



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for Hello, Dolly!

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[[start page]]

[[column 1]]

[[advertisement]]

There is enough Chantilly in this bottle to shake your world.

[[image-black and white of perfume bottle]]

Essence de Chantilly by Houbigant.

BLENDED IN U.S. © 1968 HOUBIGANT INC.

[[/advertisement]]

[[column 2]]

nishing Madison Avenue with a fruitful source for its growing artistic needs and providing many actors with a lucrative alternative to waiting on tables or paying periodic ego-deflating visits to the unemployment office.

It wasn't always so. Time was when advertising was a dirty word on Broadway, so Madison Avenue had to make do mostly with magazine models who couldn't act, and announcers who all looked and sounded the same. But as the commercials themselves got better and funnier, as Broadway arrangers and composers began playing the jingle game, as big-name performers like Jason Robards, Lauren Bacall, Arlene Francis, and Ralph Bellamy identified themselves unashamedly with coffee and aspirin and rejuvenating tonics, and as word seeped across the Atlantic that such "in" directors as Joseph Losey and Richard Lester weren't averse to directing commercials -- gradually, the stigma began to fade.

It was largely a symbolic stigma anyway: a public admission, in effect, that your career had hit the skids. Nowadays, though, with so many established Broadway names on Madison Avenue casting lists, working in commercials simply indicates a willingness to remain one's bank account. And this, after all, is nothing to be ashamed of in an affluent society. So it is that those hauntingly familiar voices you hear on television commercials belong to the likes of Jose Ferrer, Martin Balsam, Gary Merrill, David Wayne, Herschel Bernardi, and Orson Bean (to mention but a few), all of whom have demonstrated that a hypnotic voice can make even foot powder sound interesting. And in the process, if you figure the ratio of working time against money earned, they have become among the most well-paid performers in the entertainment industry.

Money is without question Madison Avenue's Siren song. No one denies it. A

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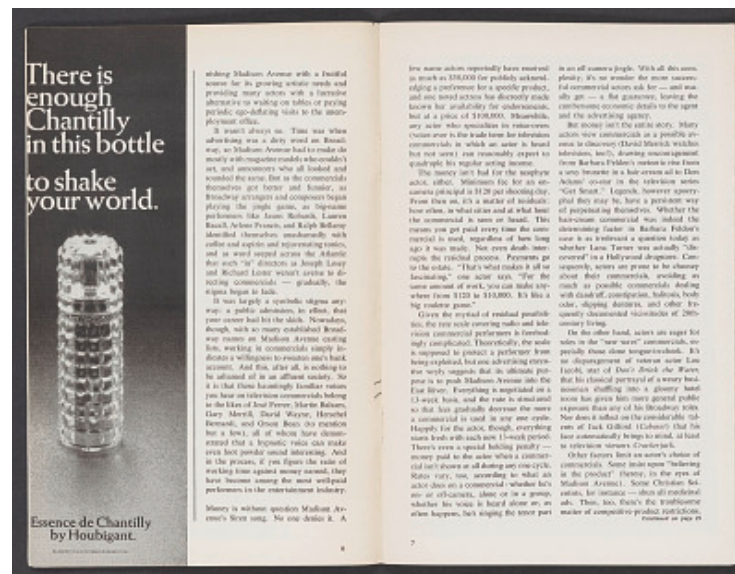
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few name actors reportedly have received as much as \$50,000 for publicly acknowledging a preference for a specific product, and one noted actress has discreetly made known her availability for endorsements, but at a price of \$100,000. Meanwhile, any actor who specializes in voice-overs (voice-over is the trade term for television commercials in which an actor is heard but not seen) can reasonably expect to quadruple his regular acting income.

The money isn't bad for the neophyte actor, either. Minimum fee for an on-camera principal is \$120 per shooting day. From then on, it's a matter of residuals: how often, in what cities and at what hour the commercial is seen or heard. This means you get paid every time the commercial is used, regardless of how long ago it was made. Not even death interrupts the residual process. Payments go to the estate. "That's what makes it all so fascinating," one actor says. "For the same amount of work, you can make anywhere from \$120 to \$10,000. It's like a big roulette game."

Given the myriad of residual possibilities, the rate scale covering radio and television commercial performers is forebodingly complicated.

Theoretically, the scale is supposed to protect a performer from being



exploited, but one advertising executive wryly suggests that its ultimate purpose is to push Madison Avenue into the East River. Everything is negotiated on a 13-week basis, and the rate is structured so that fees gradually decrease the more a commercial is used in any one cycle. Happily for the actor, though, everything starts fresh with each new 13-week period. There's even a special holding penalty--money paid to the actor when a commercial isn't shown at all during any one cycle. Rates vary, too, according to what an actor does on a commercial: whether he's on- or off-camera, alone or in a group, whether his voice is heard alone or, as often happens, he's singing the tenor part
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in an off-camera jingle. With all this complexity, it's no wonder the more successful commercial actors ask for--and usually get--a flat guarantee, leaving the cumbersome economic details to the agent and the advertising agency.

But money isn't the entire story. Many actors view commercials as a possible avenue to discovery (David Merrick watches television, too!), drawing encouragement from Barbara Feldon's meteoric rise from a sexy brunette in a hair-cream ad to Don Adams' co-star in the television series "Get Smart." Legends, however apocryphal they may be, have a persistent way of perpetuating themselves. Whether the hair-cream commercial was indeed the determining factor in Barbara Feldon's case is as irrelevant a question today as whether Lana Turner was actually "discovered" in a Hollywood drugstore. Consequently, actors are prone to be choosy about their commercials, avoiding as much as possible commercials dealing with dandruff, constipation, halitosis, body odor, slipping dentures, and other frequently documented vicissitudes of 20th-century living.

On the other hand, actors are eager for roles in the "new wave" commercials, especially those done tongue-in-cheek. It's no disparagement of veteran actor Lou Jacobi, star of Don't Drink the Water, that his classical portrayal of a weary businessman shuffling into a gloomy hotel room has given him more general public exposure than any of his Broadway roles. Nor does it reflect on the considerable talents of Jack Gilford (Cabaret) that his face automatically brings to mind, at least to television viewers Crackerjack.

Other factors limit an actor's choice of commercials. Some insist upon "believing in the product" (heresy, in the eyes of Madison Avenue). Some Christian Scientists, for instance--shun all medicinal ads. Then, too, there's the troublesome matter of competitive-product restrictions.
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