

The Twilight Lexicon interview with principle casting agent Lana Veenker for the film adaptation of Twilight by Stephenie Meyer.

I would like to thank Lana for taking time out of her busy schedule to send this to us. You are truly gifted at what you do.

Lexicon - When casting for a movie adaption of a book, do you read the book, or just the script?

Lana - We try to read the book, if there's time! Sometimes everything comes down the pike fast and furious, though, so just keeping up with script revisions is a challenge.

Also, reading the book can influence our casting choices...for better or for worse. Sometimes, the script is significantly different from the original novel. Since we ultimately need to cast the characters as they are written in the script, being influenced by the book can be a problem. But when the script and book are similar, reading the source material can add additional insight and back story. It's always worth doing the research and then determining how much to take into consideration.

Lexicon - If you have read the book, are you a fan?

Lana - I read "Twilight" and really enjoyed it. I'm looking forward to reading the others, as the potential movie sequels approach!

Lexicon - What types of qualities in an actor do you look for when casting small roles?

Lana - The same qualities we look for when casting large roles: actors who are professional, a pleasure to work with and who possess strong acting skills.

But actors reading for small day player parts also need to understand that it isn't a movie about Waiter #3. If the character's only line is "Would you like some more coffee?", the actor should just say the line, simply and believably.

Unless a one-liner has been specifically written to be quirky or odd, there's no need to spend hours torturing over the character's back story ("I was frightened by a redheaded clown as a child and as a result, am terrified by all redheads, therefore I'm going to whimper my line while trembling the coffee pot"). Just keep it simple and real. Listen and respond. Be in the moment. That's all.

Lexicon - There was a large casting call for Native American young men. What goes into organizing a casting call like this?

Lana - We hired a PR company to put out a press release to five NW states and British Columbia, then I spent a lot of time fielding media calls and doing interviews for newspapers, radio and television stations all over the place.

We also put out a casting breakdown to all the area talent agencies and theatre companies. We contacted American Indian reservations, organizations, businesses and clubs. We posted information on our [website](#), our MySpace pages ([Lana Veenker Casting](#), [Tools 4 Actors](#) and [Rutabaga Background Casting](#)) and [blog](#), as well as a few other resources.

We even sent staff down to cast on the Navajo Nation in the Arizona desert. And of course, the LA casting office conducted a search of its own.

Lexicon - Solomon Trimble (Sam Uley) came out of this casting call, what was it about Solomon that caught Catherine Hardwicke's interest?

Lana - Solomon is an actor we've cast in other projects, so we already liked him and thought Catherine might, too. He's charming and professional; he takes direction well and really makes an effort to connect with the other actors. Plus, he's got fantastically long and beautiful hair. And he's just a great guy. He and Catherine were hugging by the end of his audition, as I recall.

Lexicon - There seemed to be a great deal of pressure to find Jacob Black. What things were you looking for in an actor to play that role?

Lana - This was indeed a tough one. Besides possessing the right look, charisma and acting chops, the actor needed to be someone who could grow into the character that Jacob becomes in the sequels. Jacob transforms in many ways and his role becomes more significant over time. We needed to take that into consideration.

Catherine really, really wanted to hire an authentic American Indian from our open casting calls to play the role. There were a few amateurs we brought in whom she fell in love with that went on to multiple callback sessions and screen tests, but ultimately it was determined that they didn't have enough experience to carry such a difficult and significant role as Jacob.

She definitely wants us to keep them in mind for the sequels, though! I know there are some smaller parts or even background roles that they could be right for.

Lexicon - Who is your favorite character among those you cast?

Lana - The roles of Jacob and Sam were a lot of fun, because it was exciting to bring in so many people we'd never met before and who had never auditioned for major roles in a big feature film. But we also saw some adorable little girl actresses for the role of Young Bella (seen in the ballet studio scenes) and some pretty mean Frat Boys (who threaten Bella in Port Angeles).

Lexicon - You mentioned to me that you cast several parts that were cut from the film, is that difficult to see a part cut after you spent time finding “just the right person” for the role?

Lana - Luckily, we got the news before putting much work into those parts, but I have (on previous projects) spent a lot of time casting roles that end up getting cut. It's the worst when it happens *after* the actor has already been booked, because he or she is so excited about getting cast. When you have to break the news that the role has been cut, it's heartbreaking.

Sometimes, the actors actually do the work and then the scene is cut in post-production. That's hard, too. We had that happen to an actress on "Feast of Love" with Morgan Freeman. Director Robert Benton was a sweetheart, though, and insisted that the production company send the actress in question a DVD of her deleted scene, so that she'd at least have it for her reel and as a souvenir.

Lexicon - I am sure you have had the opportunity to hear Catherine Hardwicke's vision for the film, can you tell us how that vision drives the casting choices made?

Lana - Catherine truly wanted to inject some diversity into the film, since most of the lead characters are demographically similar. So she had us looking at different age groups, shapes, sizes and ethnicities, to try and balance it out a bit. For the roles of Jacob and Sam, she really wanted kids whom you could believe lived on a reservation. She didn't picture them being played by spoiled brat Beverly Hills teenagers, for example. That wouldn't be right for this film.

Lexicon - Are you surprised by the hype surrounding this film already?

Lana - Yes! I feel like we've been working on the next "Harry Potter"!

I saw Stephenie Meyer on set the other day and was telling her that we've been getting mail and friend requests from kids all over the world: Ireland, Saudi Arabia, you name it. And our press release for the Jacob casting call has been translated into languages I don't even speak.

Of course, most of the kids who write us have never acted before, are too young for the roles and/or live thousands of miles away. But it doesn't stop them from dreaming! It's cute, but overwhelming and sometimes a little sad, because we know how much it means to them and we simply don't have the time to respond.

Lexicon - Is there any advice you can give our users who want to become actors?

Lana - Lots!

First, a few words relating to any future casting of the Twilight series:

Sequels:

IF there are any sequels (note the word "IF"), all the same actors who are playing the leads in this film will be coming back to play their respective roles in the sequels. So there's no need to send us letters saying "I missed the opportunity to play Alice in 'Twilight,' but could I audition for that role in 'New Moon'?" Not going to happen! :)

Lead roles:

Except in rare and publicized cases (such as trying to find the right American Indian teenager for Jacob), lead roles in big movies are typically destined for established, name actors. Producers have to cast people who are already famous in the leading parts, to raise money and to reassure their investors that people will show up at the box office.

That's just the business. If you don't have a track record, you need to start building one by getting some training, signing with an agent, auditioning for smaller projects first, etc.

Location:

99% of the time, producers will *not* pay to travel an actor to play a role (unless he or she is famous; see above). So, to be considered at all for a role, you should either look for films casting in your area or move to a city where films are being cast, in order to be a local.

Even if you're willing to pay for the travel on your own dime, no one wants to take the risk on an out-of-town actor. (What if you miss your flight? What if the shoot keeps getting delayed and you have to replace your plane ticket five times? What if we change the schedule and we need you RIGHT NOW for a wardrobe fitting...and you're 1000 miles away? What if we fly you all the way out here and it turns out you're not right for the role or you're crazy or irresponsible?).

Yikes! Too much stress in an already stressful business. It's safer to hire actors we know and love, and who live within the vicinity of the shoot. There is no shortage of willing and available talent in our own backyard. Our job is to *reduce* the risk of problems for our producers, not *increase* it. So get to know your local casting directors and start there.

Breaking into the Business:

I talk a lot about how to break into the business in my online course, [Marketing Tools for Actors](#), but here are a few quick tips:

- * Get absolutely the best training you can get. Don't waste your time with second best.
- * Do a LOT of research before choosing an acting coach, school, headshot photographer or agent. Get referrals from professional, working actors or other highly reputable sources.
- * Stay away from so-called modeling schools that also pose as agencies. Usually they just want to sell you expensive classes, photos and trips to acting contests. Most bona fide casting directors do not work with these kinds of agencies. (Hint: if the "agency" is located in a busy shopping mall where lots of starry-eyed teenagers hang out, or if they

try to sell themselves to you by saying they can make you famous--in exchange for thousands of dollars in classes and photographs--RUN!)

Agents shouldn't charge you money for *anything*, except a commission off of work they find for you. And anyway, you should be trying to sell yourself to them; not the other way around. If they're good agents, they're already swamped with eager and talented actors seeking representation. They don't *need* to recruit. *You* should be convincing *them* of your ability. Otherwise, not a good sign.

* Audition for professional theatres and independent films, to build your resume. Look for companies and individuals whose previous work demonstrates strong production values. You want projects that you can invite agents and casting directors to come see, without being embarrassed about the quality. A small indie film that turns out great could win awards at film festivals and launch your career much faster than if you pounded the pavement in LA for years!

* Generate your own acting work and PR. If you want an agent to sign you, you have to already be out there creating a name for yourself. Agents want go-getters who will make them money. They don't want someone who isn't generating any buzz or who will sit around waiting for the agent to do all the work.

* Make things happen. But do it professionally. ;) Don't be a stalker.

* By all means, try working as an extra once or twice. You'll get the hang of being on a movie set and find out if you even enjoy standing around all day waiting for something to happen! Shoot days can be notoriously long and arduous, but if you're really thinking about pursuing a career in professional acting, I think it's a good idea to learn the lingo and the protocol early on. If anyone's interested, I have posted a checklist of how to behave on set and a glossary of film terms on [our extras company MySpace page](#) (under the blog).

That's about it. We're thrilled to be working on this great project with such a talented cast and crew. I was on set while they were shooting the cafeteria scenes the other day and it looked fantastic. Can't wait to see the final product!

Thank you again Lana for giving us such a wonderfully insightful look into the work that goes into finding the right actors to make Stephenie's dream a reality.

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