

Talented young actors fresh out of acting school ready to take on the world. Sounds like the premise for yet another 'reality' TV show but this isn't TV, this is life.

**Kate Dougan**

Let's face it. Actors have it tough. People joke about all actors being waiters but the grim truth is that in Australia only 6 per cent of actors can be employed at any one time. That leaves the other 94 per cent out in the cold. It's a daunting statistic and one that acting students get hit with right from the start.

Sitting in a café in Sydney's inner city Darlinghurst, John Schwarz, 25, looks every bit the actor. Young, hip and talented, he graduated from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA), Australia's foremost acting school, in 1998. Fresh out of another audition, this time for a soft drink commercial, Schwarz knows only too well what he must suffer for the sake of his art. "It was pretty weird, like obviously lots and lots of actors going for it," he says.

pretending we were playing golf for nearly half an hour, just ridiculous. You do a few of those a week."

The routine of auditioning can take its toll on any actor. For most of us the stress of a job interview, like the audition, is quickly forgotten after we've secured our place in the work force, but for an up-and-coming actor the audition is an essential and constant part of life.

"Going for them week in and week out and being knocked back and not letting your self-esteem be too damaged, that's the biggest challenge for me. You have to really just keep going, you can't get too upset about getting rejected," says Schwarz.

All this would not be possible though without the vigilant efforts of that breed of people that every actor covets: the agent. A

# THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS



John Schwarz, actor, 25, would rather dig holes than work on the set of *Summer Bay*.

"The script said you had to be a good golf player and I was acting with a really well known Australian actor. He was in there with me running around the room

good agent is an actor's lifeline, their umbilical chord to the industry. "It's really, really tough if you haven't got an agent, you can't work at all," says Schwarz. "And

it's tough if you're out there and you just decide to become an actor to try to get an agent because agents don't really open their books very much at all."

Ros Bredan is a casting director with Maura Fay Casting. She acknowledges it is difficult for unknown actors to find agents but says that once you've got that elusive audition, talent is the only thing that counts.

"As the casting director, I don't look at people's background. It is whoever is best on the day in the audition that gets the role. I don't care where people come from," she says.

For some, even the best agent can't guarantee a place at all auditions.

"I've got friends in the industry that didn't go to NIDA and they always whinge about it and say that they can't get into certain auditions. The casting director at the Sydney Theatre Company won't even bother seeing people unless they're a graduate from one of the schools. They all joke about it as being a Willy Wonka gold ticket to get in there," says Schwarz.

Schwarz's fellow graduate, Damion Hunter, agrees. "Every time you go to an audition or something one of the main questions is always like 'oh how was NIDA? How did you find that?' rah rah rah."

At 23, Hunter is young to graduate from the school and has more than auditions on his mind.

"Actors' careers don't really take off until they're in their 30s so I'm actually pretty young to be storming off into the acting thing, you know. So I'm just more worried about money rather than acting," he says.

Desperation can make people do crazy things and the acting world is no exception. Schwarz was offered a role on one Australian soap but declined.

"I was offered a part for two years on one of the soaps but I hate them. I'd rather work digging holes for two years than go on the set of *Summer Bay*. I just couldn't handle it. I don't even think it's being picky, it's like if you had a choice whether or not you could give yourself cancer, you



Damion Hunter, actor, 23, is more worried about money than acting.

know you just wouldn't do it. I'd end up hating what I love most."

Casting agents and directors, when assessing an actor's potential for a role, are constantly judging the look of a candidate and in some cases this can be even more important than their skills as an actor.

Schwarz is quick to point out that "You've gotta take yourself really seriously in your appearance and who you

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are and what you're about because you are a commodity, you're selling a product but if you get caught up in that too much it'll consume you."

As an Aboriginal, Hunter also knows the critical nature of look.

"Casting directors or agents don't have any imagination. One thing I notice is a black man will never get cast for a role unless the character synopsis says black man and that kind of pisses me off," he says.

The odds stacked against these young actors beg the question, why do it? Hunter, who began acting at school, tells a

story that hints at the passion and determination that drives these young actors on.

"In year 11 my theatre arts teacher pulled me aside and said, 'What are you doing here?', and I was like a really cocky little bastard, 'I want to be an actor', you know.

"He said, 'You're not going to be an actor, you're not going anywhere, you've got no talent, you're lazy, you're boring.

Half these people in this class, they've got the talent to go somewhere and they're going to go places, you're just wasting your time.' Stuff like that is really crushing at times."

But Hunter had the last laugh.

"The second year [at NIDA] I was helping out auditions for the new intake and I saw one of the students he [my old theatre arts teacher] had pointed out [at school] that was going to go places. She got axed on the first day and I was like, 'yeah, she's going to get further than me now, is she?'"