

Product placement makes inroads on Broadway



By JAKE COYLE, AP Entertainment Writer
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NEW YORK – In the Broadway musical "Rock of Ages," beer is everywhere.

It's served to audience members during the show — unheard of at New York theaters — while cast members hoist a few on a set adorned with ads for brew.

It's fitting in a way, because "Rock of Ages" — a jukebox musical of 1980s hair rock like REO Speedwagon and Warrant — is set in a Los Angeles bar.

Coors Light is served by discreet waiters directly to theatergoers in their seats using a smart system of previously purchased tokens, so the exchange can be made quickly and quietly during the performance. But in a move that could offend theater purists, there are at least seven signs for Molson Coors Brewing Company products on stage, including five for Coors Light.

While embedded advertising has become commonplace in movies and television, to many theatergoers, the stage is more sacred ground. Product integration can aggrieve even those attending a musical such as "Rock of Ages," an unabashedly fun and silly show.

"When you walk into the theater, we're trying to kind of disarm people," said producer Matthew Weaver. "It's not your traditional theater experience."

The show originated in Los Angeles, so many of the producers, including Weaver, are from the film and TV business. They came to Broadway, Weaver says, in two ways: "scared to death" and "with a movie mentality."

Patrons at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre are greeted with questions like, "Are you ready to rock?" and handed fake lighters to wave during the show's power ballads. The musical stars former "American Idol" contestant Constantine Maroulis.

The deal with Molson Coors came from an investor who is involved with Manhattan Beer Distributors.

Weaver declined to say how much Molson Coors is paying, but says that it's not very much. Money earned through beer sales in the theater goes to theater, not the show.

"I have the opportunity to have 50 deals right now and I don't have any," he says. "We're not interested in that right now. As the show grows and if it's smart, we'll explore it. But we have a very small but important deal with Coors and that's all we have right now."

The show — for which a movie adaptation is in the works — also jokingly name drops Arby's, but Weaver says there's no deal with the fast food chain.

"Rock of Ages" has a number of other marketing deals off the stage, including one with MTV/VH1 (whose headquarters are nearby) and Twisted Sister front man Dee Snider's radio program. Styx and REO Speedwagon performed onstage following Monday's performance.

In recent years, product placement has been making sporadic inroads to Broadway, bringing marketing to stages more acquainted with Arthur Miller and Stephen Sondheim than Madison Avenue synergy.

In 2005, a version of "Sweet Charity" starring Christina Applegate made waves for rewriting the script to substitute Jose Cuervo's Gran Centenario brand for scotch. Baz Luhrmann's "La Boheme," in 2003, included a deal with fine pen maker Montblanc. A company sign was placed on stage in exchange for window displays in Montblanc stores.

Amy Willstatter, founder of the marketing firm Bridge to Hollywood and Broadway, put the "Sweet Charity" deal together. Since 2001, she's been looking for ways to bring marketing to Broadway's largely affluent audiences.

"It seemed to me, shame on Madison Avenue for not paying attention to Broadway when clearly it has a huge franchise," Willstatter says.

She still believes product placement is ultimately more suited to TV and movies. In theaters, she says, it's most beneficial for beverages that can served right there in the auditorium.

"It opens a whole different ball game (on Broadway) because you have accountability to a marketer now," Willstatter says. "It really needs to be the right show and the right time and the right place. The producers have to be really savvy."

Some might forgive Broadway producers for making whatever money they can in the midst of a recession. Others, though, don't like the idea of embedded advertising at all — let alone when people are paying \$100 a seat.

"There's an honorable tradition of the stars having their name in lights on Broadway, but it shouldn't be Coors," says Robert Weissman, managing director of Commercial Alert, a nonprofit organization devoted to keeping commercialism in its "proper sphere."

"Product placement is built on deceiving the audience," he says. "It's main appeal is the deception and nondisclosure of an advertisement. Broadway should not participate."

On the Net:

<http://www.rockofagesmusical.com/>

<http://www.commercialalert.org/>

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