
THE ARTISTIC LIFE
FAIR PLAY



Recent listings on Backstage.com called for an “athletic woman” for an energy-drink commercial (“Yoga is a plus”), and for a tenor to star in “Smile: A Country Rock Musical” (aspiring musician gets hooked on meth, expresses himself through Kenny Chesney songs). But, for actors who can’t touch their toes and look bad in cowboy hats, there was a more promising notice: a casting call for people “skilled in improvisation, narrative development, and working in intimate settings. . . . Professional bartending experience preferred.” The pay was a hundred and thirty-five dollars per five-hour day, for five days.

The job had been posted by Liz Glynn, a thirty-one-year-old artist based in Los Angeles, who will debut a participatory performance piece at the Frieze Art Fair, on Randall’s Island, this weekend. If you visit Frieze, and are among a randomly chosen hundred and forty-four guests, you will receive, along with your admission ticket, a key and a set of instructions. The instructions will lead you to an unmarked booth. Inside, in what resembles a Prohibition-era bank vault, you will use your key to locate a safe-deposit box, in which you will find a few papier-mâché objects (such as a tiger paw and a glove), a booklet of literary fragments, two glasses, and cocktail ingredients. An actor, standing behind a bar, will mix you a drink, while ad-libbing a monologue that, depending on the contents of your box, will refer to one of thirty-six stories by Jorge Luis Borges or Franz Kafka. The Actors Studio does not necessarily prepare its students for this.

“It’s about how we assign value to objects,” Glynn said the other day. “But the actual objects are deliberately crappy.” She sat near a half-empty bottle of vodka, in the ramshackle (there was a hole in the ceiling) Frieze office, in Union Square. She was wearing bright-red ballet flats and had a Cleopatra haircut.

Glynn had already cast two bartenders—Dennis Brito, who left a corporate career to pursue acting, and Tom Jacobs, an assistant professor of English who’d previously been in a Tino Sehgal performance at the Guggenheim. She needed two more, and three actors had been invited for a callback. (Others, including a man who named Hemingway as his favorite author—“a red flag,” according to Glynn—and a man who kept talking about fairies, had been dismissed.) Now it was down to Leila Bicos, a woman in a leather jacket, who works for a whiskey company; Tyler Gardella, who was anxious to get back to his day job at ABC Carpet & Home; and Alejandro Stein, an Argentinean with a mustache.

Glynn offered them some notes on their initial auditions. In general, the eye contact was too intense. “I bet on film you’re amazing, but right here you’re creeping me out,” she said. “You’re eighteen inches away from the person, so there’s definitely an awkwardness built into it, which I like. But you’re dealing with a contemporary-art audience, which tends to be skeptical. You need to be charismatic enough to engage them without being aggressive.” Glynn’s past projects include blindfolded tours of MOCA in L.A. and the erection and destruction of a miniature ancient Rome, at the New Museum.

Cecilia Alemani, a Frieze curator, arrived, carrying vermouth, lemons, olives, ice, and a cocktail shaker. At Frieze, the actors will be preparing drinks specially designed by a mixologist. At the audition, they would be winging it with Martinis. For their improvised narratives, they had been asked to read Borges’s “The House of Asterion”—a story about the Cretan Minotaur—and had been told to weave in a lock, a labyrinth, a window, and a spiral staircase.

Bicos went first. “What is a lock? What is a home? What is a window? What happens if you can’t see out the window? Food for thought.” She juggled the Martini shaker above her head and grinned.