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Working Stiffs: Playing Dead on TV Can Keep a Career on Life Support

Actors Are Sorely Needed for Corpse Duty; A Reporter Gets Shot on 'Law & Order'

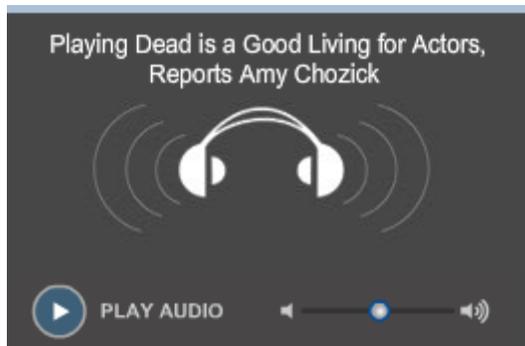
By AMY CHOZICK

"Corpses, hold your breath...and, Action!" the director yelled. I had been slumped in an office chair on a Hollywood set for hours, covered in a gooey mix of corn syrup and medical latex made to look like a messy chest wound.

It's not easy playing dead for a living.



WSJ's Amy Chozick goes undercover on the set of 'Law and Order: Los Angeles' - as a corpse. Find out what it takes to play a dead body on prime-time television.



Last month at the Los Angeles Center Studios where "Law & Order: Los Angeles" is filmed, I got into character as shooting victim Nancy Jimenez, a mortgage broker killed in a coming episode. It's a gig actors call "corpse duty," and in a shrinking market for jobs in scripted TV, dead-body roles are on the rise.

In the past few years, TV dramas have responded to feature-film trends and HDTV, which shows everything in more realistic detail, by upping the violence and delivering more shock value on the autopsy table.

The Screen Actors Guild doesn't keep figures on corpse roles, but currently, seven of the top 10 most-watched TV dramas use corpse actors, including CBS's "CSI," "NCIS" and spinoff "NCIS: Los Angeles." The new ABC series "Body of Proof" revolves around a brilliant neurosurgeon turned medical examiner who solves murders by analyzing cadavers.

It all means more work for extras, casting agents and makeup artists who supply corpses in various stages of decomposition. Matthew W. Mungle, who won an Oscar for his work on the 1992 film "Bram Stoker's Dracula," does special-effects makeup on "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" and "NCIS."

Mr. Mungle has hundreds of prosthetic chests that can be cut open during autopsy, organs that can be pulled out and removable limbs. "Just when you think they've thought of every way to kill someone, we have to build another severed limb," he says.

"Law & Order" creator Dick Wolf agreed to let me spend a day as a corpse on "Law & Order: Los Angeles" (known as "LOLA") on NBC. Usually, the show opens with a teaser in which a body is discovered.

In this episode, I'm one of six victims, working at Vela Mortgage Associates when a gunman shoots the place up. "You guys are going to be dead soon. I love saying that first thing in the morning," a 29-year-old production assistant, John Clarkson, tells us when I arrive at 8 a.m.



AMY CHOICK IN CHARACTER

The crew says I'm lucky to play "freshly dead." A body that is "morgue dead" requires an actor to be still for three hours or more to get into chalky-white full-body makeup and a "Y incision" across the chest.

The clear molds that create bullet holes in my chest and forearm are made of medical adhesive. A Bondo sealant, a malleable substance that dries rock hard, is used to make the wounds look three-dimensional.

A bulletin board in the "LOLA" makeup trailer is covered in photos of heinous crimes—a man who died from blunt-force trauma to the head, a woman with multiple stab wounds. The makeup applied "depends on how they died, how long they've been dead and how much we can get away with on TV," says makeup department head

Harriette Landau.

"NCIS" and "CSI" also use mannequins molded in the likeness of the actor who plays the victim. These take a couple of weeks to create and cost about \$7,800.

A typical crime drama shoots in eight days and costs around \$2.5 million. Making regular use of these fake stiffs is too costly in time and money.

And corpse actors also lend verisimilitude. "The truth is nothing looks more realistic than an actor playing dead," says "NCIS" executive producer Mark Horowitz.

New York casting director Jonathan Strauss says actors don't need experience to play a corpse, but he does make them lie on a sofa and demonstrate the short breaths required on camera. Not everyone can do it. "The dead work hard for their money," he says.

Actors don't like putting corpse roles on their résumés. Playing dead on a TV show makes it hard to return to the living in another part. For a background, or nonspeaking role, a SAG actor is paid \$139 for an eight-hour day, plus overtime and all-you-can eat food service.

A corpse actor makes an additional \$100 or so for wardrobe fittings and posing for still pictures of the victim in happier days, that is, while still living. Extensive makeup or getting wet (which

according to a SAG spokeswoman includes being "dumped in the East River") earns an actor an additional \$14 or \$18 per day.

Julie Basem got hardship pay when she played Page Ferguson on a recent episode of "Law & Order: SVU." On location outside a warehouse in Brooklyn, Ms. Basem had to lie scantily clad on the hood of a GMC Denali SUV in 14-degree weather.

"Think about drinking margaritas in Aruba," makeup artist Rebecca Perkins told the actress, while applying more "drying blood," a mix of corn syrup and silica gel that forms crusty, deep-red gunk.

Back on the "LOLA" set, the director tells us to keep our eyes open, since closed eyelids almost always flutter. I try not to blink as detectives poke around for clues.

"Suspect came in shooting. Not your typical M.O. for a stickup," says Detective Rex Winters, played by actor Skeet Ulrich. My eyes burn and I feel the steady trickle of fake blood on my shirt.

A production assistant who herds us around during the 11-hour day warns us that "people treat background actors like trash, walking props." In fact, the principal actors barely make eye contact with me.

A more substantial role with more screen time on the autopsy table improves the dynamic. Robert David Hall, who plays coroner Albert Robbins on "CSI," says he tries to help his corpses out. "I'll always guide them and let them know when they can take a breath and blink," he says.

On our lunch break, the other corpses and I must wear plastic trash bags with arm holes cut out and latex gloves so the liquid blood mix doesn't stain the sets or rub off on people.

I put my tray down across from Bruce Frausto, who sells furniture in L.A. to support his acting career. He plays my fellow victim Dante Rojas. With a gaping wound in his leg and latex goo hanging off his cheap bloodied suit, Mr. Frausto says, "This is the bottom of the acting totem pole."

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