



Pearl Lam in a Microsoft commercial.

The Commercial Side of Seattle Theatre

By TODD MATTHEWS

For many local theatre actors, television and internet commercials help pay the bills.

Late last year, actor Marianna de Fazio pulled into Federal Way's Wild Waves Theme & Water Park under cover of darkness at 4:30 a.m., steering her car down a narrow driveway and toward a parking lot. Stepping out of her vehicle, she walked past dormant and eerily quiet roller coasters and water slides before spotting people gathered under tents and around craft services tables.

This must be the place, she thought. »



Clearly, this wasn't a typical acting role. De Fazio and maybe a dozen other actors were up early to film a commercial for Washington Lottery's Kraken-themed scratch tickets. The shoot began at the park's area for bumper cars, which was cleared and converted into ad hoc bleachers resembling Climate Pledge Arena's hockey stands. Actors wore Kraken jerseys and reenacted a raucous crowd celebration. By sunrise, de Fazio and her fellow actors were strapped into the Timberhawk—Washington state's largest wood-framed roller coaster—and launched through the ride's steep dives and careening curves for a 30-second commercial that would appear on television and the internet.

"That was a unique gig, for sure," said de Fazio, whose agent asked if she was up for repeatedly riding a roller coaster. For this one-day

shoot, she rode the roller coaster 19 times. "I thought, 'I don't know.' I mean, I used to love roller coasters as a kid." Still, she accepted the job—one of several commercial roles she's performed for Delta Dental, Microsoft, and Toyota.

De Fazio is one of many local actors who scratch together an income by splitting their time between performing at ACT Theatre, Seattle Rep, Taproot Theatre Company, Village Theatre, and other theatres while also performing in television and internet commercials for PEMCO, Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, Taco Time, and other companies. Pay attention to the commercials the next time you watch a Seahawks or Mariners game—you might spot a local theatre actor.

"I think you have to have your irons in many fires to make a living as an actor in general, especially

in a smaller market," said Melissa Baldauf, Agency Director at Big Fish NW Talent Agency, which helps de Fazio and other local actors find commercial work. "Commercials pay pretty well; usually, it's a one-day shoot. Many actors in this market are theatre actors, so agents and casting directors are used to working with their busy schedules. With most shoots being one day, it's possible to squeeze in commercial shoots in between rehearsals and shows."

De Fazio recalled wrapping the Washington Lottery commercial by 3 p.m. and being home for dinner. Also, preparing for a commercial, which often requires little to no dialogue, involves far less preparation than preparing for a theatre role.

Seattle has a decent environment for commercial work—whether filming spots for television or the



Pearl Lam in a Taco Time commercial.

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Photo: Zoe Schlanger

sky hopinka

SUBTERRANEAN CEREMONIES

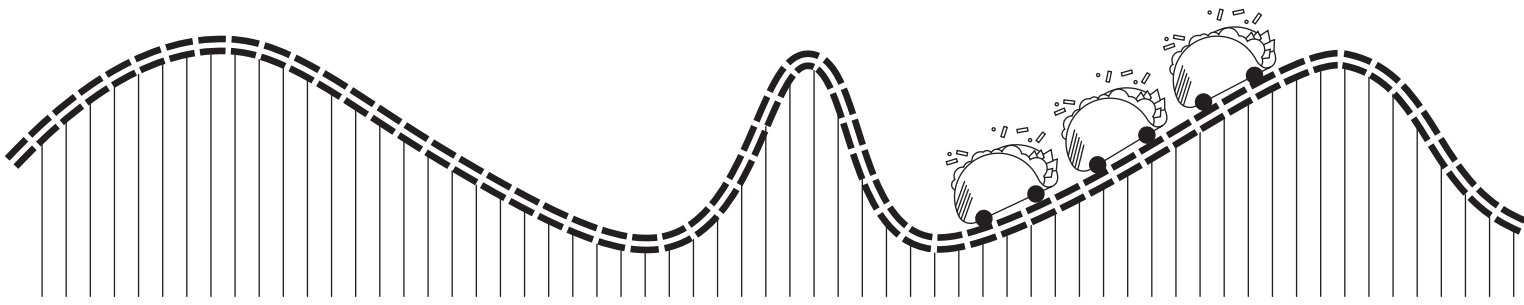
Through May 26, 2024

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Sky Hopinka. *Mnemonics of Shape and Reason* (still, detail), 2021. Digital video (color, sound); 4:12 min. Courtesy of the artist

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“Now, we have so many more and higher paying opportunities with the growth of tech and new media to share commercials and digital content. We now get a fair amount of SAG-AFTRA national commercials.”



“The director told me that out of all the auditions they received, mine was the only one that made them laugh.”

internet or in-house employee training videos for Microsoft and Amazon. According to Baldauf, some synergy exists between theatres and commercials, with casting directors attending theatre productions and calling in talent for auditions after seeing them perform in various shows. “We’ve certainly found some great talent to partner with after seeing them in local productions,” added Baldauf.

The City of Seattle’s Office of Economic Development reports nearly 570 permits for commercial and corporate projects were issued between 2019 and 2022, accounting for an average of 58 percent of the permits issued for all types of filming during that period. Local actors and crew members filled an average of 4,450 jobs during that period.

Baldauf has seen the industry evolve. “Seattle is a huge non-union commercial and digital market these days,” she said. “When I moved to Seattle 20 years ago, the breakdowns were mostly for Microsoft corporate videos and some local and regional commercials. Now, we have so many more and higher paying opportunities with the growth of tech and new media to share commercials and digital content. We now get a fair amount of SAG-AFTRA national commercials.”

It’s also very competitive, with The Actor’s Group, TCM Models & Talent, TC Talent, Big Fish NW, and other agencies responding to casting calls. “We have to

treat every project as if at least two to five other agencies are submitting talent,” added Baldauf. “Depending on what clients are looking for, they could see hundreds apply for a single role.”

Evolving technology and the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly changed how actors land commercials—namely, the absence of in-person auditions. Baldauf estimates at least 90 percent of commercial casting is conducted via Zoom or a video an actor records on their own.

Local actor Bob Williams misses face-to-face auditions and credits one in particular with his landing a principal role in a Seattle Cancer Care Alliance commercial in 2016. During the 20-second spot, which aired on television and the internet, a voice actor stresses the importance of healthy choices as Williams is surrounded by co-workers in a breakroom and distracted by a box of donuts. Instead of eating an entire donut, he takes the voice actor’s advice and cuts it in half, then quarters, making a healthier choice than eating an entire donut.

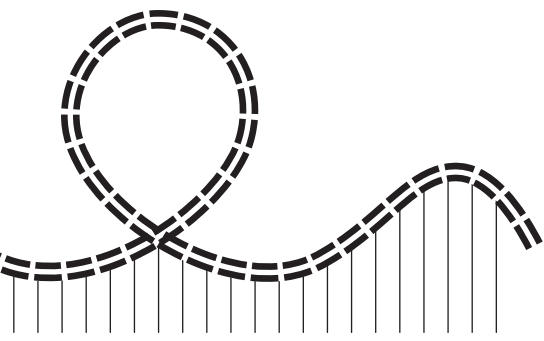
“I kind of won them over in the audition room,” he recalled. “I was just casually talking with one of the producers, the director, and a couple of other people when we ended up having a funny conversation about Cancun and Señor Frog’s.” When it came time to audition, Williams said his performance was natural because he had already been talking and laughing with

the crew. “I was a real person,” he added. “I think that came through in the commercial. If I got asked to audition for that commercial today, I’d be in my living room setting up, shooting, and directing my self-taped audition, which might not bring out that connection.”

Actor and comedian Pearl Lam represents a new generation of actors pursuing commercial work. Lam graduated from the University of Washington in 2020 with Bachelor of Arts degrees in Marketing and Cinema and Media Studies. A few years ago, she landed her first major commercial—a 30-second Taco Time spot you might have seen in heavy television and internet rotation. Relaxing in a heavily wooded area, kicking back in a foldable chair, and taking in a view of Deception Pass while eating a Taco Time burrito and Mexi-Fries, Lam is startled for a moment—wide-eyed and suspicious after hearing mysterious noises—before she shrugs and returns to her meal. Lam has no lines, but her comedic acting chops and facial expressions are hilarious—extensions of her YouTube channel, which features comedy sketches and boasts more than 33,000 subscribers, and her improv and comedy performances at Jet City Improv, ComedySportz Seattle, and 18th & Union.

“The director told me that out of all the auditions they received, mine was the only one that made them laugh,” Lam said. “That was a really nice compliment.”

Lam has since filmed commercials for Microsoft, Amazon, and SwissWater Decaf, all of which enlist some level of comedy and improvisation. “Humor is big in commercials because it’s easier to



sell products when there's comedy," Lam explained. "Most casting calls I get call for humor, which is one of my strong suits. Sometimes, they don't even write the lines. They just give you the topic and tell you to film yourself riffing on it. It varies from project to project, director to director." One of her favorite commercials was a Tik-Tok-style job for Amazon, where the directors gave her a bare-bones structure and asked her to improvise.

"I'm a full-time actor," Lam said. "I'm not working a day job at the moment. For people trying to make a living from acting, you have to factor in commercials. But a lot of the commercials are non-union and tend to pay less. It can be pretty hard."

Like many local actors, Lam isn't ready to leave the stage entirely for commercials. She wrote and performed the solo show *XXX Island* at 18th and Union in January and performed in the dramatic sci-fi adventure play *Once More, Just For You* at Seattle Public Theater in February. "Acting and creative work are rewarding," she added. "I don't fully get that from commercials."

Todd Matthews is a Seattle-based writer, editor, and journalist whose work has appeared in *Earshot Jazz*, *HistoryLink*, *Real Change*, *Seattle magazine*, and other publications in print and online over the past 25 years. A graduate of the University of Washington and the author of three non-fiction books, he has earned four awards from the Society of Professional Journalists.



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