

Terri Apple: Voiceover Virtuoso

Terri Apple is talking so fast that this computer-bound columnist is having trouble transcribing the pertinent information. Nevertheless, interviewing a voiceover veteran on the telephone seems appropriate. I hear her but don't see her, which is how millions of people have experienced her on the screen and on the radio for close to 27 years. According to her website, www.teriapple.com, she's currently the voice of Oscar Mayer's Lunchables, Hormel Chili, OfficeMax, Rice-A-Roni, and several other companies and products. She tells us that she has completed thousands of sessions, has five commercials running nationally, will soon be going to Tuscany to shoot an on-camera spot for Olive Garden, and is about to do something for Ford with Jerry Seinfeld.

The successful Kansas City-born Angeleno files this news as if she's taping a commercial in which the director has requested no air between the words. A good part of her accomplishment can be attributed to her having decided at 15 that she wanted to get into voiceover work. She says she was "intrigued by the voice" at an early age and began to open magazines and "read copy as if it were an actual commercial—give it a mood." Intent on getting into the business even before she was certain there was a business to get into, she made a fake demo: "I've always been highly ambitious" is the way she understates it. But when the not-yet-16-year-old Apple took her demo to the only agent in town, he "listened to it and said, 'I have no idea what to do with this,'" she recalls. He advised her to be a secretary.

Apple didn't take his advice. Instead she took her naturally raspy voice to Hollywood, where she nailed a few small jobs while waiting for her big break. That break came in the form of a voiceover assignment for the Homebase home improvement store chain. At the time, she was thinking more about getting on-camera assignments while working her day job in the literary division of Creative Artists Agency. But ever since that call came, she's been an in-demand voiceover artist.

She is still awestruck at her position, believing that "voiceovers are too hard to break into. The best actors are in the voiceover market." She also maintains that voiceovers are the toughest acting work there is, for the simple reason that she and her colleagues have to achieve their effects strictly through the voice.

Apple lands assignments with such regularity—between 200 and 400 annually, she estimates—it's surprising she's had time to write a book on the subject: *Making Money in Voice-Overs*, which she's currently updating. The new edi-



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tion will come with a CD, and she's readying an instructional video. She also has her own recording studio in West Hollywood, a logo (an apple with a bite taken out of it), and a sideline coaching privately—for which she relies solely on word of mouth to attract the five students she takes on weekly.

Nailing the Read

And she has plenty to tell her students: "It's really about being a good actor. Your biggest goal is how to nail the read. You have got to know how to give them a read—and perhaps an alternate read. Once you've hooked that read, stay out of your own way. You have to remember you're lending your voice and talent to a producer, a writer, a client. You're giving them yourself for them to mold you into what they're looking for."

Apple delivers voiceover facts with "no B.S.," she says. "Most voiceover people are not pushing their voice. Our tool is to sell that product, to have fun every time." She notes that anyone doing voiceovers must carefully examine "the specs"—the qualities a client is looking for, often expressed exclusively through adjectives. She describes and demonstrates various combinations an account exec or commercial director might want to hear—flat and wry, dry and off-the-cuff, warm and fun, hip and cool—insisting that if you ignore the specs, you're doing so "at your own peril." That's why in her classes—where students read from "a trunkful of A-list copy," she says—she uses the "Honey, I'm home" exercise, in which she has students repeat that phrase in

Stressing that it's "the mood behind the words" that's vital, Apple says it's crucial to know "who am I telling this to? I'm telling Rhonda and I'm sitting at a deli and she's drinking a soda. Visualization is a huge help until you get good enough" to produce automatically what's being sought. Before taping a commercial, "if I don't remember the mood, I'm not going to remember the voice that came out of it. It really is about your personality—what you can do to stand out in the read."

A good voiceover actor must be able to recapture that assignment-landing moment in the studio. Apple says she has to respond appropriately when someone says, "Have a little more fun with it" or "Pull it back a little bit": "I have to remember every direction they give me along the way through 30 or 40 takes." Doing that, she suggests, is how a voiceover artist builds a reputation as "easy to work with."

And these days—thanks to phone patches—a commercial voiceover actor has to be able to do it on a moment's notice from anywhere. Having been sent the script, Apple can work from any nearby studio, while the producer is in one far-flung locale and the client is in another. She reports, "They've found me in the smallest town in Montana and asked, 'What's the closest facility?'"

Staying Out of the Box

Despite her reputation for reliability, Apple says, "even if the call is for 'a Terri Apple type,' I still have to audition. And all of the auditions involve reading the script." Furthermore, she concedes, it's easy to get stereotyped: That raspy voice that's made her fortune isn't something she always wants to use, and she tells students it's a good idea to try to avoid being stereotyped. "I got to be known as the quirky, wry voice," she says. "You've got to get yourself outside of the box. Overexposure happens." Indeed, Apple's voice is so familiar that she's often stopped by people who recognize it, if not her.

Working with certain agents can increase the odds of being stereotyped, she says. One way to avoid stereotyping is to "try to get in [to auditions] for all different kinds of moods." She sometimes sees to it that "the rasp goes out of my voice"; one time she even "snuck back in for an audition and said, 'I can do it without the rasp.'" She got the job. "I got myself out of the box."

Although Apple could probably produce a cocky voice if asked, the alternately raspy-voiced, honey-voiced, trusting-voiced, wry-voiced, warm-voiced, fun-voiced voiceover specialist is not at all cocky. She says of her still-thriving business, "I never thought I'd have a career I can wear sweats to. I'm so thankful for it. I can do this until I'm 80. Vocally, in 20 years I've aged five years. I don't smoke. I don't drink. I create the world for myself." And what she's done for herself, she encourages others to do. "Keep barking up the same tree," she says. Her attitude is "I'm successful in this, so let's get more successful here. If you're good, you're going to book jobs."