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## 'Casting' a fresh eye at the give-and-take of auditions

By Ty Burr, Globe Staff | June 8, 2007

The intriguing cinematic thingamabob "Casting About " represents a new genre: cattle-call impressionism. In 2000, director Barry J. Hershey was preparing a period film called "Moving Still " and tested actresses in five cities in Europe and the United States. The film fell through but Barry was fascinated by the audition footage -- by what it revealed about both pretending and being true to oneself -- and he edited 350 of the auditions together to create this visual tone-poem.

There are segments in "Casting About" devoted to hands, to faces, to regional accents -- little digressions that riff on the differences between the women as well as their similarities. The film is loosely structured by topic, and it builds slowly to several auditions observed at length. In one, the young actress Amanda Witt delivers a monologue twice, the second time pulling up emotions so raw they startle even her. Then, tears still wet on her face, she coolly analyzes her performance.

Well, of course , she does; that's her job. "Casting About" marvels at the central paradox of acting -- that it fakes the truth -- and wonders where (and if) the performance stops and the actress begins. Still, the film's a striking piece of work that, in the end, is just an inspired stunt. Hershey is unwilling to overlay any greater meaning on his collection of jigsaw puzzle pieces. He likes to watch.

Voyeurism is central to the cinema and to acting, of course, and you'd better believe these women know it. Still, "Casting About" feels oddly disingenuous. Its lyrical cross cutting obscures a fundamental fact about an audition -- that it's a job interview, with an unequal balance of power between director and actor .

At the same time, given the potential creative partnership at stake, an audition also has aspects of a first date. Hershey only shows us one side of the restaurant table, though, remaining unseen until the film's very last moments. I wouldn't go so far as to accuse him of exploiting his subjects, but by celebrating them en masse he loses sight of their individuality. The movie's like a Busby Berkeley musical number played out in time rather than space: all those faces flicking by, each hoping we'll see her and her alone.

That's the dilemma faced by any casting director, and "Casting About" deserves praise for revealing the process with such creativity. Still, I admired it and felt a little ground down at the same time. At one point, Hershey shows us all his actresses in a photo-mosaic that makes up one large face. The movie's like that as well, but the bigger picture's missing.□

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