

THE BITE AND SMILE SCHOOL

As an acting task, chomping into a Kentucky Fried drumstick may not rank up there with performing the Queen Mab speech from "Romeo and Juliet." But it's not bad work if you can get it.

"Tabletop" spots are a special breed of television commercial. If regular commercials utilize the talents of actors for a matter of a few moments, "tabletops" capture only a split second or two of their work. Sometimes these ads focus only on a particular body part of an actor: hands, lips, feet—even armpits.

Santiago Suarez is one of the leading New York directors of tabletops. He's created ads for such accounts as Twix and Pizza Hut. Sometimes his commercials don't use humans at all, and his "casting" is of oversize models representing Life Savers or chocolate bars. But Suarez often looks for human models, too. (He does not seek actors for voice-over portions of the commercials—only for visuals.)

According to Suarez, the biggest opportunities for actors in tabletops are probably for faces. At one recent casting call, 80 people were considered, none of whom met with the approval of the client. So a second call of 60 people was held.

A good number of the face-oriented commercials are what are referred to in the industry as "bite and smiles." These are exactly what they sound like, according to Suarez:

"It's not 'bite and think about it.' It's not 'bite and grimace.' It's 'bite and tell me you like it.' 'Cause that's the point of it. All in a second—sometimes even less."

It's not as easy as it sounds. When Suarez hires actors for a "bite and smile," he has plenty of concerns: "Will they make noise? Will they take too long to chew and swallow? Does the Adam's apple get in the way?"

Basically, it's a search for someone who eats gracefully, naturally, and efficiently. And for someone who can do the work without much direction. Suarez may advise an actor not to curl the lip while biting the product, but he will not likely be giving emotional-memory suggestions to an actor slurping a spoonful of minestrone soup.

It's important that the actor feel comfortable with the particular product being marketed. Vegetarian actors responding to a Pizza Hut call may become disturbed to learn they'll be asked to chew pepperoni. "At the casting, we have to know this person isn't going to break out if we give him cheese," Suarez adds.

In addition to faces, Suarez does a lot of work with hand models: both "glamour hands" and "working hands." But he admits that it's much harder to break into this kind of work. Because there's no danger of industry "overexposure" with hands—as there is with faces—Suarez tends to use the same four hand models (two women, two men) over and over again. Still, there are opportunities for particular kinds of hands: "ethnic hands" for instance, or a particularly "beefy" male hand to pick up a baked potato.

An actor who has worked as a chef might be right for certain spots. An ability to slice cucumbers with the left hand—or with the knife tilted at an odd angle to accommodate the lens—could be an important attribute. "Aim" is vital to hand models, since they must work with a lens that is focused upon a space of a few inches.

So, yes, there is an acting skill involved; tabletop work is not merely "modeling." As Suarez puts it, "Actors have to be gymnasts at cutting, slicing, ladling, pouring honey...doing a cheese pull."

Or shaving an armpit. Selecting the right woman's underarm for a Gillette commercial may sound absurd, but even there casting is taken seriously. Suarez recommends that only very thin women need apply for such work: When the arm of a healthy sportswoman type is raised, the effect becomes too "meaty" and somehow disturbs the aesthetics of the ad.

For actors who are looking to pursue tabletop work, Suarez suggests going to a casting agent. Putting together a reel of previous work is helpful, especially if it shows the actor's "range" within the tabletop niche. As for headshots, they're especially vital for this kind of casting, and it's important, says Suarez, that such shots not be 10 years old. Suarez works with union actors, and he experienced difficulty during the recent actors' strike finding suitable talent.

Suarez says tabletop work requires the same charisma as any film work. "Actors have to make love to the lens, whether they're serving an omelet or smiling."