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Life as a 'Mercy Street' extra

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Local actress Louise Ricks speaks about working behind the scenes

By Sean CW Korsgaard Staff Writer

PETERSBURG — With the second season of "Mercy Street" filming in Old Towne Petersburg, more than a few people have probably looked at the set and wondered what it takes to be an extra, or what it's like behind the scenes.

One of those extras, local actress Louise Ricks, was more than happy to share the experience.

Ricks has been deeply involved in the local theater scene since the seventh grade, starring in productions with Theatre IV, Richmond Triangle players, and the Whistle Stop Theatre. As a playwright, she wrote the award-winning "Cinderella: The Fairy Godmother's Tale", and she currently serves as the spokesperson for Richmond Art Works.

"Mercy Street" marks her first formal appearance on screen however, and it made for a wildly different experience than working on stage.

"In theatre you get energy back from the audience and it motivates you, you get to rehearse and immerse yourself in the role," said Ricks. "Film on the other hand, it's just you in your scene partners, you practice a couple times, or asked to improvise, and you're done after a few takes."

So just how does one become a "Mercy Street" extra? According to Louise, it's a surprisingly simple process.

“I emailed them my headshot and my resume, and the next day, Chad Darnell, the casting director, called me in for a fitting. He looked me over and said, ‘You should be a hooker’, and was sent down to my costume fitting. Before you know it, I’m in a soldier’s lap collecting his money!”

Last year, Ricks was on set for two weeks. This year she was on set for just one day, having been promoted to a featured role for season two.

“The director brought all the women auditioning into one room with all the men auditioning to play a drunken soldier, and asked us to improvise a scene where we are trying to pick the drunk soldiers up,” said Ricks. “After that me and one other actress were asked to do it again, only this time to try and pick up two soldiers at once, afterwards, I was told I had the role and was dismissed.”

"Mercy Street" employs between 250-300 extras for each episode, pulled in equal parts from local theater and first timers alike. On set, working as an extra came with some interesting challenges.

“All the girls wondered how to go to bathroom in a hoop skirt, and a lot of the guys struggle with their facial hair,” said Ricks. “My scene partner, Michael Todd, was just itching to shave. “

As a whole though, working on "Mercy Street" is as fun and rewarding, Ricks said. She has had run-ins with lead actors Josh Radnor and Norbert Leo Butz, but it's working alongside her colleagues and friends that she enjoys the most from the experience.

“I got to hang out with all my favorite people on a lovely spring day in costume, and working in Petersburg is like stepping back in time,” said Ricks. “Best. Day. Ever.”

Working with friends, and the thrill of seeing on television of course.

“I hardly recognize myself!” Ricks said.

Not bad for a day's work.

As for anyone interested in becoming extras themselves, Ricks points to the Facebook page, Mercy Street Extras Casting, from where the show has recruited many of their extras, and eagerly suggests getting involved in the local theater

scene.

“It’s such a wonderfully rewarding experience,” said Ricks. “To those curious about it, just find your local theater and get involved however you can.”

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