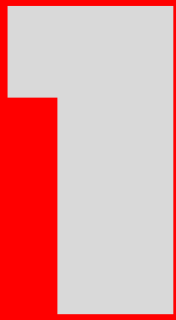


ARDENT RESOURCES

Agents:

What they do and
how to get one

Produced by Ardent Theatre Company
from interviews with agents Barnaby Welch,
Ashley Vallance, Mia Thomson and Amy O'Neill



LINKS

www.bloomfieldswelch.com

www.intertalentgroup.com

www.miathomsonassociates.co.uk

www.thrive-talent.co.uk

ABOUT

ARDENT RESOURCES is a collection of workshop notes, interviews, guidance and tips about working in Theatre. It is not intended as comprehensive advice or formal educational resource on which reliance should be placed; rather it collates various insights from people working in the industry that you can choose to incorporate into your own toolkit. Nothing should be taken as a representation or warranty as the correctness or fitness for purpose of any of the content.

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CONTRIBUTORS

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QUICK TIPS

An agent's role is to:

- Function as their clients' professional representative
- Source job opportunities and help build careers
- Negotiate and service contracts
- Provide support and guidance

THE ROLE OF AN AGENT

What are the key things involved in your role?

Ashley: The job of an agent is like no other. Not only are we there to source work for our clients and negotiate/service their contracts, but we are also there to provide support and guidance, often both professionally and personally. This could cover anything from advising what to wear to a casting, to suggesting a good accountant or helping choose new headshots to simply being a sympathetic listener when a casting hasn't gone the client's way. Being an agent is not a 9-5 job. We often need to be available for our clients out of normal working hours and be able to adapt to the different needs of each individual client.

Barnaby: I am basically the middle person between actors that we represent and casting directors. We obviously look for work for our clients, but we also do much more besides - we strategise and build careers and make sure that our clients have a long and satisfying career.

Amy: It's hard to sum up as it's a really multifaceted role! An agent must be highly skilled in lots of areas and the job itself is a mix of so many things... a salesperson, lawyer, counsellor! But in a nutshell, I am my clients' professional representative, sourcing and pushing for their job opportunities and negotiating their contracts.

Mia: My role as an agent is to assist, manage and grow work opportunities for my family of actors. Then to negotiate and implement the best deal, providing clear support and clarity to everyone involved. Ultimately to help create a career in the business that we love.

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QUICK TIPS

Most work opportunities come from:

- Spotlight casting breakdowns
- Direct contact with casting directors
- Knowledge of recently announced projects
- Word of mouth

LINKS

www.spotlight.com

What is the process of finding work for your clients?

Amy: Mostly we tend to use a system called Spotlight. Actors pay a yearly fee to be members and agents use this system to suggest their actors for the projects that are casting on there. Most casting directors use Spotlight for their briefs; however, some prefer to send direct breakdowns/scripts to agents or to just speak directly to the agents of the actors they have in mind for the projects. So, there is definitely a big element of hustling and digging for info from the casting offices from agents. Gone are the days of sitting back and just suggesting on Spotlight. It often needs follow ups, calls and emails to persuade! Then when the audition is secured, it's in my client's hands to get the job itself.

Ashley: The most common process is using the industry casting website Spotlight, which sends agents breakdowns of projects currently casting. However, I think it's really important for an agent to be proactive, rather than just being reactive and simply suggesting when a breakdown comes in. If I feel that a client is particularly right for a role, I will often follow up a Spotlight suggestion with an email/phone call to the casting director flagging key reasons why I feel they should see said client.

Barnaby: We respond to breakdowns on Spotlight, but also constantly read scripts and make suggestions to casting professionals. We also have a good relationship with many casting directors who call us when they are looking for actors. It is never just a passive process for us - we need to constantly know what is being cast and which of our clients are available and interested in projects that are casting.

Mia: Finding work for actors often comes via word of mouth, Spotlight, and after research into upcoming projects. After years of working as an assistant there is a wonderful network of creatives, from writers, directors, producers and casting directors that create opportunities for our actors - and we try to connect these people, so that potential work can happen.

Ashley: We also need to be aware of what is going on in the industry by keeping on top of any recently announced theatre, TV or film projects. I will then do my research to find who has been attached to cast and send over any relevant suggestions before a Spotlight breakdown has been released.

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QUICK TIPS

Some of the ways an agent offers casting support and guidance include:

- Sharing detailed information about the project
- Sharing any insights about the director/casting director
- Reading and discussing the script
- Advice and feedback on self-tape auditions
- Advice on what to wear

Once a casting is secured, what support or guidance do you give?

Mia: Once a casting is offered, we will log the meeting and share this with said actor. This will include general info – who, what, where - and more information regarding the project, casting, creatives, character, filming dates, specifics (off book/with reader) etc. We are also happy to offer advice when self-tapes/zoom meets are required. We will look at the director, script and any other things that may help with the audition, once the actor has had a chance to look at the material. We follow up to check that everything is ok, and the actor is audition ready.

Amy: This very much depends on the clients' experience and how they prefer to work. There will always be an initial conversation about the project, and for some, that will be all they want and need. If a client is a new graduate or a particularly inexperienced actor, I may advise on what to wear, how to approach the meet/audition or if it's a self-tape I may work with them on the script and give notes to retape.

Barnaby: We give all sorts of advice from clothing options to reading in with a client so that they can understand a scene. We can also give them advice about self-tapes and about the particular casting director they are taping or auditioning for. We work very collaboratively with our clients and do anything that we can to help them secure the job they are going up for.

Amy: Often, we will have another chat or email about how it went or if it was a self-tape, what my thoughts were. If it's a first round self-tape, casting directors don't often have time to give any sort of feedback (unless it goes to recall/offer) so I do feel it's important to give my client my thoughts or feedback to acknowledge their hard work as it can be all they get.

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QUICK TIPS

After getting a job, an agent's support includes:

- Telling the client the outcome of the casting audition
- Discussing, negotiating, and confirming details and conditions
- Agreeing fees and signing off the contract
- Acting as the middle person between the company and the client
- Dealing with any issues or changes that arise during production
- Seeing the work and getting industry contacts along to watch

If they get the job, what's involved in looking after the client?

Mia: Once they get the job, we will discuss the role, dates, fees, contract, and any other stipulations - including perhaps a change of appearance or options. Once the contract has been negotiated, agreed and signed, we will support the production team, costume department and admin team with anything they need regarding our client on the job. Once filming we are available to help with any issues or changes.

Amy: I would of course negotiate and sign off all contracts and then when the client is on the job, I am their go to for any issues that crop up and I am the middleman between them and the production company for any such problems. If it's a theatre job I will go along to support and take industry colleagues to watch them (casting directors, directors, producers etc). If it's screen, I may do a set visit to say hello, support and watch their work (not so much in Covid times!) and go to the screening/premiere with them.

Barnaby: Anything from schedule and diary management, to negotiating the financial and contractual elements of the job. If the job is long term, we will always check in with the client throughout the contract to make sure that they are happy and can continue in the job to the best of their ability.

Ashley: The best part is getting to tell the client that they've got the job. No matter whether they are a new graduate or more experienced actor, nothing beats the feeling of being able to pass on the good news. Following that it is then my job to negotiate the contract to ensure I get the best possible deal for the client. This not only covers the financial aspect of the offer, but can also include things like billing, dressing room/trailer allocation, accommodation, travel etc. It's also important to have an open dialogue with the client from the very start to ensure that everyone is on the same page with regards to the pros (and sometimes cons) of the offer for their career.

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QUICK TIPS

- Reputable agents never charge fees for actors to join
- All monies are usually collected by the agent
- The agent deducts their commission and any other deductions
- Payment to the client is usually made within 7-10 days
- Each job is different and there are endless issues that might occur
- Tasks range from marketing to inviting industry contacts to watch
- There might be issues such as sickness/injury or dealing with travel/accommodation queries
- Once a job has started, an agent will also focus on getting the next job secured

How does the collection and payment of fees work?

Amy: Reputable agents NEVER charge fees for actors to join their roster. We only earn if our actors do and take a cut of client wages when they work. So, production companies pay the fees to the agent, the agent takes their cut and pays the actor.

Ashley: All monies are collected by the agent on behalf of the client, whether they are paid via BACS or invoice (raised by us). Once the money has been received, we then deduct the relevant commission, pay out on our weekly pay run and send them a statement.

Mia: Your agent will have agreed to take commission on fees and agree to collect on your behalf. This will be on invoice or by signed contract. We have a client account that is designated for Client fees only. We agree with our client to pay within ten days of receipt and pay to a bank account of their choice. Our Accounts then send out a payment summary to the client detailing fees with any deductions – commission, NIC, pension etc.

What are some of the things you might have to deal with through that employment timeframe?

Barnaby: There is an endless list of what can go wrong during a contract! After nearly 20 years doing this job, I am sure that I have still not dealt with every problem that can occur!

Ashley: Initially it will always start with the marketing - announcing the job on our social media sites and updating the client's Spotlight CV and website biog. For theatre we will then arrange press night gifts and invite casting directors who we think will be beneficial to the client's career. Other things we might have to deal with are sickness/injury during the contract, travel/accommodation queries, any issues amongst the cast and creative team etc. No two jobs are the same, so as agents we just have to be ready for anything! Once a client has started on a job we also have to be focussed on getting them the next one.



QUICK TIPS

Some of the ways an agent may find a client are:

- Email applications and actors writing in
- Attending drama school/college final year showcases/shows
- Watching TV, film and theatre productions
- Word of mouth and recommendation

HOW TO GET AN AGENT

How do you find potential clients?

Barnaby: We get on average 100-150 applications by email each week. We look through every single one carefully. I wish that we could reply to everybody, but it is a full-time job! We have taken on clients in the past who write in, and we also watch third year drama productions and try and see as many graduates in the course of a year as possible.

Ashley: When I am actively looking to expand my list I will cover the drama school showcases. We are also very lucky at InterTalent that we get a number of actors writing into us for representation so I often have numerous CVs and showreels to go through.

Mia: Word of mouth, watching tv, film and theatre, graduate showcases. Perhaps I have worked with them before through previous employment.

Amy: For me personally, it often comes from actors approaching me having been recommended by my clients or someone in the industry who knows me. Sometimes it's from an email submission, or it might be that I've seen someone in their final showcase/show at Drama College.

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QUICK TIPS

- Email is best
- Personalise it with a name; don't put "Dear Sir/Madam"
- Keep it short and attachments small
- Include Spotlight link if you have one and/or a CV, headshot and any links to self-tapes
- Always write when you have something to write about (e.g. you are graduating, you are in a new show etc.)
- If you get invited to talk with any agent, go
- Don't chase with an email or call; if interested, they will get in touch.
- Say thank you regardless of the outcome as it helps build your reputation as a professional

How should a client approach you?

Ashley: All agencies have their own policy regarding representation requests, but we ask for email submissions as it wastes fewer trees! Due to the amount that we receive we unfortunately cannot guarantee a reply, but we do try our very best to look at all of them. If one of the agents responds positively to the CV then they will get in touch directly, so please don't chase up with a phone call. Also make sure that you personalise the email as putting a "Dear Sir/Madam" just highlights that the actor hasn't done their research.

Barnaby: By email. Keep attachments small and keep to the point - there is no time to read enormous emails - your Spotlight link and a very quick rundown of what you are up to will suffice. Always try and write to an agent when you have something to write about - you are graduating, you are in a new show etc.

Mia: A nice email or letter, or invitation to see work (with names correct). If you get invited to talk with any agent about representation, respond and meet. Don't hold out for better/bigger...go talk. And thank everyone for their time/interest regardless of the outcome.

Amy: Initially, to email with their CV, headshot and any footage or self-tapes is best. I try my hardest to respond to everyone who writes in.



QUICK TIPS

- Do your research
- Speak to the people that an agent already represents
- Speak to industry people who have employed clients
- Look at their social media presence
- Check out their website and IMDB
- Look at the type of work their current clients are being booked on

If an agent rejects someone it's most likely due to:

- Being too similar to an existing client
- Not taking on any new clients at that particular moment
- Poor approach to agent (e.g. bad letter, photo etc.)
- Lack of experience or training
- Meeting with the client didn't go well

How does someone judge which ones to approach?

Barnaby: I think word of mouth is the most effective way of judging an agent - speak to the people they look after already. Look at their social media presence. Are they doing the type of jobs that you want to do?

Amy: Speak to other actors you know and ask them about their agent. Look at other actors you respect and see who they are represented by. Research, look at their websites, their IMDB...but I do think it best to speak to other industry people and get opinions and thoughts first-hand as it's so much about the individual agent within the company.

Ashley: As mentioned above, the key thing here is that the actor needs to do their research. Most agencies have a website which should give all the information you need to know about the clients they represent and the type of work they are being booked on.

What are some of the reasons you might reject someone?

Amy: The main reason is likely to be that they are a 'clash' with another client. Which means that I feel that one of my clients is a similar casting bracket to them. I also may just not be taking on new clients at that point. Often it really isn't personal but just about a fit at that particular time.

Barnaby: There are so many good actors out there and we only have a limited list, so we do turn down many actors who apply to us - it is normally due to the fact that they clash with an existing client or that our list is full!

Ashley: It's usually because I either don't have any space on my list or they are too similar to an existing client.

Mia: Bad letter, bad photos, a generic email blanketed to every agent in town, too similar to my list, not enough skills perhaps or training, or bad meeting.

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QUICK TIPS

- Be honest and open with your current agent
- Discuss your reasons and see if they can be addressed
- Give the agent the chance to address any concerns
- Be honest with your current agent before approaching others

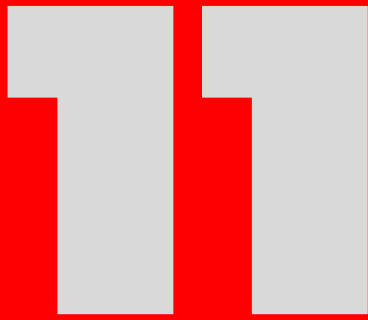
What should someone do if they want to change agents?

Barnaby: Personally, I think that it is always good to be honest with your current agent and ask to have a chat about your expectations and what you hope to achieve in the near future. It is never pleasant to find out that a client has been looking to change agents behind your back. Be honest and transparent and give your current agent the chance to push a bit harder. Sometimes it is not the best thing to change. Make the relationship that you have work for you!

Ashley: The first thing they need to do is establish the reasons why they are wanting to change and then make sure they have raised these issues with their current agent. We're all human, so it would be unfair not to give the agent the chance to address any concerns and hopefully rectify them. If nothing changes and the actor continues to be unhappy then at least it won't be a shock to the agent when they finally decide to leave. Once the decision has been made it is then just the same process as finding your first agent.

Mia: Always discuss with their agent first. Be clear and honest. Discuss issues. Like any other relationship - we know when it's not working.

Amy: My advice would be to firstly speak to your current agent. Is the reason you want to move something that can be solved or rectified where you are? Sometimes communication has just lapsed. If you are intent on moving, the best thing is to be honest with your current rep and then start to approach other agents. But I do get that it can feel scary to leave an agent before finding a new one, so a lot of actors don't do it that way.



QUICK TIPS

The process of signing someone to an agency includes:

- Making the offer
- Moving/adding them to Spotlight (if not already there)
- Checking CV is appealing and headshot is a good representation
- Dealing with grace/transition period if moving from another agency

If you're thinking of taking someone on, what's the process of signing them up?

Amy: This depends on their previous/current agent and restrictions there are contractually. In an ideal world we start immediately, and I move them over to my agency on Spotlight and get straight to suggesting them for projects. But sometimes there will be a grace/transition period between agents so it's navigating that. If the actor is unrepresented, we get them on Spotlight (if they aren't already), make sure their CV looks as appealing as it can and that the headshots are strong and a good representation of who they are as an actor.

Barnaby: Very easy really - we make an offer. If the offer is accepted, we add them to our Spotlight list and away we go - there is always a pile of admin to do when we first take on somebody, but we are already thinking about pushing them for various projects when we make the offer!

Ashley: It's massively important to me that I connect with the client on a personal level. I don't work for the client, and they don't work for me - we work together as a team. They could be the most talented person on the planet but if they have a negative or difficult personality, I won't enjoy working with them. With this in mind I think it's really important to have had a lengthy meeting with them before offering representation to ensure we're both on the same page and can see the positives of becoming a team. Once an offer has been made it is then down to them to hopefully accept and then we start the ball rolling.

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QUICK TIPS

Some of the things an agent expects from the client:

- Be honest and open, committed and dedicated
- Communicate and be clear about your availability
- Be on time, prepared and professional – you are representing the agency as well as yourself.
- Know your industry
- Inform your agent of any direct offers from personal contacts and let them proceed professionally for you

What do you expect of you client (e.g. in terms of them looking for work, making themselves available etc)?

Barnaby: We expect an honest and open relationship. Always let your agent know if you are not available - there is nothing more irritating than pushing somebody for a job, getting a meeting and finding out they are unable to do it. We always want our actors to be on-time, prepared and professional - they are representing us when they are out in the world, so this is of vital importance!

Ashley: I expect the same commitment and dedication from them that I give to their career.

Amy: I prefer my actors to let me source the auditions and as a rule that is generally what casting directors prefer. Although if the client has a personal relationship with a director/producer then that can mean sometimes opportunities come to them directly. In that scenario I would always ask that they pass the contact to me so that it's a professional exchange from the start. I expect my actors to be clear and communicative with me about their availability so that I can do my best to fit auditions around any other work commitments and I am fully informed.

Mia: Know your industry. Research. Get involved. Represent me and yourself to the best of your ability. Do not expect anything. Work hard. communicate. Hone your craft. Love what you do. It's not always about the money. Today's 'no' may be a yes tomorrow.

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QUICK TIPS

- Don't be despondent, everyone must start somewhere
- Apply for short/student films and fringe productions
- Learn from your peers and from watching back your own work
- Create your own work
- Do your homework, know who you are meeting and about their work
- Building a career is a long game; it rarely happens overnight

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Any advice for someone just starting out who might not have many CV credits?

Ashley: Don't be despondent about a lack of credits because everyone has to start somewhere! As long as you have faith in your ability and the determination to succeed you should not let anything stand in your way.

Amy: Apply for as many short/student films and fringe productions as you can and see if you can find a circle of actors who may want to join you so you can form your own classes together. Learning doesn't always have to cost a lot of money. You can learn a lot from other actors and just watching yourself back on camera and noting and discussing with a group. Try to get as much experience as you can. Extensive experience is not always necessary to get an agent, I have taken on actors with very few credits, some who weren't yet on Spotlight, just from a self-tape and seeing their potential.

Barnaby: Create your own work! Tech is so accessible these days - write a script and film it with mates! Start a production company and put on a show - you will be surprised what can happen with a bit of effort and a lot of talent!

Mia: Don't lie. We all start somewhere. Again - know your limitations at that moment. It's not personal. You are your own tool. Make it the best it can be. Do your homework. Know who you are meeting and their work. Watch other actors. Observe. I stuffed envelopes for a long time and watched our world for a long time. We are in it for the long game. Don't allow criticism to destroy you. Use it to transform.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Amy: If you are in the fortunate position of having a few agent meetings and making a choice, my advice would be to listen to your gut. Go for the agent who you feel really gets you and shares the same career visions and is the most passionate about you. The larger corporate agencies have a different approach to the smaller boutique agencies so have a think about that too. It's business yes, but it's about a personal fit. I also think it's important to think about who you feel not only will represent you in the best possible manner but who you want to be at your side at screenings and press nights. Who you feel most comfortable sharing all the ups and downs with?