronald Pickup as Neville Chamberlain and Samuel West as Anthony Eden) who sat there pretty much all day doing virtually nothing.

Of course, they had much more experience of such tedium and astutely knew when they could slip away for a quick cigarette or breather.

We sheep-like extras, though, were simply herded around like Herdwicks and did what we were told.

By the last day, it was to be Churchill's We Shall Fight On The Beaches speech (4 June 1940).

'We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender...'

Spine-tingling, stirring stuff, indeed, but repeated for the umpteenth time by an actor who I kept reminding myself that had played the Sex Pistol Sid Vicious in the film Sid And Nancy in 1986 mean that it became increasingly less convincing.

Of course, as usual with films, the director took a great deal of artistic licence.

Although we all know Churchill loved cigars, that didn't mean he was allowed to smoke in the Commons.

And yet, smoke was pumped into the studio set to make it 'more realistic'. Whereas, in fact, smoking has been prohibited in the Commons chamber since 1693.

We also had order papers fluttering down from the roof - although I'm not sure if that ever happened in real-life or was merely what has become a perennial cinematographic cliché in films of the historic Commons.

So dull was filming that a highlight was the moment a camera on a crane - a beast of a contraption which swooped, swept and dived around the fake Westminster chamber - hit a plastic cowling which crashed onto my fellow MP extras below. Despite much panic, it didn't hit anyone. The film company's insurers must have heaved a big sigh of relief.

Having had a glimpse at the drudgery involved in the world behind the silver screen, I now understand why the credits-lists at the end of films go on so long that you are normally out of the cinema door and on the way home by the time they have finished rolling.

Most of my fellow 500 extras, I decided, fell into three categories. First, semi-professionals, who treat this work as their job and money is their only motivation.

Then, wannabe luvvies, failed actors and movie groupies.

Third, retired or redundant men who had absolutely bugger all else to do, and this seemed to be their life.

(I may be fooling myself but I convinced myself that I did *not* belong in this gang.)

Also, there were some decidedly weird characters.

On Day One, there was a man with Tourette's syndrome, but we didn't see him again.

Another notable oddity was a man who, poor chap, appeared unable to speak, or at least was incapable of saying anything remotely comprehensible. I never did discover whether he was loopy, had a serious speech problem, or was just a tourist who didn't understand what was going on.

Another man who's been an extra on countless films told me this production was as good as it gets – indoors, warm, sitting down, fed, and paid the full Film Artistes Association rate of pay at £88 a day. Various other payments and overtime resulted in a total of nearly £600 for three very long days. Certainly more than the full basic State Pension of £122.30 a week.

Finally home after my last day on set as the clock struck midnight, I struggled to wash the Brylcreem out of my hair.

What, you may wonder, became of my friend responsible for roping me into this silly idea?

Bizarrely, he was deemed too tall by the wardrobe department to be an MP. Instead, he was offered a part as a “hand double” in a lesser production. What a humiliation!

But I mustn't crow. Perhaps when I troop down to my local cinema, the Gate Picture House in Notting Hill, west London, when the Darkest Hour opens next week, I'll discover that, I, too, have been a victim of the final edit and don't appear at all.

If so, it will be a case of what Churchill himself famously said in very different circumstances towards the end of World War II: ‘You must be prepared for further efforts of mind and body and further sacrifices to great causes.’

The Darkest Hour is in cinemas from January 12

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