

Taking In the Sites

# Internet Offers New Venue for Aspiring Entertainers

By CHARLES L. P. FAIRWEATHER

Forget the cold calls. Don't bother dreaming of being discovered at the local coffee shop counter. Starving artists can now be discovered even while they sleep, as long as they have left their best work somewhere on the World Wide Web.

The medium through which companies are trying to sell all manner of products is also a medium that

entertainment industry professionals are using to sell themselves.

"Exposure is everything," said Mark Baker, who along with his twin brother, Mathew, founded and runs a Web site called World Wide Stars. Their site, started as a free resource about 18 months ago, now charges each performer \$99 for a year of time on line.

"I wanted to have a grace period where people could get on and have nothing to lose," Mr. Baker said of

the first six months he offered free. The site now boasts 250 members; two commercials have been cast exclusively from the site.

World Wide Stars accepts only union-affiliated performers who already have agents, but plans to add a section for unrepresented talent. That could prove to be a real asset to aspiring stars trapped by the entertainment industry's own Catch-22 — you can't get a job until you join a union but you can't join the union

until you've had a union job. Through this new medium, anybody's face and résumé can be posted for industry professionals to see.

There are many variations of this setup on the Web, with prices and content that vary greatly. Some sites, like Internet Stage and Screen Resources and Centerstage@Buzz post job listings, offer reviews of current stage and screen shows and all manner of pre- and post-production personnel and services, and even maintain on-line chat rooms.

One site in particular, Screen Test Online, wanted to do even more. Jeff Lucas, with the help of Charles Wyke-Smith at Printz Electronic Design, tried to bring the whole audition to your monitor. The service, which had about 200 performers' material on line, offered the ability to search for a performer with specific characteristics. The script for searching the product would allow you to look, for example, for a 14-year-old girl with red hair and green eyes whose skills include juggling and pole vaulting. And if you found her, you could download and view her one-minute performance.

The hitch, according to Mr. Lucas, was, "We were two years ahead of the game." Unfortunately, even with today's streaming of images and sounds, a technology that was unavailable in October 1995, the video material cannot be delivered with the speed and resolution necessary for professional use.

Currently, casting agents send out a call for whatever type of actor they need for a part. Agents get the specifications, go through their files and grab photos and résumés of the clients they think meet the requirements. Then the casting agent has to sift through a pile of material and let the agents know which actors they want to audition.

But now, as Andrew Williams, vice president for creative advertising at 20th Century Fox puts it, producers can turn to their computers instead of issuing mass casting calls. "Instead of going through the normal channels, casting calls with hundreds of applicants, they can just sit down at a computer, click, click and they are done," Mr. Williams said.

"As these sites become filled with actors and actresses, they will become accepted," he added. While no one is yet doing lunch on the Web, "When people realize that they can get quality people for their films, the industry will come around."

Graham Elwood has his résumé posted with World Wide Stars and was one of 15 men called to audition for a national car manufacturer's commercial. All the actors who auditioned were culled from the Web site. While Mr. Elwood did not get the part, he said the site was "an excellent tool."

"With this, they can narrow the field just by sitting at a computer," he added.

Screen Test Online conducted its own test as part of a privately financed experiment using a high-speed network put together by Pacific Bell for the trial in California. This proved to be too expensive for general consumption. A testament to their work remains on the Internet, and you can play introductory clips for about 40 of the participants in the original project. But be prepared to use your browser's film-playing extension, or player software, and to spend 10 or 15 minutes downloading each film clip to your computer over a 28.8-kilobit modem. But when the technology for media delivery improves, Mr. Lucas said, "We'll be there with bells on."

## WHERE TO GO

- ✻ WORLD WIDE STARS  
<http://www.worldstars.com>
- ✻ INTERNET STAGE AND SCREEN RESOURCES  
<http://www.stagenet.com>
- ✻ CENTERSTAGE@BUZZ  
<http://www.buzznyc.com>
- ✻ SCREEN TEST ONLINE  
<http://www.screenetestonline.com>
- ✻ THEATRE CENTRAL  
<http://www.theatre-central.com>
- ✻ THE VIRTUAL HEADBOOK  
<http://www.xmission.com/~wintrnx/virtual.html>

