

As a theatrical agent, I'm used to dealing with monstrous egos and what in the business is called 'the artistic temperament'. Translated that usually means a toxic brew of low cunning, tantrums when thwarted and vanity on a massive scale.

Nowadays it's mainly the ones with limited talent, the so called D listers, who like to throw their weight around, need flattery by the bucket load and are as ruthless and devious as sidewinders when they are chasing a role. You soon learn to be just as devious if you're going to survive in our profession and I'm a survivor.

In my one man agency, Janine Corbeau is a perfect example of the D list celebrity actress. She'd started off in soft porn, kept the casting couches warm in a few producers' offices, got parts in low budget horror movies and then married Leo Van Rick, a Harvard academic who wrote stream of consciousness novels with no plot and little punctuation.

It may have been the effect of her recent marriage to Van Rick but when Janine came to see me in my office that morning, it soon became clear that she was setting her sights a lot higher than her usual skinflicks.

"Look Foxy," she said, "I hear Grant Tayborg is casting for his next picture by some old Russian guy and I want you to get him to let me read for it."

I managed to hide a grin. Grant had just finished a screenplay based on Chekhov's play 'The Three Sisters'. I'd read it and it was going to be very tricky to pull off and would depend very much on the skill and sensitivity of the main actors. The thought of Janine as one of the sisters was ludicrous. Janine however gets regular work in the straight to DVD adult market and this means I earn a good commission for putting her up for roles that she probably would get anyway without

an agent. She is one of what I call my bread and butter clients so therefore I don't want to antagonise her. I have to tread carefully. More than most, she demands the regular flattery injections that are all part of an agent's stock in trade.

"So which role are you interested in?"

"Why Irina of course. The youngest one. The other sisters are far too old. I haven't read it all the way through yet but Leo tells me I'd be perfect for it. He wants me to change my image and do something really intellectual to show them I'm a serious actress. Monroe did it when she was married to Arthur Miller."

I was surprised. Leo may be a screwed up writer who makes James Joyce look like an easy commuter read, but even he must have known Chekhov was out of Janine's league. I guessed the first flush of infatuation with Janine hadn't yet worn off. I wasn't worried until it turned out she had another string to her bow.

"Leo's uncle is willing to put up half the money for the picture," she added. "He's very fond of me. He's really keen to help with my career. Some Russian may be putting up the other half but I can handle him. Most Russians are permanently horny. No problem there. I can do horny."

I hid my concern. I wanted Joan Cross for the part. Joan is a highly talented young actress from a theatre background and that rare being among the artistes I represent, a genuinely nice young woman. If I ever have a daughter, I'd want her to be like her. Joan would be ideal as Irina.

In Chekhov's play, Irina is the youngest of the three sisters, full of spirit, intelligence and idealism whose fiancé is killed in a duel. It could be a breakthrough role for Joan, but the lure of the uncle's money might be a potent factor in Janine being chosen. I knew that Grant's producer, Fred Makin, was having difficulty selling the Chekhov to investors. Joan had recently read for the part and Grant was

impressed. He'd have to be really strong willed however to stand up to Fred, a producer anxious to shore up the finances for a movie that might do well on the Art House circuit but bomb at the mainstream box office. With all this going on with Leo's uncle, there was a good chance that Janine would get the part.

I needed to secure an audition for Janine if I wanted to keep her on my books but I had to think of a way for her to fail it so that the prospect of the uncle's money helping to back the picture wouldn't save her. It would all depend on how she read at the audition. Money up front counts with producers and I guessed she'd get it if she showed even a modest degree of acting competence and to be fair she did have a certain basic know how around a set, always knew her lines and hit her chalk marks first time. Grant was a good technical director. They could shoot round her in the difficult scenes.

"How do you see the character of Irina then?" I asked.

"Leo says she virginal so I need to tone down my sex appeal."

She tossed her hair back and sighed, a new mannerism copied from the latest Streep movie.

"I do sex with taste though. When I did the strip scene in 'Boys Beware' one reviewer in 'Ass' magazine said I was 'post ironic'. I guess that's a classy way of saying I'm intellectual. I rang him to find out what he meant but they'd fired him after the issue came out.

She preened herself in the mirror opposite my desk.

"I can alter the image you know. I thought of having the boob job I had done for 'Martian Madam' reduced. It's easy enough to slip the silicone back in when the shoot is over."

"Have you done any work on the script yet?"

She frowned.

“Leo isn’t very patient with me going over the lines. He once took classes at the Strasberg studio in New York and he’s still into that Method shit. Says it’s all got to come from within and the actress playing Irina has to think of wild geese flying over the steppes in spring. I guess I need a little more help than that. What the hell have flying geese to do with it? And this Foxy is where you come in. You are going to help me prepare for the reading.”

“You want me to coach you?”

“You know what these arty directors want. The directors I usually work with just tell me to show a bit more cleavage or hitch up my skirt and leave the rest to Nature but an intellectual like Tayborg will be looking for other things. You can tell me what they are.”

She saw my reaction. Her voice hardened.

“Come on. You haven’t had to bust your ass much to get me parts before, so now it’s about time you started earning your commission. I can easily find another agent.”

It was as I thought. My regular money earner would be off elsewhere if I didn’t show I was doing everything I could to help her land Irina. I needed to think. No way was I going to let Janine scupper Joan’s chances but I also had to find a way of keeping Janine on board. The agency needed all the money it could get. I played for time.

“Leave it with me. I’ll be glad to help.”

I forced a smile.

“Getting you into such a prestigious production will be good for the agency.”

I lied with the utter conviction of an experienced agent.

“And I’m sure you’ll be great.”

She hesitated.

“You have a quality I think that is just right for Irina,” I added reassuringly.

“Come round tomorrow and we’ll work on the scene for the audition.

I tapped the script.

“Look at the party scene. That’s where the character is established. And don’t ask Leo for advice. He was no good as an actor.”

I racked my brains for a barrel of flattery.

“He’s wrong about the part not needing sex appeal. You’ve got it in spades and this picture will need lashings of it if it’s to recoup its spend. It’s got to appeal beyond the Art House crowd and bring in the punters who think Chekhov is just a character in the old ‘Star Trek’ movies. You’ll bring them in and you’ve also got a following with the Art house gays. ‘Martian Madam’ has made you into a cult figure with them. We have to use that in the audition.”

“A cult,” she purred. “Wait till Leo hears I’m a cult.”

I searched for something clinching to say and thought of the fired journalist.

“You will be ‘post ironic’ I promise by the time I’ve finished with you. Trust me.”

She smiled.

“‘Post Ironic.’ That sounds really good. And a cult too.”

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It was with a feeling of despondency that I returned to my apartment that night. I couldn’t sleep. The problem went round and round in my head. How could I keep

Janine's earning power in the agency and at the same time keep faith with my young protégée Joan Cross.

I needed something to occupy my mind. I picked up a disk that a client had left for me. Jack is a bright young animator who had worked for Disney but now was striking out on his own. I was representing him for getting into short TV cartoon films and this was one he wanted me to pitch to a TV producer of children's programs. It was a pilot and if they liked it, it could lead to series of shorts based on Aesop's fables. Stories with a clear message using state of the art graphics were becoming popular. A series based on the fables might possibly take off.

It was typical of Jack's work – brilliant animation and a good story line. I sat up and replayed it. The plot was based on the fable of the fox and the crow. I watched closely as a hungry fox sees a crow with a piece of cheese in its beak perch high on a branch above him. The cunning fox gradually flatters the crow, persuading it that it has a beautiful singing voice until finally the vain crow opens its beak to croak. The piece of cheese falls to the ground where it is gobbled up by the fox. Moral – don't trust flatterers or if you want to be successful, be one and flatter to deceive.

What was so good about the little film was the way the animator showed the fox slowly increasing the flattery and playing on the vanity of the bird to bring about its own downfall. I had an idea. By the time I went to bed, I had the outline of the strategy I was going to employ. I felt in a much better mood when I turned out the light.

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The auditions were held on an empty set. Four cameras were placed to pick up different angles and we watched the monitors. I had got permission to be there and I sat behind the Russian oligarch Fred was trying to get to invest. I had managed to

persuade Fred to let Joan to do another audition in the hope that the difference between her and Janine would sway things in her favour and she went first. I watched her in full close up on the monitor.

It was the scene where she had to say nothing but simply react to the news of her fiancé's death. Joan was a theatre actress but intuitively she had realised that with screen acting less is more and that the audience will read what they want into your face. Her mouth trembled slightly and a tear gathered in the corner of her left eye and slowly slid down her cheek. She turned abruptly away from the camera and we saw the tension in her neck and shoulders. Her back was rigid. She had become Irina.

When it was Janine's turn, she teetered on to the set in her trademark killer high heels that I had insisted she wore. The contrast was startling.

It was the opening scene where Irina welcomes a young officer to her party. It is a scene that establishes the situation and introduces the characters. Normally the pace would be fast with overlapping dialogue with little of significance being said at that point. It has to be played naturalistically, if anything underplayed, like all Chekhov.

Janine could certainly take direction. In a way I felt strangely proud of her as she followed my instructions exactly as we had rehearsed them. The young actor playing the officer was totally bewildered as she spoke slowly in that wobbly strange voice I'd given her and inflected even the most innocent and mundane phrases with heavy innuendo. Her soft porn background had made her acutely aware of the position of the cameras and I had encouraged her to mug to them with little moues and licking of lips just as she did in all her skin flicks. The climax came when she offered to cut a piece of her birthday cake for the young officer, who by this time could only stare at

her like a rabbit hypnotised by a python. She held out the knife and before plunging it into the cake, sensually caressed it. She handed him the cut slice and slowly sucked her fingers. I had taken a great deal of trouble getting the timing right for this piece of business. We had rehearsed it for a full morning. It was like a monstrous parody of the seduction scene between Bancroft and Hoffman in 'The Graduate.' I relaxed. Had Janine's performance been ghastly enough to put even Fred off? Had I made her drop the cheese?

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In the post audition inquest I had expected Fred to take the lead but it was the Russian who was clearly in control.

"It has been most interesting," he smiled but his eyes were as cold and expressionless as Putin's. He probably came from the same ex KGB background.

"Such very different talents. I gather Mr. Fox that you are the agent for both these ladies."

I nodded.

Fred began to speak.

"I think we need to bear in mind the financial situation. Miss Corbeau's uncle is"

Albanski cut him off. He raised a hand and continued to speak to me.

"Normally I take little interest in the films my corporation finances. But this is different."

He leaned forward.

"When I was young I worked for the great Madame Furtseva in the Soviet Arts Department. Part of my job was to visit the Moscow Arts Theatre frequently. It is a living shrine to Stanislavsky and Chekhov. There I developed a great love for the

playwright. This film is very important to me. It will show the whole world the greatness of the playwright. I have been most impressed by your client Miss Cross. She has I think an instinctive understanding of Chekhov. She will play Irina. It is settled.”

He turned to Grant.

“If this film is successful then perhaps we may think of doing ‘The Seagull’ next for she would be perfect as Nina.”

I gulped. This could make Joan into a major star. Nice guys did sometimes finish first after all.

He looked over to an open mouthed Fred.

“The money is of no consequence. My organisation will finance the film totally. I leave it to you to draw up the contract with Mr. Fox.”

I walked with him to the car park.

“Miss Corbeau your other client is also very talented in certain ways though perhaps she wasn’t well advised to attempt Chekhov.”

He gave me a sly look and I realised he knew what I had done.

“I gather you are only a small organisation. Could you perhaps lose her as a client?”

That thought had been uppermost in my mind since the end of the auditions. I had to think a way of keeping Janine sweet and somehow I didn’t just think getting her another skinflick would do that.

“I have a proposal,” Albanski said, “which may suit us both. My organisation is currently producing an historical epic in London. It is what I think you call a blockbuster. It is about Messalina, the wife of the Emperor Claudius. A key scene in the picture is where the nymphomaniac Empress competes with a whore from the

docks to see which one of them can service the most clients in twenty-four hours. The key role of the whore has yet to be cast. I think your Miss Corbeau would be ideal.

What do you think?"

Again I gulped. Albanski smiled.

"I'll get the paperwork round to you soon. Tell me, with that name, has she a French background? Since I came to the West, I find I have developed a taste for Gallic ladies."

I grinned.

"Sorry to disappoint you. She's from Milwaukee and her real name is Janey Crowberg."

He grinned back. Definitely ex KGB.

I was euphoric as I walked back to the office. Joan was safe and Janine would be thrilled to be going to London to do her 'post ironic' schtick. I'd done better than the fox in the fable. I'd secured two pieces of cheese.

I had no appointments that afternoon. I remembered the young animator who had left me the disk. I decided to work on my pitch to the TV commissioning editor. I'd re-read all the fables. Aesop certainly knew what made people tick. He'd have made one hell of an agent.