



# Bill Oberst Jr.

*Your Career, Your Way*

by Kim Doty

When Bill Oberst Jr. was young, he was convinced there was a room with all the answers. He just had to find it. Of course, no such room exists. "The room is empty," said Oberst without anger or distress. "No one knows anything."

It can be a scary discovery, this lack of certainty and knowledge in the face of countless questions. That is, unless you choose to find it empowering. For Oberst, it was liberating to realize he had the freedom to "just try stuff" and see what worked for him.

In more than 20 years as a working actor, Oberst has tried a lot. And with over 150 stage, film and television credits to his name, it's clear that much of what he's tried has, in fact, worked. In his Thursday keynote presentation at the 2016 SETC Convention, titled "The Empty Room, the Open Heart, and Other Lessons from Hollywoodland," Oberst engaged SETC members in the story of his journey. From his early days in Georgetown, SC, where he was "the fat kid, smart kid, ugly kid and sissy kid, all in one kid" who learned that entertaining other kids was an easy alternative to getting beat up, Oberst moved on to tour across the nation in one-man shows based on historical figures (from Jesus to JFK), make a living in Los Angeles as one of the horror genre's go-to film and television actors, and ultimately find his way back to his passion for the stage.

Oberst kept a busy schedule at the convention, following his keynote presentation with a casual chat-back discussion, a masterclass on video auditioning and a performance of his award-winning one-man stage show *Ray Bradbury's Pillar of Fire*. He offered insight and inspiration, sharing his experiences for actors to use as jumping-off points in their own search for answers. "I'm not ashamed to tell you," he said in his keynote, "that if something works, copy it."

In addition to describing what has worked for him, Oberst shone a light on important questions all artists must confront when they pursue their passion as a profession.

#### One-Man Shows:

#### Create Your Own Opportunities

To make a living as an actor, Oberst says you must simply work. In the same way that a writer must write and a painter must paint, an actor must act. While it may sound easier said than done, Oberst emphasized that you don't have to wait for anyone else's permission to start doing what you love.

"When I got out of college, I wanted so badly to act professionally and nobody would hire me, so I hired myself," Oberst said. "I'm a big believer in hiring yourself."

Taking his career into his own hands, Oberst created projects that he was passionate about and pursued them with full force. Oberst's one-man touring stage ministry *Jesus of Nazareth* was born out of a love of historical characters and an inkling that Jesus "can't have been as boring as preachers make him." He started cold-calling churches and fellowships, and during a 10-year span starting in 1994, Oberst



## Bill Oberst Jr.: Bio and Career Highlights

### EDUCATION

Attended University of South Carolina

### THEATRE CREDITS INCLUDE:

*Ray Bradbury's Pillar of Fire*, 2015-Present  
*Tonight: Mark Twain*, 2005-09

*Stand-Up: When Comedy Was Funny*, 2001-08  
*A Tribute To Lewis Grizzard*, 1999-2010  
*Jesus of Nazareth*, 1994-2004

### FILM CREDITS INCLUDE:

*The Retrieval*, 2013  
*Deadly Revisions*, 2013  
*Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies*, 2012  
*Children of Sorrow*, 2012  
*Scary or Die*, 2012

### TELEVISION CREDITS INCLUDE:

*Criminal Minds*, CBS, 2014  
*The Confession*, The Hallmark Channel, 2013  
*The Shunning*, The Hallmark Channel, 2011  
*True Blood*, HBO, 2010  
*Sherman's March*, The History Channel, 2007

### INTERNET CREDITS INCLUDE:

*Take This Lollipop*, 2011

### AWARDS INCLUDE:

Ernest Kearney Platinum Medal, Hollywood Fringe Theatre Festival, *Ray Bradbury's Pillar of Fire*, 2015  
Los Angeles Movie Award, Best Actor, *Deadly Revisions*, 2014  
Daytime Emmy Award, New Approaches, *Take This Lollipop*, 2012

Above: Oberst addresses a packed audience during his keynote presentation at the SETC Convention.

Opposite page: Oberst performs his award-winning one-man stage show *Ray Bradbury's Pillar of Fire* Friday night at the 2016 SETC Convention.

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performed his one-man *Jesus of Nazareth* over 1,000 times in theatres, community centers, churches and synagogues across the nation.

Oberst also developed and began touring other one-man shows based on historical characters who drew his interest. He portrayed President John F. Kennedy in *JFK* from 1996–2004, and presented *A Tribute to Lewis Grizzard*, in which he portrayed the Southern writer and humorist, from 1999–2010.

#### **Breaking into Film: Lessons in Unabashed Ingenuity**

After more than 10 years on the road, Oberst found his way to the camera. In 2007, with a broken MS-DOS computer and a father encouraging him to get more modern equipment (and a more "real" job), Oberst bought "this thing with something called a browser and a camera." Only an AltaVista search away, Oberst saw an online casting ad for the lead role of William Tecumseh Sherman in a TV movie.

Despite feeling unqualified for the role, Oberst used everything he had at his disposal – his *Jesus of Nazareth* beard, red spray paint, a blue coat from his one-man *A Christmas Carol*, a printer, some Scotch tape, and one of Lewis Grizzard's jokes about General Sherman – to craft a makeshift, yet photo-worthy costume and express interest. When a request came back to drive to Washington, DC, with the costume for an in-person audition, Oberst wasn't fazed. He used Google to track down a General Sherman reenactor from a nearby town in South Carolina and convinced the man to loan him his full getup. With a nothing-to-lose attitude, Oberst landed his first on-camera role as the Union general. The television documentary, *Sherman's March*, was warmly received by critics when it premiered on the History Channel in 2007.

With one television movie under his belt, Oberst began pursuing more work on the small screen. He played John Wesley, a founder of the Methodist movement, in the 2009 movie *Wesley*. Later, he earned the role of a stern Amish father in two Hallmark Channel movies based on the book series "The Heritage of Lancaster County" by Beverly Lewis: *The Shunning* (2011) and its sequel *The Confession* (2013).

"This is the kind of material I love to do," Oberst said of his work playing historical characters on the screen. "This is what I wanted to be."

#### **Working in Hollywood: Understand Your Brand**

When Oberst moved to Los Angeles with the hope of building on his success as a historical character ac-

tor, he learned a difficult lesson. "If it didn't happen in L.A., they don't really care," Oberst said. His 15 years of stage experience and few television credits didn't mean much on the West Coast.

He started over from scratch. In his first six months of struggling to book roles in Hollywood, Oberst noticed a theme in his series of rejections. Auditions for soccer dad roles led to feedback such as, "You look like a soccer dad that's gonna kill the team and eat them." And a potential client for an energy drink commercial mentioned being "afraid of [his] look."

Desperate for work and running out of savings, Oberst finally took the hint and accepted the advice of a producer he had met at the Hollywood YMCA who urged Oberst to "go dark ... Your eyes, they're disturbing. With your face, you can't go dark enough."

Oberst realized he could capitalize on his unique look to break into the horror genre – and work started rolling in. He seeded the Internet with phrases such as "master of creeps" and "the guy with those disturbing eyes" until Google search results painted a picture of Oberst that caught the attention of casting directors. Soon, he began getting typecast as killers and creeps – from a backwoods cannibal (*Dismal*, 2009) to a necrophiliac clown (*Circus of the Dead*, 2014). And while typecasting has an overwhelmingly negative connotation, Oberst reminded participants in his video auditioning masterclass that "the second word in typecast is 'cast' – you'll work a lot."

Since 2008, Oberst has appeared in a slew of horror roles. He booked more than 100 roles in a five-year period – an IMDb record. Oberst had the opportunity to combine his new horror film credentials with his longtime appreciation for historic impersonations in the 2012 B movie *Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies*, in which Oberst's standout portrayal of Abraham Lincoln was the one critical success in an otherwise panned movie. His performance as an online stalker in the Daytime Emmy Award-winning Facebook app *Take This Lollipop* (2011) made millions of viewers question how much personal information they should share online. And in a personal and audience-favorite role, Oberst played the "Killer Woodsman" on CBS's popular *Criminal Minds* (2014). "I became the guy that the camera wanted me to be," he said.

#### **Finding Fulfillment: Do What You Love**

After this prolific period, Oberst hoped he had finally paid his dues and could start to earn the type

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# Kiss the Camera: 10 Steps to Mastering the Video Audition

Bill Oberst Jr. began his video auditioning masterclass at the SETC Convention with a question for the participants: "Does anyone like video auditions?" Not a single hand went up. Over the course of the workshop, Oberst shed insight on how he's learned to succeed in a format that inspires fear and disdain in so many actors. Here are some of his personal strategies for booking on-camera work through video auditions:

## 1 **Feel the love.**

"It sounds ridiculous," he conceded, but "the secret to successful auditions is love." Love the camera. Love casting directors. (Remember: they want you to do well.) Love the unique value you offer as an actor.

## 2 **Embrace the power of eyes.**

Once, Oberst was so rushed to record and submit a video audition that he looked straight into the camera without thinking about it. He booked the role, and since then he's come to realize the power eyes have to engage viewers (and casting directors). Look into the camera's eye to create a strong sense of connection.

## 3 **Find the light.**

When filming your audition, play around to find the light that hits your eyes and best highlights your features. "Make sure your eyes have a glint," suggested Oberst. This advice holds true for headshots as well as video auditions.

## 4 **Take risks.**

Oberst uses the improbability of getting cast as an excuse to throw caution to the wind. "Don't be afraid to take risks – statistically, you're not going to get it anyway," he half-joked. Make it your own, and you might just stand out enough to get the job.

## 5 **Show your strengths.**

Oberst admitted he often ignores requests to include specific shots in a video (e.g., a side profile, a long shot, and a full body shot from left and right) in the interest of showing what he knows works for him. "I get my eyes to the camera as quickly as possible," he said. "I give what I want, and it shows confidence."

## 6 **Learn the material.**

When given the script, "always use exactly their words" and "find the poetry and beauty" within them, Oberst recommended. His favorite technique for learning (and loving) his lines is to sing them, ultimately switching among different musical stylings as he goes. "I sing on until they're deep down in my soul," he said.

## 7 **Minimize movement.**

Actions don't matter on camera like they do on stage. In fact, they can be distracting. If an audition scene takes place in the car, Oberst warns not to mime



driving. "Acting on stage is doing," he said, whereas "acting on camera is being."

## 8 **Don't forget your demo reel.**

Oberst recommends keeping your demo reel short and including close-ups. He suggested student films as a good way to start building footage and recommends signing up-front agreements to ensure you receive material you can use.

## 9 **Know your type.**

Understand what makes you unique (and therefore valuable) as an actor. If you're not sure what that special something is that you bring to the camera – the reason the camera loves you – ask for professional opinions. Directors of photography are great resources for this kind of insight.

## 10 **Unplug to succeed.**

Turn off your phone and unplug from the Internet and social media while preparing for an audition. "You can either be in touch with the world or you can be in touch with your character," said Oberst. "You can't do both."

*Oberst, known for his portrayal of the "Killer Woodsman" on TV's Criminal Minds, leads a video auditioning masterclass at the 2016 SETC Convention.*

- Kim Doty

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of historical character roles he came to L.A. for in the first place. Instead, he continued to book the same horror work, just with better billing.

"You get invited to nicer red carpets, and that's about it," Oberst said. But, he added, "There are some benefits to being frustrated with what you're doing and that is that it makes you step away from your plan and do something different."

Oberst took on work "for almost no money at all" that he found more fulfilling. He played a slave bounty hunter in the independent film *The Retrieval* (2013). "Sure, he's evil," said Oberst of his character, "but it's a more nuanced story." It's the movie Oberst says he's probably most proud of. Oberst's relationship with Hollywood grew strained when *The Retrieval* wasn't picked up for distribution and he began to see in himself a striving for fame and importance that he found troubling.

When work stopped coming, Oberst turned his focus to one of his favorite authors, Ray Bradbury. A quote Bradbury shared in a 1968 video resonated with Oberst during this period: "The only thing you're ever going to own in your life is your work – I own my

books. We belong only by doing, and we own only by doing, and we love only by doing."

Oberst asked himself, "What have I been doing?" and "Have I been loving what I was doing?" Then, he focused on another quote from Bradbury: "Do what you love and love what you do, and if you don't love it, then stop doing it." Bradbury's words gave Oberst both guidance and an idea for a project. He decided he wanted to speak Ray Bradbury's words from the stage. Once again, he didn't wait for permission to do the type of work he was passionate about. Returning to his one-man stage show days, he started performing Bradbury's story, *Pillar of Fire*.

Having come full circle, back to his early days on stage in a one-man show, Oberst feels a renewed energy and passion for his art – and has a new approach to working in LA. "I still do movies," he says, "but I'll do things that mean something to me." ■



Kim Doty is the communications specialist in the SETC Central Office. She previously worked for Triad Stage and the North Carolina Theatre Conference. Kim received her undergraduate degree from Indiana University Bloomington, where she studied English, journalism and studio art.



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