

A SOLID SUPPORT

Having taken roles in films ranging from *1408* and *The Dark Knight* to *Hanna* and Ken Loach's forthcoming *The Angels' Share*, actor **Paul Birchard** knows first-hand the importance that supporting characters have to a film's success. Here he sheds some light onto this under-appreciated aspect of filmmaking.

It starts with the intense desire to become an actor in the first place—no matter what the consequences. When I was young, studying acting and theatre at UCLA in the 1970s, I was riven with the nagging doubt that if I ever really dared to pursue this calling, I still might never 'make it' as an actor.

This barely submerged inner turmoil reached its height when

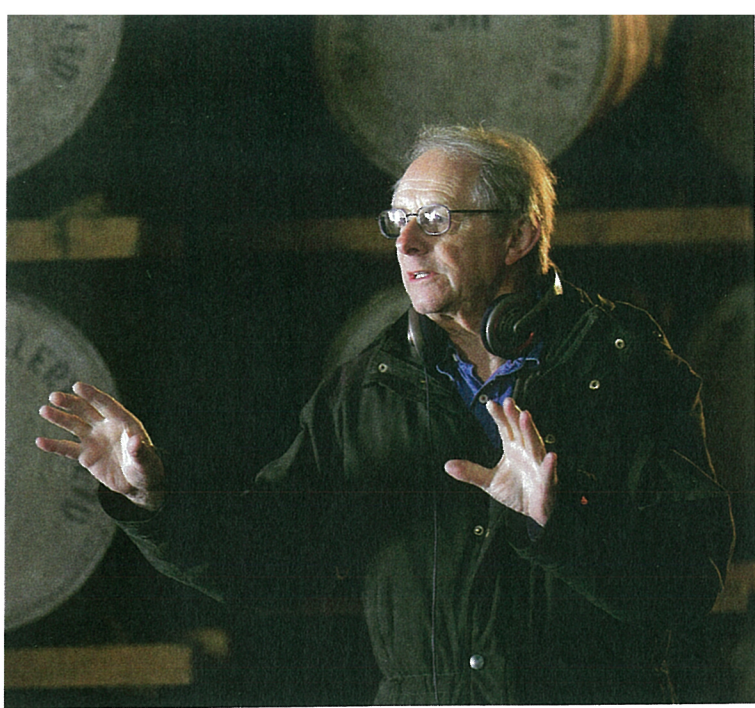
I found myself sitting in traffic one day in Westwood, California, waiting for the lights to change. I must have been muttering but I wasn't aware of it until I heard my own voice speak out, distinctly. 'If I can't be an actor, I'll die!' The red lights turned green, and I moved forward—the direction I've taken ever since, to be an actor, first and foremost, come what may.

As Michael Caine has famously observed, if you can do *anything* other than being an actor, you should do it. You should only pursue acting as a career if you really feel there is nothing else in this world or beyond that satisfies that deep need to express your humanity as fully as possible, in all of its crazy shades and colours. I have been fortunate enough to consistently find work as an

actor, primarily in movies (which I love the most) and television, and also on stage, in radio and voice-overs. But there have of course been gaps, difficulties and disappointments, tests of patience and plenty of opportunities to develop fortitude, courage and perseverance. Indeed, when I was working on John Boorman's *The Tailor of Panama*—a picture I was mostly cut out of—one of my fellow acting veterans wisely observed, "You know, acting is easy. It's a joy! It's gravy! It's being an actor that's difficult."

Some years back I found myself out in Kenya on an episode of *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, in the company of two wonderful actors, Paul Freeman and the late James Gammon. I don't know why they were having this particular conversation that afternoon but, as I was standing nearby, I overheard Jim saying, "It's a game of attrition. You start out in your 20s and there are 10,000 of you. Then you hit your 30s and there are 400 of you. Then you're in your 40s and one guy's making more money in real estate and another guy's making more money in computers and finally you're in your 50s and they say, 'Get me Wilford Brimley!' 'He's working.' 'Get me Richard Farnsworth!' 'He's working.' '[Sigh] Well then, get me Gammon!'"





Paul Birchard has a supporting role in *The Angels' Share* (opposite) from director Ken Loach (above)

It was a revelation to me. "That's my game plan!" I said, quietly. Jim Gammon looked up. He didn't say a word, but there was deep understanding in his eyes. So at some point, right in the beginning or later on, as age and the choices we've made begin to display their effects on our bodies and faces, we become 'character actors', 'supporting actors', 'day-players' or—that old-fashioned term that can still pack a poignant sting—'bit-part actors'.

But however small or apparently insignificant the roles, supporting players really fill out the tapestry of a movie and make or break the vivid texture of it. Who could forget Rob Reiner's mother declaring that 'I'll have what she's having' in *When Harry Met Sally*? Or the social worker vetting Robin Williams as he manically plunges into and out of drag in *Mrs. Doubtfire*? Or anything that Margo Martindale has ever done? Or Ned Beatty? Or Charles Durning? Or Bill Nunn? Any movie star at the top of her or his game completely understands the essential function of the supporting actor and, in my experience, most of them acknowledge and support

you on the day—and it often is only one day.

Robert Redford, for example, made a point of coming over to a pal of mine who had a day on *Spy Game* and saying quietly to him, "You know, you've got about the most difficult job there is—to come onto a movie for only one day." That particular day—player also happened to be an award-winning stage actor, but that sort of thing doesn't make the task of the supporting actor any easier when the camera rolls.

Michael Caine is also on record as saying that the more the supporting actors can do in a scene, the better he likes it. It's one scene less for him to carry as the star of the picture. And, from our point of view, it's great to be in the show; not to mention the reassuring feeling of confidence in your own technique you get when you are holding up a piece of paper with lines on it just out of shot for Martin Sheen, or taking turns forgetting lines with Cate Blanchett, or saving Kevin Spacey's bacon when he forgets his words.

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Feature Supporting Character

experience. When I worked on *1408*, for example, I was amazed to discover, as he walked onto the location, that John Cusack is six foot three, with the build and quick reflexes of a boxer! It was also a surprise to learn, as we conversed before a take, that he had never performed in a Shakespeare play before, not even in high school!

When I worked on *The Dark Knight* (as Cop with Fat Thug) I was able to watch the late Heath Ledger during the scene in which Gary Oldman enters the holding-cell area and warns everyone to treat the Joker with extreme caution. These shots took most of the morning and half of the afternoon and the camera was never on the Joker, who was sitting 20 feet away in his holding pen. In fact, he didn't even need to be there. But Ledger was there, radiating a menace and mercurial violence that was palpable, even while apparently doing nothing out of shot. This was acting of a very high order and it was a privilege to experience it. Ledger was not

stand-offish or self-absorbed, but his concentration and the power of his imagination during *other actors' shots* were simply breathtaking to witness.

Michael Caine also advises actors to *never blink* during a take. And he's right... up to a point. When I was just starting out I worked with Colin Nutley, a superb writer/director, on the *Screen Two* episode 'Words of Love'. In one scene I had to shake the hand of Buddy Holly (played by Pancho Russell). My character, Tommy Allsup, had been the lead guitar player on Buddy's last tour and it was a poignant moment because, even though they thought they were just saying goodbye as normal, it was actually the last time they would ever see one another. We shook hands, I smiled, but the director didn't call cut. He kept running. I kept hold of Russell's hand and continued to smile... and then came 'Cut!' After the scene was shot, Nutley took me aside and explained that he'd kept running until I'd blinked. That blink

Birchard found working on *The Angels' Share* a creative and collaborative experience

gave him the perfect place to cut to the next scene.

When you're auditioning for a movie, a lot of the time it takes place in front of a small handcam in a casting director's office. Some actors resent auditioning this way. But I find that a blink, a glance, an eyebrow slightly raised or a new word thrown in at the end can help the director and editor see how they can cut away to the next scene. These small signals indicate that here is an actor who understands the demands of cinematic storytelling, and who can be depended upon to help them build their movie.

Last spring, a series of happy coincidences led to an audition for Ken Loach. I wanted to work with him, of course. I love the way he tells stories of 'ordinary' people whose far from ordinary qualities emerge under the tough circumstances of their lives. But what of the story? The character? Loach thinks it best to keep the plot fairly secret. I'd heard the actors often aren't even given the script, but only sides, a day at a time. And he shoots *in sequence!* And what were the chances that he'd be looking for an American actor for a Scottish project?

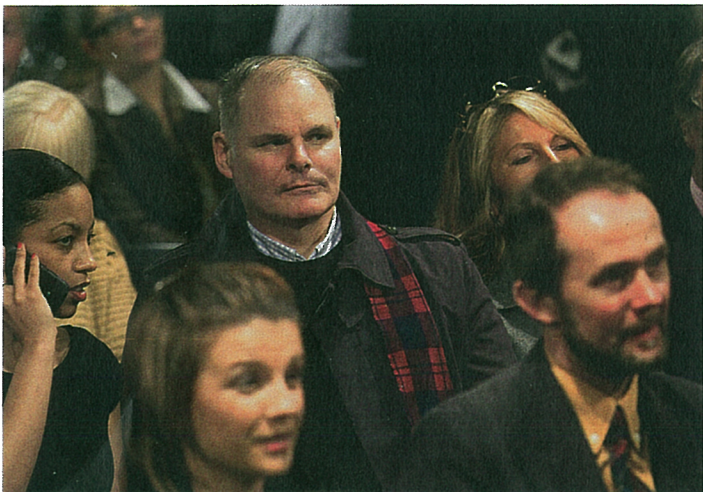
Pretty good, as it turned out. In June 2011 I headed off to Tain, on Scotland's northeast coast, to work on *The Angels' Share*—a title which refers to that portion of whisky which evaporates from the barrel

during ageing—and find out if all the rumours of Loach's technique were true. It's written, like all recent Loach films, by Paul Laverty, who is quietly humorous, calmly determined. It's clear that Laverty's script has something to do with Scotland's national drink. But can I tell you more?

Uh, no, not much. The rumours are true; you are only given the pages you're working on.

Is the script sacrosanct? Probably, but Loach and Laverty are quite content to allow the actors complete freedom to say it and do it in their own way. In fact they encourage it. The experience on set is easy, lively, and creative. Actors and non-actors are on the same level, working under the same conditions, responding to the same moments. Two cameras covering crowd scenes mean that close-ups are caught unobtrusively as a scene unfolds. Loach was effortlessly inventive as he directed a large group of non-actors in one scene—and each magically assumed a distinct presence, fully engaged in the story, under his deft, masterful direction.

The experience of working with Ken Loach is one of being completely natural, accepted and appreciated by the director and all of one's colleagues. Now, I can't wait until the summer to find out what actually happens in the story. *The Angels' Share* opens on June 1 ●



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Cinematographer Julian Court (*Birdsong*)

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