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On Broadway, Ads Now Get to Play Cameo Roles

By STUART ELLIOTT

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In 1966, when the Neil Simon musical "Sweet Charity" opened on Broadway, a waiter in one scene asked a customer, "A double Scotch, again, sir?" In the revival, soon to open at the Al Hirschfeld Theater, the waiter asks, "Gran Centenario, the tequila?"

Madison Avenue has come to Broadway.

Product placement and endorsement deals have long been staples in television shows, movies and radio programs and even, more recently, on video games. But they have been rare on Broadway. Now, advertisers, casting about for new ways to attract increasingly distracted consumers, have turned their attention to the theater world. And producers, always looking for extra cash to offset rising costs, are receptive.

"Commerce and art always merge, unless it's some hermit who takes his creative ability into a cave," said Barry Weissler, who is producing the revival of "Sweet Charity" with his wife, Fran. "Picasso was a brilliant artist who was extremely commercial. He understood how to sell and market his work. And it kept his prices up."

"Are we so pure that we can't accept a commercial adjunct to what we create?" Mr. Weissler asked rhetorically. "I don't think so."

In addition to the deal that Gran Centenario has with "Sweet Charity," which is now in previews and is scheduled to open May 4, the Hormel Foods Corporation, which makes Spam canned meat, has endorsed the musical "Monty Python's Spamalot." "Spam hasn't gotten this much attention since World War II," said Nancy Coyne, chief

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Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

In the Boston opening of "Sweet Charity," Gran Centenario, the tequila, made it into the dialogue. It was also in the cast, playing crates onstage.

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executive at Serino Coyne, an ad agency in New York that worked on the "Spamalot" deals. [Yahoo](#) also has a deal with "Spamalot."

Hilton Hotels and Resorts is sponsoring the musical "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang," playing, not coincidentally, at the Hilton Theater. Turtle Wax is endorsing the musical "Good Vibrations," which closes Sunday. And Visa sponsored the national tour of the musical "Movin' Out."

The deals are for amounts estimated to range from \$500,000 to more than \$1 million, depending on how long they last and how extensive they are. But just as there are critics of shows, there are critics of branding Broadway, who worry about blurring the line between art and commerce.

"It's sad to see Broadway become part of the marketing machinery, turning into another vehicle to help marketers bombard us with ads," said Gary Ruskin, executive director of Commercial Alert, a nonprofit organization in Portland, Ore., that seeks to stem what its members consider the creeping commercialization of American culture.

Madison Avenue, needless to say, has a different perspective.

Broadway is "an uncluttered environment where you don't have to share the spotlight as on television or in the movies," said Ms. Coyne, whose agency, owned by the [Omnicom Group](#), specializes in theatrical marketing.

"And it's a more memorable experience because it's live," she added. "At 8 o'clock, the curtain goes up, and at 10:30, it goes down. And if you weren't there, you missed it."

Most of the details would not raise eyebrows, like the two drinks created by Gran Centenario to salute the show being sold in the Hirschfeld lobby and bars near the theater, and sponsorship of cast parties. In a dance number, crates bearing the brand logo appear onstage, and print ads call the brand, which has an angel in its logo, "Broadway's newest angel." In the theater world, of course, an angel is an investor.

The reference to Gran Centenario in the revised script is "elegant, organic, not forced," said Carlos Arana, managing director in New York for Jose Cuervo International, which makes Gran Centenario.

Mr. Arana and Mr. Weissler said that Mr. Simon, whose approval was necessary to rewrite the line, agreed to the change. A representative for Mr. Simon said yesterday that he could not be reached for comment.

Until now, advertisers have not often sought out Broadway for branded entertainment deals because the theater business is smaller than the entertainment industries they typically work with. And because theater is more entrepreneurial in nature, it is often harder to make deals there than with media conglomerates.

Previous Broadway deals were limited to traditional tactics, like placing products onstage in exchange for acknowledgements in tiny type under the "Credits" section in the back pages of Playbill. And if, say, Frank Loesser mentioned Vitalis and Barbasol in "Guys and Dolls," it was for purposes of verisimilitude, not because the makers paid their way into the song.

Elaborate branded entertainment deals were once rare on Broadway. One, in 1994, was a promotion by the producers of the revival of "Damn Yankees" and the maker of Topps baseball cards, which included adding to the script a scene featuring oversize cards bearing the likeness of the hero, Joe Hardy, and selling a line of "Damn

Times.

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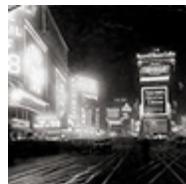


Photo: Great white way: Lights over Broadway, 1928
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Yankees" trading cards in the theater lobby. And the production of "La Bohème" that played on Broadway in 2002 featured brands like Piper-Heidsieck Champagne and Montblanc pens onstage.

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