

# An ensemble production

It's not the conventional way to navigate the profession, but, for some actors, being part of a co-operative agency plays to their organisational and diplomatic strengths, writes **Jennifer Reischel**

**W**hen I graduated from drama school, I was sent out into the world with some simple, yet strong words of caution – 1) avoid Theatre in Education, 2) don't partake in too many cruises and 3) stay away from co-operative agencies. Although rather cynically labelled as a second-rate option and habitually perceived as unprofessional in their dealings by some industry professionals ("I want to talk to an agent, not an actor"), I believe it is time to put prejudices about actor co-ops to rest.

It is notable that some co-ops have, despite staunch opposition and competition, stood the test of time, showing a profit and healthy working business 30 years on from when they were first founded. Since my graduation, reality television (among other things) has multiplied the interest in professional performance careers to a staggering extent. Times are changing and it is now not uncommon for those completing their training at prestigious establishments such as RADA to write off asking for representation from co-ops.

So how do they function? The general gist is that a group of actors, either unable to find representation or unhappy with their current, traditional agent, decide to take matters into their own hands, collaborating to form, run and manage their own representation agency. Any commission earned (usually between 10-20%) is placed back into the pot to pay for space rental, internet, postal, and other running costs. The main difference to joining a traditional agency is that as an actor (and if not in full-time acting employment), you will find yourself spending a certain amount of days per week in the office taking on the role of an agent. Rather than handing the casting process over to a third party, the actors themselves trawl the office inbox for emails from Spotlight to submit fellow members (and sometimes their own details) for acting opportunities. Switching roles from business deal-maker to professional actor is therefore one of the required key skills.

Further tasks include auditioning and considering new joiners and viewing work of current fellow members,

as well as participating in the general running and decision-making to keep the company on its feet. Most co-ops tend to be administered equally by all their actors, although some appoint what is known as a main agent. This person tends to be employed on a salary (not commission), functions solely as an agent (with no acting aspirations) and treads a fine line by pursuing a neutral point of view while also joining the democratic decision pool with their acting clients/assisting agents.

Getting down to the nitty-gritty, what distinctive opportunities can a co-operative agency offer a professional actor? Firstly, this is most certainly a way to be trained up in the business side of the industry, including learning marketing skills, and as a result, seeing the full picture of being a working actor. This can be extremely useful for those starting out, but also something to consider for the more established veteran – it is common for actors to branch out into other roles within the arts, where an understanding of and experience in business matters will often be expected, rather than just desired.

As a co-op member, you are in control of your career in so much as that you are consistently aware of the variety of casting opportunities. Not only do you have access to the submissions database to see where you stand, but most importantly, you can follow through on your own if you feel a submittal has been missed. When considering new members, one can also boycott the inclusion of an actor deemed too similar to oneself in look and skill set.

Additionally, co-ops act as a stable network, inspiring solidarity and supplying an assortment of like-minded listening ears. The business can often prove to be rather a lonely one if one is out of work and hopping from temp job to temp job. It can be reassuring to have a regular group to vent and share with. Finally, you tend to find a more open approach towards TiE, corporate role play, and similar borderline acting prospects, often rejected or at least questioned strongly by traditional agents.

In contrast, many co-ops (particularly those that do not appoint a main agent) still struggle to maintain the



Dan Carey and Joanne Mitchell from North of Watford Actors' Agency – a co-operative agency which celebrated 25 years in the industry in 2009 – in Ven Y Va at the Hebden Shorts, part of the 2010 Hebden Bridge Arts Festival

standard of business etiquette and professionalism required by those industry figures ruling the casting and production roost. The lack of a singular voice for the agency tends to cause mistrust and prejudice, while quick and strong decisions can be hard to come by when everything must be equally run by and commented on by every single member. Furthermore, messages and information can get lost in transition between the ever-rotating office brigade – some personalities will inevitably be more suitable to acting than conversing in the role of an agent.

Not to be forgotten are the joining fees (these can range up to £150 or so), designed to pay for your initial agency training and to cover start-up admin costs.

Politics can reign in a co-op, and you may find yourself arguing with

members when your views on their casting age and type differs to theirs.

And of course, it is good to be aware of the finance factor as you deal with fitting in your agency hours and commitments (which are unpaid) with ushering in the West End or part-time sales work to keep your bank account afloat as you pursue an acting career.

Pursuing this line of representation is not for everyone. With involvement comes responsibility and the actor has to be capable as well as eager to pursue business, work as part of a team and join a semi-office culture. Joining a co-operative agency will not solve all your woes – but it can make you feel more of an active participant in shaping your career and making your own decisions in regards to which parts of the industry you choose to focus on.