

Interview: Chicago Acting in Film Meetup Founder Grace McPhillips

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CHICAGO – Grace McPhillips is the epitome of the Chicago actor – talented, resilient and honest. She is also an actors community activist in the Windy City, as the founder of “Chicago Acting in Film Meetup” and is an official on the council of the Screen Actors Guild in Chicago. She will host the upcoming [Networking Night & Holiday Fundraiser](#) [14] on December 12th.

Grace McPhillips was born and raised in Montgomery, Alabama, and graduated from Elon University with a degree in Music Theater. She moved to Chicago shortly thereafter, to pursue acting and the independent film scene here. She works as a SAG and AFTRA actress in film, TV, voiceovers and the stage, and has danced in a production of “Salome” with the Lyric Opera of Chicago. She has recently completed the short film “Fitting,” which she also co-wrote and produced.



Grace McPhillips (left) and Calliope Porter in 'Fitting'
Photo credit: [GraceMcPhillips.com](#)

In anticipation of the Chicago Acting in Film Meetup’s biggest event, Grace McPhillips spoke with HollywoodChicago.com about the state of the actor in Chicago, and her activism to expand the reach of the Midwestern dynamic.

HollywoodChicago.com: You speak of the Chicago actor as the “canary in the cage”? Exactly what new precedent is happening that has caused you to use such a term?

Grace McPhillips: The ‘canary in the cage, in the coal mine,’ refers to the actor in this marketplace. I’ve been here for seven years, and maybe it’s the fact that I’ve just turned 30 years old, but if we can’t keep actors here what kind of an industry do we really have? It is the lack of union work and the lack of a living wage. I think a lot of actors leave Chicago for New York City and Los Angeles not for fame and fortune, but to be a working actor. They get a taste of it here in a non-union sense, and a few of us have gotten lucky in the union acting world here, but bigger accounts are leaving here, and they splinter into smaller companies, who in turn go to non-union to pay less. It’s a telling factor that prevents an actor from working here. I know we’re the bottom of the food chain, even though we’re usually on the cover of the playbill. [laughs] But if we can’t take care of our families, then there is no viable future here.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have been instrumental in creating a Chicago cooperative within the acting community...what has been the most apparent benefit from that cooperation?

McPhillips: Higher professionalism among actors. Even those who have gotten their degrees, they never teach you about the business end of the profession, and many theater programs are not taught by people who are active in the business. This is for the actor who has written down their five goals in the city, and think, now what? Can we have new goals in Chicago? Getting that business information can help to establish new goals.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have just been named as an official on the council of the Screen Actors Guild in Chicago. What challenges do you anticipate in that position and what will you bring from your previous experiences to the new realm?

McPhillips: One of the things I want to bring to it is the experience I've had in flipping jobs. I've had a lot of clients who have wanted to continue to keep working with me, and that helps for my benefits and pension, even though non-union might even pay more. And there is such a lack of education for this information. What I want to do is work with the new generation of creative directors, in the new technologies, to create more union work.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your observation, what are the most difficult characteristics of actors establishing governing boards overseeing themselves?

McPhillips: We are probably more selfish than the average board, because when we get a job we have to go away and do it. It's not 9 to 5, so while we can make promises to be committed, if a job comes and we have to go to Los Angeles, we go. Therein lies the challenge.

HollywoodChicago.com: How does an actor's union hold on when technology is circumventing so many of the usual rules for that union?

McPhillips: That's the tough question. We need to get together. The fact that I walk into a job, and the producer asks me if I want this under AFTRA or SAG, that's ridiculous. I'm doing the exact same thing career-wise, but I have to pay into two unions, and meet earning thresholds in both. And that is difficult in the Chicago market, by having this division. It would be really important to take that opportunity to come together, and educate all kinds of performers, even bringing in coverage for professions like modeling.

As far as new technologies and guerrilla film making, the unions have bent over backwards to make sure actors can work for free within that realm. My bigger point is that we have to make sure that doesn't happen in the advertising world. Do we have to be flexible? Yes. But we also need make sure we're not being exploited.

HollywoodChicago.com: What insecurities does the Midwestern acting market still possess and how has that changed in the seven years you've been in the business here?

McPhillips: Limited resources. We have so many wonderful people making awesome creative content, and yet it's not being done at the levels it should be, and could be. It seems that a ton of writers in television sitcoms are from Chicago, from the writers center at Second City. It drives me crazy that we're not thinking more local in terms of funding and production. We have the facilities, the crew and the actors, we just need to connect them with the funding.

HollywoodChicago.com: Let's talk about you as an actor. Since we are talking about technology, what role does the short film play for an actor now as an introduction to their skills?

McPhillips: I think of the short film as a workout. You can get on them easily, they have short production times and they are available for actors and filmmakers. It keeps the acting chops up. It's also cheaper than taking an on-camera class. We have such amazing film schools, with students who have already made three features before they even get there. I'd like to see more partnering between the professional community and the schools.





Grace McPhillips in Chicago, September, 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: What spark lit the flame for you as an actress? Was it the craft of the profession or performing in front of an audience that did it?

McPhillips: I'm not a crafts-oriented person. [laughs] It's the feeling, because I grew up a dancer and loved the recital. All I had was my school plays and the opportunity in the dance, and I loved it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Have you done enough in acting to understand the type of role that best suits you? Do you prefer character parts or would you like to try a genre type role like an action movie?

McPhillips: I think I'm seen as polished, a spokesperson, a young Mom. In some ways, I can't help that. I'm a girl from Montgomery, Alabama, who was a debutante. [laughs] Chicago is really good at pegging you, and since I'm so pegged, I'd rather go a little more gritty. I love Parker Posey, and that's the type of stuff I'd like to do.

HollywoodChicago.com: I've been asking this question of actors of late. Which movie, of any time or era, has the type of ensemble, director or story that you think would have been right for you to participate in?

McPhillips: The film that comes to mind is 'The Big Chill.' It's a great mix of history and the current moment, and what it does to you in regard to emotions, sensibilities and the relationships with people you have a history with, and people with which you're building a relationship, in life and death. It's a great story.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, as someone who believes in the power of actors to bond together, help each other and establish a support group, what is the next phase for you as that type of organizer, and how will you make it happen?

McPhillips: In order to survive and be productive, you have to evolve. In many ways, the lack of that has been Chicago's problem. I'm not totally sure how to do that, but that's the goal I'm always striving for.

The "Chicago Acting in Film Meetup" Networking Night & Holiday Fundraiser will take place on December 12th, 2011, at Chief O'Neill's Pub in Chicago. [Click here for more information.](#) [14] For information regarding the Chicago Acting in Film Meetup, [click here.](#) [15]



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