

# There's no business like ad business

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By **Laura Petrecca, USA TODAY**

NEW YORK — Broadway's biggest stars will celebrate the Great White Way during the 60th Annual Tony Awards on Sunday. But producers have a different color in mind — green — these days as they team with marketers to add product placements, in-theater sponsorships and even commercials to their stages.

Theater "is the oldest form of entertainment, and it's been taken for granted for a long time," says Nancy Coyne, CEO of Serino Coyne, which specializes in entertainment-related marketing. Companies "are waking up and seeing that there are a lot of affluent people in theaters."

The growing commercialization has some critics turning thumbs down.

"They're trying to turn Broadway into ad-way," says Gary Ruskin of watchdog group Commercial Alert. "People go to Broadway for a moment of solace. This could alienate the audience."

But it's hard for marketers to resist the more than 12 million people who saw Broadway shows during the 2005-06 season, as tracked by The League of American Theatres and Producers.

They spent \$862 million on tickets in the season that ended on May 28, up 12% from the previous season. Theatersgoers' average annual household income the previous season was \$96,100.

There's less data about the millions more who see off-Broadway shows, traveling and regional productions.

Marketers also are interested because theatersgoers can't zap through ads the way they do at home with digital video recorders and VCRs. And that audience is usually deeply engaged.

"In the theater, you use all five of your senses," says producer Kevin McCollum, whose shows include *Rent*, *Avenue Q* and *The Drowsy Chaperone*. "It's not just about the message. It's about how you experience the message."

## Costly costumes

Meanwhile, Broadway producers are eager to offset their soaring costs. They spent \$165 million on expenses for new productions in the season that ended in May 2005, up 23% from the previous year, according to the League.

"A Broadway musical can cost between \$10 million and \$15 million to produce," Coyne says.

That helps to explain why Cablevision Systems just hired a product-integration firm to find corporate partners for its popular annual holiday show at Radio City Music Hall.

"For the first time in its 73-year history, the Radio City Christmas Spectacular will use product placement," says Amy Willstatter, founder of marketing firm Bridge to Hollywood and Broadway. She says she's "aggressively in the marketplace" seeking integration deals for acts such as "Santa's Workshop," where St. Nick prepares for his gift drop-off.

Marketers will probably pay Radio City a fee. But in other cases producers accept free products to offset the costs of play props and opening-

Advertisement

Advertisement for msn Holiday Challenge. The ad features a photo of Jerry Rice and the text: "WIN \$50,000!", "Start Playing Now", and "Follow clues from celebrities like Jerry Rice for your chance to win".

night parties.

For example, Shanta Mali, marketing director for off-Broadway's MCC Theater, contacted Evian after she saw that the product was mentioned in the play *Some Girl(s)*, which opened Thursday.

Evian agreed to supply bottles of water for use as props. In return, it gets the onstage exposure as well as credit in *Playbill*, the pamphlet that theater ushers give to each audience member.

While Mali says she'll gladly take the props, "The goal, of course, is for Evian to give us money to offset the cost of production." That can range from \$300,000 to \$600,000 for an off-Broadway show.

Most companies don't disclose the price of individual sponsorship and product-integration deals.

However, the League says that over the past decade companies such as Visa, Sprint and Continental Airlines paid \$125 million in cash and media support for Broadway shows.

### **The ad's the thing**

Among the ways marketers hope to steal the show:

- Live commercials.** Tourist group Visit London produced four-minute preshow skits for theaters in New York and Pittsburgh that encouraged people to visit the British capital. The payoff: Visit London promoted the participating theaters on its website.

- Product integration.** Sprint tied in with the off-Broadway production *Burleigh Grime\$*, about scheming stockbrokers. In a barter deal, Sprint provided cellphones and PDAs as props, while one scene was rewritten to say "No e-mails on this one. Go Sprint-to-Sprint" instead of "Go cell-to-cell."

Spirits marketer Jose Cuervo paid to have 2005's Broadway revival of *Sweet Charity* promote Gran Centenario tequila. Playwright Neil Simon approved a script change that has a character drink the tequila instead of scotch. Gran Centenario's logo also was incorporated into a dance scene.

The Broadway show has closed, but Gran Centenario will stay in the touring version, which begins in September.

- Theater naming rights.** In May, Snapple made its off-Broadway debut with the Snapple Theater Center in Times Square. Others with stage names: American Airlines Theatre and the Cadillac Winter Garden Theatre.

- Special products.** QVC created a Scoundrel Collection of necklaces, earrings and bracelets for *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. They sold last year for \$36 to \$314. Actors wore the QVC-provided jewelry onstage, and the theater concessionaire sold select pieces.

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