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# Playing the bit in parts

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Picture: NEIL NEWITT  
 Adam McKenzie auditions for a role in *The Secret Life of Us*.

**Oh, to be a star. The first call on the road to TV fame is the casting agency. Lily Bragge reports.**

Buffed and tanned, with a penetrating gaze, a firm handshake and a sincere smile, Adam McKenzie is putting his best self forward. A youthful 35, McKenzie is auditioning for a guest role in the St Kilda-based television series, *The Secret Life of Us*.

On paper the part doesn't sound fabulous — Pete the flasher-pervert — a man who disgraces himself in the workplace and Sybilla Budd's character, Gabrielle, is called in to act as his union representative.

Knowing full well it might lead to a string of ignominious sleaze-bag roles, McKenzie is ambivalent about getting the part. He says it's not really the sort of thing he'd generally go for, but on the plus side, it would be a great way to get noticed — and get noticed he would be.

Primarily a music-theatre performer, McKenzie runs a personal training business and doesn't rely on acting to make a living.

"I'd love to get this part, but it's not the be-all and end-all for me. I'm probably not as hungry as some," he says.

He says turning up at auditions well prepared, and not making a big deal of the whole thing, is the key to nailing it.

"I take my nerves and try and make them work for me. If the

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audition becomes too important then you will fold with the pressure."

For a young, unknown actor, landing an extended gig on the *Secret Life* is like hitting pay dirt. Aside from a definite boost in profile and exposure, there's also the street cred. The successful show boasts a cool factor that its dowdy cousins just do not have.

Mullinars Casting Agency has been responsible for choosing the cast since the show's inception. Having just finished three days of auditions for two episodes, casting director Wizzy Ringer looked at hundreds of wannabes for the 10 roles on offer.

The more interesting candidates were sent scripts to learn for auditions. Ringer filmed each actor and has now whittled them down to a final handful for each part. Director Shawn Seet and producer Alison Higgins will make their final decisions this week.

Such is the power and allure of the show that seasoned actors jostle alongside unknowns for a chance to be in it. Ringer says that high-profile actors are generally not required to audition. If someone is to play a serious love-interest opposite a main character, they are asked to read with the featured actor to make sure they have the right chemistry.

Rhys Muldoon and Pia Miranda recently joined the cast as semi-regulars and each was simply offered a role.

For unknown actors though, it's a different story. Ringer says it's not unusual for people to employ kooky tactics in order to get noticed. She has been presented with a plastic foot - a literal attempt to get a foot in the door - and a box of marbles with a note that read: "No, I haven't lost my marbles, I just want an audition for *Secret Life*."

Occasionally, there has been a reversal of the old casting-couch cliché. A few actors have tried unsuccessfully to seduce Ringer over the years. With others, she has developed sincere friendships.

"I've developed friendships with quite a lot of actors . . . and I go out for lunch regularly - but I'd never do romance with any of them," she says.

Mullinars provides a professional actor to read opposite those auditioning. For the *Secret Life* auditions, actor and writer Vivienne Walshe reads with each actor. Having already acted in a guest role in the second series (she played a publicist who had a fling with Samuel Johnson's character Evan), Walshe has an objective view of the process.

Throughout the auditions, she swaps adeptly between the show's main characters, and includes doing an excellent rendition of Evan and an uncanny Miranda. Walshe says being a reader for 70 actors over a few days is fascinating.

"It's a great way to see what works and what doesn't. She says it's a good thing for any working actor to go through because it provides a realistic perspective on why some people are successful and others are not. Most actors take things so personally - it's all ego. To be told, sorry, you're too young, too short, too tall, whatever, can really get to you," she says.

Walshe believes that every actor who auditions has a five-minute window of opportunity to be their most charming, to sell themselves and their craft to the best of their ability. And it's just

as easy to blow a part as it is to get one.

Being a reader has proved to her how many people come so close to getting a role but, the smallest thing will be their downfall. It's all random, she says.

Throughout the course of the auditions, Ringer is upbeat and positive. Part den-mother, director and hostess, she treats every actor with unflagging respect and consideration. Some, like 10-year-old Richael Tanner require detailed instruction. Ringer says in order to get a better idea of their range and personality, it's important to work with kids a bit more than the adults. She says: "The cast and crew of *Secret Life* are all pretty down to earth, so it's important that we cast people who will fit in well. We're not interested in arrogant, difficult people, particularly if it's a child."

Richael, already a veteran of film and television, is accompanied by her parents to the audition. Exuding confidence and charm, she takes Ringer's instructions to act like a 50-year-old in a 10-year-old's body like an old pro.

Very cute, extremely well-mannered and relaxed, Richael is keen to get a regular part as a child actor. She says: "I reckon it will be really fun if I get it, but if I don't, that's okay. There's lots of other things."

A small percentage of actors require their scripts and in each case, Ringer gently encourages them to lose it.

Dark-haired, tall and lean, 22-year-old Dan Humphries went for the part of a 16-year-old thug. A quick run-through with Walshe, then Ringer commands: "Okay, let's get that down - short, sharp and shiny."

Walshe finds Humphries great to work with and thinks he is just right for the role.

Going for the same part, is blue-eyed blond Brett Cousins, who has a surfer-boy look. Personable and confident, he takes direction from Ringer well. Getting into the ugliness of the character, he comes out with some offensive ad libbing. Ringer calmly suggests: "I don't think you should say that for the tape."

Almost every actor asks to repeat a taping of their performance. Ringer obliges them all. Despite the never-ending stream of wannabes, Ringer remains encouraging and focuses on every one of them. She says her gut instincts regarding who will get a part are pretty good.

"To me, a good actor is someone, that even if I've seen 100 people and I'm tired and distracted - with a great actor, I will look down the camera and I won't be able to take my eyes off them. It's as simple as that."

*The Secret Life of Us is on Channel 10 at 8.30pm on Mondays.*



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