

# **How a “Spec” Job Turned into a SAG Super Bowl Commercial and the Lessons it Taught Me**

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It was a beautiful, humid, fall day in September, 2011 in New York, just after the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy. The sun was shining brightly after a few days of rain. I reported to set to shoot a “spec” commercial with a friend, Jamie Keohane, who I had met while doing an off-Broadway play together a few months earlier. Jamie is the one who got me this gig with this writer/director, Zachary Borst as she had worked with another of the actresses in the commercial, Linda Elizabeth, on another project. Linda was good friends with Zach. In fact, Linda had appeared in every one of Zach’s previous projects. So, it was a no-brainer for Zach when Linda recommended Jamie as the “mom” in the commercial. Zach asked Jamie if she knew a Dad, and Jamie recommended me.

I still remember the email I got from Jamie a few weeks earlier. The subject line said: “Would you be my husband?” I had to do a double take because Jamie had met my entire family, including my wife and daughters, at the premiere of our show. It certainly got my attention, so when I opened it up and she asked me to play the “dad” in this spec commercial being shot by Zach Borst, I just smiled. There were no other details in the email except a forwarded email from Zach with his email address and website link, and she said to contact him right away because he was looking for someone asap.

After going to Zach’s website and watching some of his prior excellent work, I knew right then that I HAD to work with him because, I said to myself, even if the commercial amounted to nothing, the footage was going to look great on my reel, and Zach knew what he was doing. So I emailed Zach my website, imdb page and youtube channel, and told him I was interested in the project, and of course, asked for details.

Zach wrote me back and said he had written a spot called “Happy Grad” for Chevy that he was entering into a contest for the London Film Festival, and he sent me the script. He explained to me that if the spot won the contest, then we would be paid \$1000.00 each. He asked me to come on board, which, after reading the script, I gladly accepted.

When I got to the set that morning, Zach was delayed coming back from picking up the Chevy Camaro that was starring in the spot (which he paid out of his own pocket to rent, by the way). That gave me an opportunity to catch up with Jamie, and chat a bit with the other actors, including Brett Siddell, my “son” in the spot, and a real life stand up comic and radio jockey for the “Broken Halo” channel on SiriusXM satellite radio. I remember his first words to Jamie and I were “wow, you guys are much better looking than my real parents.” And that is where the laughs began. That four hour shoot was a blast, and it flew by. I felt like everyone had done excellent work. “That is going to be a nice piece for my commercial reel” I thought to myself as I drove through the mid town tunnel into Manhattan on the way to my next audition.

A few weeks later, I received a link to the finished spot, and an email from Zach saying he had bad news and good news. The bad news, he said, was that the spot did not win the London Film Festival contest. “Oh well, there goes my

\$1000, I thought.” The good news though, as I read a bit further, was that Chevy had liked the spot so much, they pulled it from the London Film Fest competition and entered it into the Super Bowl contest. After watching it, I saw why, and the excitement and anticipation took over for the next few months. The rest, of course, is history as the spot did in fact win the contest as it was the most viewed and most shared spot online out of hundreds of submissions. We were going to get paid our \$1000 after all, and be seen by hundreds of millions of people in the process. How can it get any better than that?

Well, it in fact DID get better. During the week before the Super Bowl, I was at an audition, and I received a call from an advertising agency saying “We need to put you under SAG (Screen Actors Guild) contract for the ‘Happy Grad’ spot because Tim Allen is going to be doing a voice over for it.” I ducked into the bathroom at the casting director’s office to make sure I heard her right. I did, and a few days later, the entire cast signed SAG contracts. One word: RESIDUALS!! What a thrill it was watching the spot during the Super Bowl, and all of the pre and post game publicity I received from my local papers and beyond was even a bigger thrill for me. I even had an article published about me in Backstage magazine! How exciting and humbling at the same time. All of the work I put in to get to this point finally paid off in a big way.

So, what lessons did I learn from this experience, and what lessons did this experience reinforce in me?

First of all, I am so glad I network everyday in this business. Networking, not just with companies in the business, ie, agents, producers, casting directors (which of course I do) but also with fellow actors. It is so important because you just never know when you are going to be working with someone you have previously met. By networking with your fellow actors, you are in the position to share your networking contacts with them, and they can share theirs with you. I have learned more from my fellow actors about this business than any one person could ever have taught me.

That leads directly to the second lesson; I never know where my next job is going to come from. Think about it for a second; where did my biggest job come from? The one that earned me a SAG card? My agent? NO, it came from a fellow actress who I had done a play with. Who says this is not a crazy business? In fact, I can think of several jobs that I have gotten over my career that came from people my family or friends knew of and referred me to.

Third, I am so glad I work hard at keeping my marketing materials up to date, including my website, head shots, demos and reels. Casting decisions are often made in the blink of an eye and if I didn’t have up to date materials for people like Zach to see instantly on line, I would have missed this opportunity. I am so grateful that all the daily work I put into keeping my website, imdb listing and youtube channel up to date, as well as my head shots and demos, paid big dividends for me.

Fourth, I am so glad I just did not immediately dismiss the project because it did not “pay” up front. So many actors and voice artists automatically dismiss projects if they do not get paid monetarily for it. I can tell you that I have done several spec jobs that have paid me nicely when the work was picked up. The key to this, though, is being selective in the spec jobs you accept, and being confident in your work.

Fifth, I am so glad I gave 100% of my effort, like I do on set at all times. So many actors I know will not give their best efforts because they are “not getting paid”. I approach every single job as if I never know whose eyes will be seeing my work, or where it will ultimately end up. Just think if I said “oh this is just a spec job, who cares” while I was on set, because none of us knew at the time it was even being considered for the Super Bowl. Thank god none of us did that, and we all gave 100% so that it was an excellent final project. So much so that Chevy spent \$3.5 million dollars to air it against the likes of Ferris Bueller, Jerry Seinfeld, Jay Leno, Elton John, etc, etc.

Sixth, I also need to believe in, and love, the project as much as the writer does, and I need to be convinced that the writer and their project are professional and excellent. If, for example, I did not like the work I saw from Zach on line, or if the script was not written well, or if the equipment was poor, or crew was non-existent, I probably would have passed on this job, as it would not have been professional enough to air during a local high school football game, let alone the Super Bowl.

I certainly have passed on many “freebies” and even paying gigs, because I did not believe in the strength of the project or professionalism of the writer/director. If I am giving 100% and being professional at all times, I expect nothing less from everyone else involved in the project. If I have any whiff that will not happen, I pass. For instance, here in New York it is very inexpensive to rent studio space for auditions. It averages between \$15 and \$25 per hour. If someone is having auditions in their apartment rather than spending that little sum for a professional studio space, an immediate red flag is raised for me and I think twice about auditioning for that project. If the producer is too cheap to even fund the studio space for auditions, what is going to happen on set?

Also, some projects I do completely without pay, but only for the right reasons. For instance, and ironically enough, the off-Broadway play I did with Jamie (my wife in the Super Bowl spot who recommended me for the part) I did for free. It was an original “show case” of short plays that I did entirely for the exposure (the industry people who were in the audience), the experience (it was my first off Broadway play in NYC), and because I loved the character I played. Not only did that play directly lead to this SAG Super Bowl commercial, but I also have done several other projects with the writer of that play, and several others are in the works. And now he has a couple of scripts commissioned by television studios in Hollywood!

Finally, and most importantly, this entire experience has reinforced in me that anything is possible. It reinforced that I can make it in this business, and it doesn't matter that I started in my late 30s, that I do not have “Brad Pitt” looks, that I am balding and have a gut. None of that matters. What matters is that I continue to study and practice my craft on a daily basis so that I can be the best actor I can be. And of course, so I can continue to work on better and bigger projects.