

AN ACTOR PREPARES by Max Blagg

I'm not a doctor, but I did once play one in a TV commercial, which proved so lucrative that I got an agent and did more, even though I was not concurrently going on casting calls for TV shows and films, because *I'm not an actor any more than I am a doctor*. But don't tell these casting agents that.

Appearing in TV commercials is the easiest of easy money, and having entered that dark period of middle age relatively intact, *I have a look they can sell* – college professor, banker, baker, Cialis abuser.

I won't even refuse if they send me for the part of the butler. In the constant struggle between dignity and money, *the money wins every time*.



► The phone rings. It's Maggie, my commercial acting agent. I wonder what she wants me to be today. We've never actually met, she's just a disembodied voice that calls with instructions to proceed to this or that casting agency, on what is far too often a fool's errand. I'm vaguely horrified at her question "Do you wear dentures?" Dentures? Sweet bleeding Jesus, even though we've never met face to face I thought she saw me as some kind of suave silver daddy, an older but wiser sartorialist, not some gummy old pensioner. Catching my indignation, she apologises and we chuckle about her misapprehension. But in fact, like the rest of these thespians on the commercial circuit, I am simply meat on the hoof,

a malleable cipher to be shaped to the client's whim. You walk into the room, light a Camel, then you frown. You frown because there are 10 or 12 other guys who look vaguely similar to yourself. Several shades of grey hair frequently thinning at the crown, some even "showing chrome", the bare skin camouflaged by elaborate comb-overs, shoe polish, and other tonsorial

convolutions. All around me the remnants of great look lingering on faces that have fleshed out or slid downward toward the neck, everyone dressed in the same bland mid-level clothing, comfortable shoes bought on sale – Florsheim, Ecco, Via Spiga. My elegant John Lobbs are not made for pounding the pavement, hoofing around the network of casting offices that cross-hatch midtown Manhattan.

On a busy day you might find yourself following the same guys from one address to another, nodding a curt hello and meantime engaging in a furious interior monologue, dissecting

every tiny fault in the mirror image across from you. "Shit, do I look that old?! Fucking hell, he should have shaved his head long ago, I can see the crop circles from here. And that belly, Christ – 38in waist, no doubt about it. That suit is crap, look at the shine on the trousers, cardboard lapels, looks like old designer stuff picked up in a thrift shop, pickled in perchloroethylene. Hope I never look that bad..." Some hope.

Casting directors range from friendly and cool to callous to totally deranged. Hey, just like real people! Have Maggie get you in there early, get on the first hour of the reel. You don't want to arrive at 4.30pm, when they've already spent several hours looking at idiots parroting consumer lies. Most directors watch casting tapes on fast-forward anyway.

It was late December, counting down toward Christmas, when Maggie called (again!) with a double bill: an audition for some new vodka and another, just round the corner, for a cruise ship company. At the vodka casting I recognised the director, an Urkel-lookalike fashion photographer, obviously picking up some easy money from a square client who wanted his special brand of hip. Maybe my downtown cachet would join his hip and we would work together to kick Grey Goose off the top of the table. We had occasionally encountered each other at a rather cool downtown restaurant, where I had recently (temporarily, of course!) worked as a maître d', though I was so discreet most people thought I was just hanging out there. The producer also recognised me and praised my many talents, about which he was doubtless completely ignorant. The part was a downtown type talking about the latest art movement at a fancy uptown party. Hey, I do that bullshit for real! And that's what I did, rather unconvincingly, when the camera rolled.

Still, I had an inside track on this one, and I proceeded with confidence to the cruise ship casting. Nail 'em both, why not? I will pay that rent, goddammit! To my consternation, there were several actors sitting around the green room, clad only in bathing suits. Maggie had omitted this crucial detail from the job description. The casting director told me not to worry (maybe I would play the captain!), then asked me if I'd mind stripping to the waist. I did mind, but still I removed my shirt. I can only pray that videotape of me has long since been erased. Naked from the waist up, flappy gut and worn old tattoos on bicep and shoulder, talking about golf. What am I, a sporting pirate who boarded the ship in mid-Caribbean? "Do you play golf?" The casting director had asked. Instinctively I said yes, though I've only ever used a golf club to pummel a car, and that's all been settled now. Part of the shoot involved disembarking from the cruise ship and playing a few rounds on one of those sun-kissed little islands.

Sweet. Sometimes when your agent calls it sounds like she is pitching a dream vacation: "Are you free from the 10th? It's a five-day shoot in Morocco." Or a car ad in Argentina, driving round the pampas dressed in Tom Ford suits. Yes, we're free, so we salivate and dream. If and when you do get a call-back, the hiatus is filled with frantic grooming, visits to the gym and the dentist. This business demands pure surface, as much depth as a saucer of milk.

At the call-back, it's not just the casting director or her videographer – there's the director, the client, the producers, everyone looking supremely bored. The director has his own enormous ego to keep afloat, and perhaps his apparent indifference to your talent stems from the fact that this is not the indie film he wants to make, it is a commercial for porridge. Or vodka. Or Scotchgard.

My Scotchgard audition, another Beckettian exercise in humiliation and absurdity. Maggie had called (again!) and said, "Would you wear a kilt?" Of course I would, Maggie, every Englishman has a touch of the travesty in him – we grew up on pantomime after all. And those knee socks will conceal the varicose veins. On my way in to the casting I shared the elevator with a man in full Scottish-piper regalia, including the bagpipes. I didn't realise at first that we were attending the same audition. In the commercial a mysterious kilted figure appears to a

housewife as she washes her kitchen floor. It is Scotchgard Man® with an amazing new cleaning fluid that will change her life. (Apparently, you can make this stuff up.) The kilted piper preceded me and I heard the screech of bagpipes from behind the closed door as he serenaded the dumbstruck homemaker. While waiting my turn, two more Rob Roys showed up in full-tilt kilt. I was beginning to feel like the lone Ranger at Parkhead Stadium. The casting director called me in and, noting the absence of a kilt, handed me a beret and a plaid blanket. I was instructed to stride in from off-camera and say, in a commanding Celtic accent: "Stop that scrubbing, wee lassie! The Scotchgard Man is here!" to the rather attractive actress pretending to wash the floor. Already intimidated by the immaculate turnout and musical talent of the competition, my improvised kilt felt inauthentic, but it was the beret that somehow stripped me of all dignity. When I made a small Highland leap and announced myself in an unconvincing Scottish accent to the housewife, she looked right up my kilt and simply burst out laughing. No haggis there. I dropped the wee blankie and ran, mentally sobbing, from the room, the laughter of the "housewife" echoing in my ears like toffee hammers on a dinner gong. In the elevator I felt an abasement much deeper than the usual catamitic humiliation an unsuccessful audition can trigger. An actorly failure of seismic proportions. It really was time to get a real job.

I didn't hear from Maggie for a while, so I called her. The cruise ship had left without me and the four-eyed twat in charge of the vodka shoot found another, hipper character for his 30-second remake of the party scene from *Midnight*

Cowboy. Maybe I should limit myself to voice-over jobs. The voice-over specialists are a different breed from on-camera actors. The males especially are much less socially presentable. Since they'll be off-camera, they see no need to dress up. Some of them arrive seemingly still wearing the bath robes in which they've been sitting about all day, practising their multiple

accents. While waiting for the opportunity to gull John Public with their golden voices, they riff loudly on accents, list their recent jobs and holidays and generally take up all the air in the room. I only despise them because they stand in the way of my gainful employment. I would do their job in a minute if I could find the right inflection to sell this particular ointment or condiment or condom or stroke-prevention pill.

In the end, as one of Madonna's gobshite lawyers famously remarked, "It's not about the money, it's about the money." Considering how easily you can earn 40 grand for a day's work (if the ad runs a few months on national network TV), that smell in the room is real: greed and envy and desperation all fusing into a very unpleasant fragrance. We line up like old horses praying not to be shipped to the glue factory, or further down the unemployment line we're already standing on, but we will be shipped to those dark places, if that lottery-style combination of producer/director/client doesn't freeze on the same frame and point to you and say: "That one. He'll do. We can fix the teeth and the gut in post. Next!" ◀