

As Seen In

The New York Times

October 22, 1998, Thursday (Business/Financial Desk)

Who Says Talk Is Cheap: What Is the Sound of One Voice-Over Actor Yapping?

By CAROL MARIE CROPPER

Carlos Alazraqui was just a comic from Los Angeles doing voice-overs on the side when he got that fateful call in July 1997.

It was his agent. "She said, 'You're playing the voice of a dog for Taco Bell,'" he recalled. "I said, 'All right.'"

And so, history was made. Or at least voice acting history. Mr. Alazraqui, 36, a second-generation Argentine-American, became the man behind the talking Chihuahua in Taco Bell's attention-grabbing commercials. He joined a growing list of voice actors who earn hundreds of thousands — even millions — of dollars a year without ever having to set face on a screen.

"I think, 'Wow, how lucky I am,'" said Mr. Alazraqui, whose parents emigrated from Argentina in the 50's. "It's stupid money," he added, alluding to being paid so much for saying "Yo quiero Taco Bell" while a jugged female pooch named Gidget appears to lip-sync the words of desire for the fast-food chain.

With or without megabucks, voice acting has certain intangible attractions. "I like being famous and anonymous," said Lorenzo Music, a k a Garfield the cartoon cat and the talking crash test dummy in those public service ads warning you to buckle up. "I can walk down the street and nobody comes up to me."

Moreover, neither looks nor age matters. "Some of the sexiest-voiced actresses, you wouldn't want to see," said Jeffrey Hedquist, a former deejay turned voice actor.

Mr. Alazraqui refused to say precisely how far into six figures he earns, but he is clearly not the top-paid voice in his field. That distinction probably falls to someone like Don LaFontaine, a full-throated Los Angeles actor repeatedly heard saying things like "Next week on 'E.R.'" on television. "I make millions," Mr. LaFontaine, 58, said in a phone interview.

Though a handful of star voices have always earned big money, both the money and the number of actors chasing it have

exploded in the last 5 to 10 years, according to those in the business. Meanwhile, advances in technology have helped the most popular voice stars bite off a bigger chunk of the business.

"They're coming by busloads with doctorates in voice acting," Mr. Music said. "I think people figured it out."

But he added a key point: "Of all the people who are calling themselves voice actors and doing voice acting, not all are making a living at it yet. Most people supplement other income with voice acting."

Indeed, while thousands of actors are chasing voice acting jobs, most of the work is split among no more than 100 actors, said Dick Moore, spokesman for the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, which represents 80,000 actors, news broadcasters and other radio and television performers around the country.

Still, when jobs are won, the money is good and it can take only minutes to earn it, compared with the hours an actor might spend on an on-screen appearance, Mr. Moore explained.

Unknown applicants have to troop to studios and audition each time a potential job pops up, and this and callbacks can require a lot of time. But some known voices do not even have to audition.

Mr. Music, 61, said of the time he needs to make a commercial in a studio: "It takes maybe a half-hour. That includes schmoozing and donuts." To read the script, nail down the lines with guidance from a producer and create a usable tape, he said, "takes maybe 10 to 15 minutes on-mike time."

For that, Mr. Music might get \$500 to \$750 for each radio spot, or more if the commercial is made for a national network program, plus the same amount all over again each additional 13 weeks. "You can tape one thing and it can play for 10 years," he said.

While Afra scale is \$200 a session for a

radio spot, it is common for popular voice actors to negotiate two or three times that or to get a contract for far more, he said. In addition, money is added to the base rate when the commercial is to be played in major cities. In Los Angeles, the going rate for voice actors is \$350 a session, according to Bob Lloyd, owner of the Voicecaster, a casting concern in Burbank, Calif. TV sessions are \$359.95 under Afra scale but go as high as \$707.40 in New York, with spots made for network television paying extra each time they are broadcast.

The incomes of voice actors have risen along with network budgets, Mr. Moore explained. He also pointed out that this is a business in which advertisers are willing to spend hundreds of thousands or even a million to lure big-name screen actors to be the unseen voice of their product, believing a familiar sound will snap consumers to attention.

In his later years, Robert Mitchum was the voice for the beef industry and Oppenheimer, the brokerage firm. Dick Cavett did commercials for, among others, AT&T. Richard Dreyfuss was the unseen voice behind certain previous Apple Computer ads and is now the voice behind some Honda commercials. Stars once turned up their noses at such jobs but now, "I think there's a realization that there's no shame in doing commercials," Mr. Moore said.

At the same time, new kinds of audio work have opened up, with books on tape and readings for the blind. And shows like "The Simpsons" have led to a resurgence in animation, with a need for voices. "Business has just boomed," Mr. Music said.

Technology has also brought higher earnings — for some. New, ultra-clear integrated services digital network, or I.S.D.N., phone lines mean that a voice actor can be directed and even recorded by a producer at another site.

That means voice actors can live anywhere and still perform, said Mr. Hedquist,

(continued)

who moved from the Northeast to Fairfield, Iowa, to live among followers of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and transcendental meditation. Some top voice actors have I.S.D.N. lines in their homes, he said.

The overall effect, however, has been to concentrate business in the vocal cords of a few dozen actors in New York and Los Angeles rather than to spread out the work. If the talent can be in a backwater town, so can the ad agency or production house that decides it wants to use big-city talent rather than the local guy. "Twenty years ago, I used to use a lot of Dallas talent," said Poppy Sundeen, a Dallas writer and producer who creates broadcast commercials. "Now, a lot of the time I will just cast someone in L.A. or New York, and I don't even think about the Dallas talent."

Mr. Music produced such sitcom hits as "The Bob Newhart Show" and "Rhoda" before becoming a voice. He credits himself with helping to usher in a more natural sound. Starting in the 70's as the voice of Carlton the Doorman on "Rhoda," he expanded into other roles after an agent told him he could make money with his throat. "I made the transition from being a big-time Hollywood mogul to being a voice actor," he dead-panned in his laconic Garfield voice.

The move toward more natural voices is such that although radio deejays used to do a lot of the ads, having a producer find out you are a radio announcer now can be "the kiss of death," said Mr. Hedquist, who started as a deejay 36 years ago.

There is also a move away from the resonant, older male voice to younger men and

to women, said Jim Kennelly, owner of Lotas Productions, a New York company that provides voice talent for radio and TV voice-overs.

In the mid 1980's, the Woman's Voice-Over Committee of the New York branch of the Screen Actors Guild complained that 80 to 90 percent of all voice-over work was being done by men. It commissioned a study that showed that women could also be effective voices. More women are being used now, Mr. Hedquist said, although men still dominate the business. A 1995 study showed that 75 percent of voice-overs were done by men, said Rafe Greenlee, of the Screen Actors Guild, which represents film actors as well as some performers on TV and commercials.

Younger men — especially those with voice attitude — have gained as advertisers reach out to Generation Xers. One of the hottest voices today belongs to a young New Yorker named Paul Christie, who plays the wise-guy lizard on the popular Budweiser beer commercials.

The lizard, through his agent, refused to talk. Budweiser's lizards and frogs croak only in character, said Bill Etling, spokesman for Anheuser-Busch Inc., the company that makes the beer. The brewery wants the humans behind Louie, Frank, Bud, Weis and Er to remain anonymous, he said.

Of course, some voices never go out of style.

The deep-throated growl of Thurl Ravenscroft, an 84-year-old voice actor and singer, is still going strong for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes after 46 years. Mr.

Ravenscroft said he moved from Nebraska to California in the 30's hoping to become a set designer or interior decorator, but was sidetracked into singing for commercials and — off camera — in movies. Through the years he has been heard as the soloist in "Dr. Seuss's How the Grinch Stole Christmas," the Russian wolfhound in "Lady and the Tramp" and a mouse in "Cinderella."

He snared the role of Tony the Tiger because the Kellogg Company knew him from singing in another of its commercials.

He still remembers the day in 1952 he went to a studio to make the first Tony the Tiger spot. According to the script, he recalled, "Tony would say, 'Good? Why they're great'" — but in a regular voice. "I said we had to do something with the word 'great' — to make it explode — to make it special."

And voice acting history was made.

Copyright © 1998 by The New York Times Company.
Reprinted by permission

Reprinted by
Hedquist Productions, Inc.
P.O. Box 1475
Fairfield, IA 52556
515-472-6708
Fax: 515-472-7400
email: jeffrey@hedquist.com

New Area
Code 641