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Extra Special



Photo by Maki Strunc

Last fall, while the rest of us were starting to hunker down (or plot our escape), filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen were back in Minnesota shooting the final scenes of their black comedy, *A Serious Man*, scheduled for release this fall.

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By Laurie Savran with Brian Lambert

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The filmmakers put out a call for extras—people who could be convincing as members of the Twin Cities Jewish community, circa 1967. Laurie Savran, a Minneapolis attorney and former Minneapolis Public Library Board trustee, answered the call and was cast as one of several hundred attendees at a bar mitzvah ceremony and a funeral. The part did not require her to memorize any lines, but it did force her to suffer the horrors of a fiendish, skin-gouging bullet bra. This is her diary from her days on the set.

The Audition

I get involved because I love movies and because my cousin Raleigh Wolpert sent me an e-mail. It said the Coen brothers are looking for “Jews over 50” who want to be extras in their new movie, *A Serious Man*, which draws on images of growing up in St. Louis Park in 1967. Raleigh said the Coens are looking for “interesting” faces. Well, I’m Jewish and my face is at least as interesting as a lot of other Jews I know, so I audition.

Early on, we are emphatically told that if we get into the film, under no circumstances should we ever approach Joel or Ethan Coen on the set. If I’d wanted to break the rules, I could have mentioned to the boys that I attended Hebrew reading class with their mother, Rena, back in the late ’50s, when she was pregnant with Ethan. She was an adult then, and I was just a girl. Also, that I’d seen Rena at art events over the years and went to shiva for her when she passed away in 2001.

The audition, at a warehouse in Northeast Minneapolis, is crazy. I take one look at the huge crowds and my courage fails. I tell Cal [Appleby], my significant other of twenty-five years, “Turn the car around and drive me home, Cal. I’m not doing this.” But Cal teaches meditation in prisons and persists. He says we’ve come this far, and we’re going in.

I know so many people—some going back to my years at St. Louis Park High School. When it is my turn, the casting folks—minus Joel and Ethan—take my photo and measure every part of me. Then comes a spiel about not bringing friends onto the set and agreeing to be available twelve to fifteen hours a day if we are accepted. I leave thinking I don’t have a chance. But a couple of days later, I get a call saying, “The Coen brothers loved your hair.” I am ready for my close-up.

I am told to return a few days later for my costume fitting and hair design.

The Costume Fitting

I am paired with a Los Angeles costume professional named Mary Zophres, whom I later learn has worked with Joel and Ethan on other films. She sizes me up and begins pulling various ’60s outfits for my two scenes, the bar mitzvah and funeral. The warehouse is filled with racks of dresses, shoes, underwear, belts, purses, and scarves. Most was trucked in from Hollywood, but Zophres says some came from places such as Lula in St. Paul.

This is my unfortunate introduction to the bullet bra, a pointed device that hooks together in back along the length of my lower spine. Before I can try on anything, I have to get myself into the bra and a girdle, neither of which I am pretty sure are ever going to be seen in the movie. Then I begin testing out various outfits. I keep thinking how lucky I am to be costumed by the same person who dressed The Dude in *The Big Lebowski*, my all-time favorite Coen brothers movie.

Next I’m sent to a hairdresser, who puts my hair up in curlers. She puts another Jewish-looking woman’s hair up in a French twist. For most of the ten or so hairdressers, bouffant hairdos seem to be the order of the day.

The costume dresser reappears with a new idea for the bar mitzvah, an orange wool suit and hat. Orange? Really? I've never worn that color in my life. Next I get a brown dotted skirt and jacket to try on for the funeral. After three hours of fitting and primping, I can go home—with orders not to cut my hair. I get a pay voucher and am told to return in a month for three days of actual filming. Eventually I will earn \$7.14 an hour.

Filming: Day 1

A Bra Burner

I'm calling this day "Burn Bra After Reading," in honor of the Coen brothers' movie *Burn After Reading*, the one with George Clooney and Brad Pitt. Unfortunately, they are not in *A Serious Man*.

My movie career begins with complete incompetence. The film crew had sent me home with a diagram explaining exactly how to put rollers in my hair when I woke up. I try, but my thick hair makes it impossible. When I arrive at 5:30 a.m. at the staging location in an old warehouse at Highway 7 and Belt Line Boulevard in St. Louis Park, I look like I have been attacked.

There are probably 250 of us checking in, and there is breakfast. Those of us who are Jewish as opposed to "Jewish-looking" are shocked that the Coens have ham in the buffet. But I don't think anyone complains to them. To Joel and Ethan's credit, they use recyclable plates and utensils.

The set is like a reunion. I know or am related to at least half of the extras. There is my uncle Morry Miller and his brother, Lew, and my cousins Robyn and Josh Awend. The cantor in the movie is played by Neil Newman, whom I know from Beth El Synagogue, where my grandfather was a member.

Around 6 a.m., I head to the Over 55 sign for makeup. They make me up to look like my grandmother, who looked pretty good, so I'm only mildly offended. Then I'm sent to have my hair done. Now I feel like I'm in the movies. After the brandishing of a curling iron, they send me to wardrobe, where my bar mitzvah costume is ready to go.

The bra is back. But I must say, the orange suit is quite a hit with Uncle Morry and the cousins. Fully fitted, I am free to board the bus to the B'Nai Emet Synagogue a few blocks away, where the filming will take place.

The synagogue is surrounded by huge trucks and lighting equipment and trailers. We go into a big tent with the makeup and hair people following along, stopping us as we walk to fix us up. I am cornered throughout the day to have my hair puffed and my lipstick reapplied. Whenever we want to go inside the synagogue to use the bathroom, we are required to have an escort.



Photo by Wilson Webb

We are ushered into the sanctuary. I'm directed to a seat in the front row. This is when I first notice the cameraman, Roger Deakins, who is quite gorgeous and about my age. This is also my first sighting of Joel and Ethan. I've seen almost all of their movies; I even own a *Fargo* snow globe.

During the run-through, the cantor sings the prayer that begins " *Vzot Ha Torah, asher sahm Moshe* ." The congregation echoes the cantor at the end, the rabbi takes out the Torah, and we all stand. The Coens seem pleased that so many people know the melody and they don't have to teach it. At one point, Joel says we can sit, but no one does because the Torah was still being held up.

In the scene, the cantor calls the bar mitzvah boy up to the *Bimah*, or stage. The boy is supposed to shuffle his feet and look stoned. Our other scene has the rabbi giving the bar mitzvah boy his ceremonial Kiddush cup, and we sing the prayer *Adon Olam* as he walks back to his seat. Our only instruction is to look at the star of the moment—the cantor, the boy, the rabbi, the boy again. After a number of takes, we head back to the tent and begin waiting, and waiting, to see who will be in the smaller group of extras needed for more synagogue shoots in the afternoon.

Lunch is pretty good: baked chicken, tilapia, and salad. I notice that the Coens wait in line with the crew like everyone else, but the "do not approach" rule still applies.

Around 4 p.m., I get called back into the sanctuary. At 6 p.m., they release us for the day. By now the bra and girdle are slicing into my waist, and I feel like tearing them off right in the parking lot.

Filming: Day 2

I fool the Coen Brothers

Another 5:30 a.m. arrival. Along with some 300 other extras, I show up at the staging location for breakfast, makeup, hair, and wardrobe. Since it is now clear I won't be required to flash underwear in my scenes, I fool the Coen brothers by bringing my old bra from home. With the pointy foam inserts I had been given earlier, I can make it look like that horrible bullet bra—but it won't give me bruises on my ribs.

Today the extras are needed in the sanctuary while yesterday's scenes are shot from different angles. I've read that the Coens work like two creatures with one mind, and it's true. They don't seem to confer, but when Joel talks to the actors, it's like Ethan is doing something telepathic. Ethan says nothing, but Joel seems to be taking suggestions from him. And when Ethan talks, which isn't very often, Joel rarely adds anything, as though Ethan is saying exactly what Joel was going to say. We do about ten takes.

I have to say, I've never been to a bar mitzvah where the women didn't wear some piece of "Jewish jewelry," like a Jewish star, mezuzah, or *Chai*. Instead, most of us just get pearls. Come to think of it, the Torah reading for the boy's bar mitzvah is Behar, the reading for May, but most of the extras are dressed in fall clothing. So much for religious accuracy.

Savran's Extra Special Kit Bag**AUTHENTIC JEWELRY**

Savran says the costumers goofed when they didn't assign her fellow extras to wear "Jewish jewelry."

**VINTAGE EARRINGS**

Remnants of Savran's hip '60s, the decade when she finished college, got married, and had her first child.

MAKE-DO BULLET BRA AND FALSIES

Savran stole the falsies as a memento.

EXTRA'S SALARY

Savran's hourly pay, for which she took vacation time from her law practice.

Today at lunch, a canvas divider separates the extras from the cast and directors. They eat steak, homemade pasta, shrimp scampi, and beautiful salads while we have cafeteria-style pasta, swordfish, and chicken. After lunch, it's back to the synagogue in case we're needed.

Filming: Day 3**The Funeral of the Serious Man**

I wake up at 4:30 so I can be there by 5:30. I eat quickly because if you aren't in line for hair and makeup early, you can wait for hours. I find out that the hairdresser styles hair for my niece Kim Kivens and knows her daughter, Lily, besides.

For the funeral scene, I get the most beautiful hat and a brown checked suit, black heels, and black gloves. I'm

told I look stunning, and people *kvell* over my outfit. Inside the sanctuary, they want the older extras like Morry and Lew (both in their eighties) to sit in the front seats.

The rabbi is played by actor George Wyner, who has to recite a lot of Hebrew in the eulogy. The Coens run into a minor rebellion when Wyner starts the Kaddish prayer and we aren't told to stand. An old man sitting among the extras yells to Joel Coen that we are supposed to stand for the Kaddish. Joel realizes the mistake and dubs the man the new "assistant assistant director." After that, we always stand and recite the Kaddish with Wyner, which is good because he needs our help getting through the Hebrew.

In this scene, the rabbi keeps reminding the congregation that the deceased was "a serious man." On a bathroom break in the lower level, I get lucky and see Joel Coen walking by. I look him in the eye and say, "Hey, dude, I love being in the movie." Or rather I would have if I'd had my wits about me. Actually, I shook his hand and said, "Thank you very much." I know this is against the rules, but what are they going to do? Fire me?

I confess the bigger thrill is shaking hands with that handsome cameraman Roger Deakins. I tell him I am a big fan, even though I'd only heard of him two days before.

Around 1 p.m., it's a wrap. Back at the staging location, we disrobe and say goodbye to our fleeting life in the movies. Desperate for a souvenir, I hurriedly pocket the little pointed falsies I had been given for my bra. Three days later, many of us convene for an extras' party above the 331 Club in Northeast. I wear my vintage election dress from 1968, the one with the pictures of donkeys, elephants, and the White House. I also wear my vintage hat, rhinestone bracelet, and go-go boots. Let me tell you, I was a hit.

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