Episode Book

EPISODE #5557

Ten Disastrous Casting Decisions, Ranked

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SYNOPSIS

What happens when a genuinely talented actor lands in a role they are spectacularly unsuited for? We rank ten of the most disastrous casting decisions in well-known movies, from Dick Van Dyke's infamous cockney accent in Mary Poppins to Tom Hanks playing blue-blood arrogance in The Bonfire of the Vanities. For each case we dig into the receipts — contemporary reviews, Razzie wins, and the filmmakers' own confessions — and ask the harder question: was it the actor's fault, or did the director, the screenplay, and the production circumstances make success impossible? We also look at who else was considered, who turned it down, and who could plausibly have sat in that chair instead. The preference throughout is the genuinely interesting case: not a bad actor giving a bad performance, but an excellent actor inexplicably placed somewhere they could never work.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

I want to open by saying that I have never in my life been happier to be a sloth, because at least nobody ever cast me as Genghis Khan.



Herman

That's the bar, is it?



Corn

That's the bar. Daniel sent us a text this week, and it's a big one. He wants ten of the most disastrous casting decisions in well-known movies. Not just disappointing performances, he's very specific about that. He wants fundamental mismatches. An actor wildly unsuited to the character, an implausible age or physical mismatch, chemistry that never ignites, an infamous accent, someone flailing outside their natural range, a performance style at war with the rest of the film.



Herman

And he wants receipts.



Corn

He wants receipts. Contemporary reviews, retrospective criticism, awards for poor performances where they exist, comments from the filmmakers themselves. And he's explicit that we're not allowed to dress up subjective dislike as objective fact, which rules out about ninety percent of what people say about miscasting on the internet.



Herman

He also asked for something I think is the real spine of the whole thing. For each case, was it the actor's fault, or did the director, the screenplay, the production circumstances put them somewhere success was basically impossible? And who else was considered, who turned it down, who could plausibly have been in the chair instead.



Corn

Right. And the preference he gives is the one that makes this interesting. He doesn't want bad actor gives bad performance. He wants excellent actor, demonstrably successful elsewhere, inexplicably placed in a role they are spectacularly unsuited for.



Herman

Which is a much harder list to write, because you have to explain how talented people ended up there.



Corn

And he wants it ranked. Ten down to one, increasing order of calamity. Number one being a decision so misguided that the interesting question isn't why it failed, it's how anybody involved ever convinced themselves it was going to work.



Herman

I have a candidate for number one that I think is going to be very hard to beat.



Corn

I know what it is, and I think you're right, and I think we should earn our way there. Start at ten.



Herman

Ten is Dick Van Dyke in Mary Poppins.



Corn

The chimney sweep.



Herman

Bert. Nineteen sixty-four. And here's why he's at ten rather than higher. The film is a triumph. Thirteen Oscar nominations, five wins, Julie Andrews takes Best Actress. Van Dyke was a genuine song-and-dance man, a huge television star, Disney cast him off the back of The Dick Van Dyke Show. There was nothing cynical about it. He could sing, he could dance, he could carry a musical number.



Corn

He just couldn't do the accent.



Herman

He could not do the accent. And the detail I love is that they hired an English character actor, J. Pat O'Malley, to coach him. And Van Dyke said later that O'Malley didn't do an accent any better than he did.



Corn

So the coach was worse than the student.



Herman

Which is a very specific kind of production failure. It ranked second in an Empire poll of the worst film accents ever, which means one person in the entire history of cinema did it worse. And Van Dyke has owned it completely. When he accepted a BAFTA in twenty seventeen he said he wanted to apologise to the members of BAFTA for inflicting on them the most atrocious cockney accent in the history of cinema.



Corn

That's a man who has made peace with it.



Herman

He's at ten because the calamity is contained. It's a flaw inside a masterpiece. You can hum the songs, the film works, and the accent is now part of the charm. If the movie had been bad, he'd be much higher.



Corn

And the alternatives are interesting. Bert was considered for Sean Connery, Cary Grant, Andy Griffith, Adam West.



Herman

Cary Grant as a cockney chimney sweep is a wonderful thing to imagine for about four seconds.



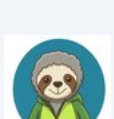
Corn

It's a wonderful thing to imagine for exactly as long as it takes to realise it would have been worse. Nine.



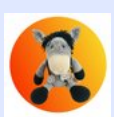
Herman

Nine is Audrey Hepburn in My Fair Lady. Same year, funnily enough. Nineteen sixty-four. She's thirty-four playing Eliza Doolittle, who is meant to be about twenty-one. And she can't sing the part.



Corn

She was dubbed.



Herman

Dubbed by Marni Nixon. And the casting logic is stated almost too perfectly, because Alan Jay Lerner told Julie Andrews, who had originated Eliza on Broadway, that she was being passed over because they wanted a name. That's the quote. They wanted a name.



Corn

And they got the biggest name imaginable.



Herman

They got Audrey Hepburn, who is one of the most luminous screen presences who has ever lived. And the Washington Post's Richard Coe called the casting the film's basic flaw. Not a flaw. The basic flaw. She's recognisably exquisite but she isn't twenty-one, and she brings a flirtatiousness that is completely un-Shavian.



Corn

And the film won eight Oscars including Best Picture.



Herman

Including Best Picture. And Hepburn wasn't nominated. And Julie Andrews won Best Actress that year for Mary Poppins. Which means the woman they replaced for not being a big enough name won the Oscar for the film they made instead.



Corn

That is a studio executive's nightmare rendered in award-show form.



Herman

It's the cleanest illustration of the theme, though. Nobody thought Hepburn was untalented. They thought she was a name. And the name was the problem.



Corn

Eight.



Herman

Eight is Marlon Brando in The Island of Dr. Moreau. Nineteen ninety-six.



Corn

This one's different, though. This isn't a mismatch of type. This is a production that ate itself.



Herman

It's a production that ate itself, and Brando was at the centre of it, but I want to be careful here because there's a real tragedy underneath. His daughter Cheyenne died by suicide during the production. He withdrew. He retreated to his private island. And what's left on screen is an actor who has checked out entirely.



Corn

He was fed his lines through an earpiece.



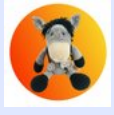
Herman

He refused to learn them. He wore an ice bucket on his head in one scene. He had a miniature version of himself, Nelson de la Rosa, as a prop. He picked up police radio chatter mid-scene and said there was a robbery at Woolworths.



Corn

In the middle of the take.



Herman

And the director, Richard Stanley, was fired by fax and replaced by John Frankenheimer. That's the detail that tells you everything about the state of that set.



Corn

Fired by fax.



Herman

It won Brando the Razzie for Worst Supporting Actor. Ebert called it perhaps his worst film. And the thing is, the original conception wasn't stupid. Stanley bonded with Brando over the Heart of Darkness connection, the Kurtz thing, Moreau as a Kurtz figure. That's a real idea. It just met a man in the worst year of his life and a production with no floor under it.



Corn

So the failure is circumstances, not casting.



Herman

Mostly. Though I'd say casting a method actor who needs to be handled carefully into a chaotic effects production is its own gamble. Seven.



Corn

Seven and six are a pair. Do we do them together?



Herman

We should, because they're the same film. Batman and Robin. Nineteen ninety-seven. Arnold Schwarzenegger as Mr. Freeze is seven, George Clooney as Batman is six.



Corn

Start with Arnold.



Herman

Twenty-five million dollars. That was the fee. And the studio wanted a villain, in their words, big and strong and chiseled out of a glacier. Which is a description of a statue, not a character. Mr. Freeze in the comics is a tragic figure. A man trying to save his dying wife. And they cast the biggest action star on earth, with an Austrian accent, to deliver puns.



Corn

Ice to see you.



Herman

Chill out. And the reason it's a production failure more than an acting failure is that the film was mandated to be toyetic. Joel Schumacher would yell, remember everyone, this is a cartoon, before takes. The costume took six hours a day to put on, which wrecked the shooting schedule. Ed Harris, Anthony Hopkins, and reportedly Patrick Stewart were considered before the script was rewritten around Schwarzenegger.



Corn

Patrick Stewart as Mr. Freeze is a interesting road not taken.



Herman

It's a completely different film. And Schumacher apologised publicly. He said, I want to apologise to every fan that was disappointed, and then he said something much harsher about himself than I'm going to repeat.



Corn

And then there's Clooney.



Herman

Clooney is fascinating because he's the case study for the whole episode. He is a great movie star. He was cast after From Dusk till Dawn, and Schumacher cast him for humanity and humour. On paper that's not insane. Bruce Wayne needs charm.



Corn

And the result is the one performance he will not defend.



Herman

He has never defended it. He said, I was bad in it, it's a terrible screenplay, we all whiffed on that one. He called watching it physically painful. He won't let his wife see it.



Corn

That's not a man making excuses.



Herman

And the critics were brutal. The San Francisco Chronicle called him the big zero of the film. Someone called him the George Lazenby of the series, which is a very precise insult. Val Kilmer declined to return. William Baldwin was Schumacher's first interest. David Duchovny was considered.



Corn

So the sixth most disastrous casting decision in movie history is a performance by a two-time Oscar winner who was undone by a campy script and a toy commercial.



Herman

Which is exactly Daniel's point. The interesting version isn't bad actor, bad performance. It's good actor, wrong machine.



Corn

Five.



Herman

Five is Tom Hanks in The Bonfire of the Vanities. Nineteen ninety.



Corn

Oh, this one's good, because the director has confessed.



Herman

Brian De Palma has confessed, and it's one of the most honest things a director has ever said about his own film. He said the initial concept was incorrect. They tried to humanise Sherman McCoy, who is a very unlikable character, and he said, I think John Lithgow would have been a better choice, because he would have got the blue-blood arrogance of the character.



Corn

Tom Hanks playing blue-blood arrogance.



Herman

America's most likable everyman playing a smug Wall Street Master of the Universe in a satire that requires you to enjoy watching him squirm. And you can't enjoy it, because it's Tom Hanks, and you like him, and the film keeps trying to make you like him.



Corn

The satire has nothing to bite.



Herman

Nothing to bite. Rotten Tomatoes has it at fifteen percent. The Washington Post called it a calamity of miscasting. Julie Salamon wrote a whole book about the production, The Devil's Candy, which is the definitive account of a studio sanding the edges off a novel until there's nothing left.



Corn

And the alternatives list is a museum of what could have been.



Herman

Steve Martin was Mike Nichols' choice, rejected as too old. Chevy Chase was Tom Wolfe's own choice. Kevin Costner, Tom Cruise, Christopher Reeve were all in the conversation. And Melanie Griffith replaced Uma Thurman because Hanks vetoed Thurman.



Corn

Wait, Hanks vetoed Uma Thurman?



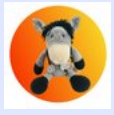
Herman

That's the account. And Griffith got a Razzie nomination for Worst Actress out of it. So there's a second casting decision layered inside the first one, and it also went wrong.



Corn

Four.



Herman

Four is Sofia Coppola in The Godfather Part Three. Nineteen ninety.



Corn

The nepotism one.



Herman

The nepotism one, except it's more interesting than that, because it wasn't vanity. It was an emergency. Winona Ryder dropped out due to nervous exhaustion. Julia Roberts had dropped out earlier for Pretty Woman. Rebecca Schaeffer had been murdered before she could audition. Madonna was considered and deemed too old. Coppola was running out of time and cast his own daughter.



Corn

Who had no real acting experience.



Herman

She'd appeared as an infant in the first film. That's the extent of it. And she's playing Michael Corleone's daughter, opposite Andy Garcia, as a romantic interest.



Corn

Gene Siskel's line about that is the one that sticks.



Herman

She's out of her acting league here. She's supposed to be Andy Garcia's love interest, but no sparks fly. He's more like her babysitter. That's the whole problem in three sentences. Leonard Maltin called it an almost-fatal flaw.



Corn

She won two Razzies.



Herman

Worst Supporting Actress and Worst New Star. And the accusation of nepotism was everywhere, and Coppola defended her by saying critics were using his daughter to attack him. Which is probably partly true and doesn't really help.



Corn

But here's the thing that makes her a great entry on this list.



Herman

She became an Oscar-winning director.



Corn

She won an Academy Award for writing Lost in Translation. She's one of the most respected filmmakers of her generation. So the failure was never about talent. It was about a twenty-year-old with no experience being dropped into the third act of the most important American film trilogy ever made, opposite a trained actor, with a director who was also her father and therefore the last person who could evaluate her honestly.



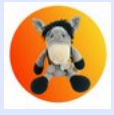
Herman

And Ebert dissented. He defended her vulnerability and simplicity. So even the critical verdict wasn't unanimous, which is worth saying.



Corn

Three.



Herman

Three is Marlon Brando again, this time as Genghis Khan in The Conqueror. Nineteen fifty-six.



Corn

Wait. Brando as Genghis Khan?



Herman

Brando was originally cast. He accepted, then backed out. And that's the road not taken, because what they got instead is our number one. But I've put Brando at three because the role itself was written for him, and it tells you the part was conceived as something an intense, interior actor could do. That version of the film doesn't exist. But it tells you how the whole thing started.



Corn

So three is a ghost entry.



Herman

Three is a ghost entry, and it sets up the top of the list. Two is Melanie Griffith in The Bonfire of the Vanities, which we've already covered, so I'll keep it short. Cast as a Southern belle femme fatale, the role needs seductive manipulative glamour, she got a Razzie nomination for Worst Actress, and De Palma wanted Uma Thurman and Hanks vetoed her. It's the same film as number five and it's a second failure inside it.



Corn

A film with two entries on the list.



Herman

And now the one.



Corn

John Wayne as Genghis Khan.



Herman

John Wayne as Genghis Khan in The Conqueror. Nineteen fifty-six. And I want to be clear about why this is number one and not just a funny old movie. Every other entry on this list has a mitigating factor. Van Dyke's film is a masterpiece. Hepburn was a studio decision. Brando in Moreau was a man in grief. Schwarzenegger and Clooney were in a toy commercial. Hanks was in a broken adaptation. Sofia Coppola was an emergency.



Corn

And Wayne?



Herman

Wayne campaigned for the role. He read the script and lobbied for it. The role had been written for Brando, Brando backed out, and Wayne went after it. Director Dick Powell tried to discourage him and then relented, and his line is the line of the entire episode. Who am I to turn down John Wayne? That's the whole thing. That's how it happens. Not a single person in the chain thought it was a good idea. They just couldn't say no to the star. And Wayne went on a crash diet and took Dexedrine to get into it, and the screenwriter, Oscar Millard, said Wayne had been drunk for three days and that his performance, drunk or sober, was the way other actors perform if drunk.



Corn

That's a devastating sentence.



Herman

Time magazine said he portrayed the great conqueror as a sort of cross between a square-shootin' sheriff and a Mongolian idiot. The Monthly Film Bulletin said he is merely John Wayne struggling with an unfortunate piece of casting. The New York Times noted he was constantly being unhorsed by lines like, you are beautiful in your wrath. In a John Wayne drawl. The film is in The Fifty Worst Films of All Time. He posthumously won a Golden Turkey Award specifically for Worst Casting, which is an award that exists because of this performance. And Wayne himself apparently said the film taught him not to make an ass of yourself trying to play parts you're not suited for.



Corn

The star learned the lesson.



Herman

And there's a dark footnote, which is that it was shot downwind of a nuclear test site in Nevada, and ninety-one of the two hundred and twenty crew developed cancer. Several cast members died of it.



Corn

So the film that exists because nobody could say no to John Wayne also gave cancer to its crew.



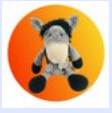
Herman

That's the film. That's number one. The purest case of a hugely talented, hugely successful star actively campaigning for a role he was spectacularly unsuited for, and an entire industry deciding that saying no to him was not an option.



Corn

Okay. I want to push on the ranking for a second, because I think there's an argument that Wayne shouldn't be number one.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

Daniel's criterion is how anyone convinced themselves it was going to work. And with Wayne, the answer is almost too easy. Nobody convinced themselves. They just couldn't refuse him. Whereas Sofia Coppola... somebody looked at a twenty-year-old with no experience, opposite Andy Garcia, in the third Godfather, and said yes. That's a decision someone had to actively make.



Herman

That's a real argument. The counter is that Coppola's situation was an emergency with no good options left, and Wayne's was a choice made from a position of total freedom. Nobody was forcing Howard Hughes to make The Conqueror.



Corn

Fair. And Wayne is the only one on the list where the actor himself is the engine.



Herman

He's the only one where the person who should have known better was the person in the costume.



Corn

Alright. I'll accept the ranking. But I want to note that the list has a pattern in it that Daniel didn't ask about.



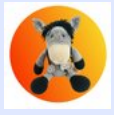
Herman

Which is?



Corn

Four of the ten are cases where the alternative was a woman who then went and won an Oscar. Julie Andrews. Uma Thurman, arguably, in a different register. And Sofia Coppola, who became an Oscar-winning filmmaker after being told she couldn't act. There's something in the water there.



Herman

There's a pattern where the person who gets passed over goes on to prove the point. Andrews is the cleanest. They told her they wanted a name, and she won Best Actress for the film they made instead of casting her.



Corn

That's not a casting failure. That's a casting failure with a receipt attached.



Herman

And I'd add the other pattern, which is that almost none of these are the actor's fault in the way people assume. Clooney whiffed on a script he didn't write. Hanks was in an adaptation that had been sanded down. Schwarzenegger was told to be a cartoon. Brando was grieving. The only two where I'd put the failure squarely on the performer are Van Dyke's accent and Wayne's decision to campaign for the part.



Corn

And Van Dyke's is a charm at this point.



Herman

Van Dyke's is a charm.



Corn

So the actual lesson is that miscasting is almost always a structural failure. Somebody with power wanted a name, or a studio wanted a toy, or a director was out of time, or nobody could say no.



Herman

Which is a much more useful thing to know than a list of bad performances. Because it means the question isn't who's a bad actor. It's who has the power to say no, and why they didn't.



Corn

Speaking of which.



Hilbert

It's twenty-five million. Not that it changes anything.



Corn

For Arnold?



Hilbert

Twenty-five million dollars, and the studio paid it because he was the only person on earth who could open a movie in the summer of ninety-seven. I was doing sound for a commercial house in Burbank that year, and we did the tie-in spots. We had the Mr. Freeze toy on the mixing desk for six weeks. It was a plastic thing with a blue light in the chest, and it made a noise when you pressed the button. We had to mix the noise into the spot. That was the job. Mix the noise.



Herman

So the toy came before the performance.



Hilbert

The toy came first. The toy always comes first. I've got a question about this, actually, and it's been sitting with me since I heard you two start on it. When a studio decides a film is going to be toyetic, does the casting decision even count as a casting decision? Because if the character is a plastic thing with a light in the chest, then the actor is being hired to be the voice of the toy. And you don't hire the voice of a toy for range. You hire it for recognition.



Corn

That's a good question.



Hilbert

I don't need it to be good. I need it answered.



Herman

The honest answer is that it's a casting decision that's been made by the merchandising department and then ratified by the casting director. The person with the actual authority is the one holding the toy.



Hilbert

Right. Because we had a meeting about the noise. About the noise. And there were eleven people in that room.



Corn

Eleven people deciding what a toy sounds like.



Hilbert

Eleven. And none of them had read the script. I asked. I asked one of them, and he said he'd seen the outline. The outline. That's the industry. I've worked a lot of jobs, and the ones where the money is biggest are the ones where the fewest people know what they're making.



Herman

That actually reframes the whole list. Every entry on it is a case where the person with authority wasn't the person with knowledge.



Hilbert

That's it. That's the whole thing. And I'll tell you the other half of it, which is that the crew always knows. We knew. We watched the dailies come in and we knew. Nobody asks the crew.



Corn

Why not?



Hilbert

Because the crew can't be fired for being wrong if nobody asks them. Anyway. I've got to go.



Corn

Now?



Hilbert

There's an animal expecting me.



Herman

Fair enough.



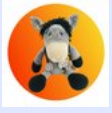
Hilbert

It's not far. But she's particular about the time.



Corn

Understood.



Herman

Okay. So the thing Hilbert just handed us is that the authority and the knowledge sit in different rooms, and the room with the authority is the one with the toy on the desk. Which is why the Wayne case is number one, because there the two rooms were the same room.



Herman (continued)

Wayne had the authority and he was the one who was wrong.



Corn

And nobody in the other room could overrule him, because he was also the reason the money existed.



Herman

That's the structural version of the whole list.



Corn

Before we close, I've got one from the cutting-room floor. The Bonfire of the Vanities production had a moment where the studio tested the film and the audience reaction was so bad that they went back and tried to reshoot the ending, and the whole thing was documented in real time by Julie Salamon, who had been given full access. She was embedded in the production the way you'd embed a war correspondent. And the book she wrote is the reason we know the De Palma quote about Lithgow, because she was in the room. That's the only reason any of this is on the record.



Herman

That's a good one. Most of these productions are opaque. Bonfire is the one where somebody was taking notes.



Corn

Which is why it's on the list twice.



Herman

And the forward-looking thought I'd leave with is this. The list hasn't stopped. The mechanism that produced all ten of these is still running. Somebody with authority still wants a name, or a franchise, or a toy, and the person with the knowledge is still in the other room. The only thing that's changed is that the audience finds out faster now.



Corn

And the crew still knows first.



Herman

That's the show. Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, who is currently walking somewhere on a schedule.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

The human-AI collaboration podcast. If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We read everything.



Corn

And Daniel reads it first.



Herman

Daniel reads it first. We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.