

Forsher Explores History of Commercials

Impact Theatre To Produce Multimedia Shows

By Kira Miller
Staff Writer

Jim Forsher, Cal State East Bay communications professor, explored a century of commercials in a presentation Friday at the Concord campus.

Part of the Film Night series, "100 Years of Commercials" featured rare footage from Forsher's archive, comparing some of the earliest commercials shown on nickelodeons with those seen on today's television.

"Commercials are a distorted but good mirror of the culture," said Forsher, an award-winning documentary filmmaker and prominent movie historian.

In the 1970s there was a change in what was considered appropriate in America, and this was reflected in commercials. Couples could be shown sleeping in the same bed, and it became socially acceptable for women to talk about being pregnant.

Similarly, cigarette commercials appeared for the first time on television in the 1950s. During this era, commercials were integrated directly into regular programs.

Forsher presented a clip of a 1953 episode of the "Jack Benny Show," in which guest star Humphrey Bogart made references to Lucky Strike cigarettes throughout the broadcast. By the end of the episode, a full advertisement for Lucky Strike was shown.

This practice was continued in

popular quiz shows such as "You Bet Your Life." Forsher's mother was a contestant in a 1956 episode. She bet \$100 that she could spell Mississippi correctly. She got it wrong. Ironically, Forsher said, her home address was on Mississippi Street at the time.

The presentation began with a look at nickelodeons, which were invented in 1905. Commercials were first shown in these early movie theaters, and have been part of the movie-going experience ever since. The earliest commercial Forsher presented came from that era and featured a cigarette cover.

In 1915, two of the most famous comedians of their day, Mabel Normand and Fatty Arbuckle, were asked to promote the World's Fair held in San Francisco. By this time, audiences needed more substance and entertainment from advertisements, according to Forsher.

"If movie stars are going to do this, it's got to be good," Forsher said.

Buildings were constructed to look like movie sets.

Coincidentally, both Arbuckle and Normand were involved in scandals a few years after the fair. In 1921, Arbuckle was framed for rape and murder. His career was ruined, and he took the pseudonym William Goodrich. Normand's reputation was also tarnished as a result of drug problems.

"The only difference from this today is that it's shown in the National Enquirer," Forsher said.

Approximately 15 years later, sound was introduced in commercials so products could be explained orally to the audience. Forsher noted a General Electric commercial featuring Dick Powell and Betty Davis. They described products such as the coffee pot, door bell and dishwasher.

Forsher discussed a 1991 commercial he directed and produced with the former president and vice president of Mattel. The ad depicted a toy called Monster in My Pocket, aimed at children ages 5 to 7.

The Film Night series is part of the university's free community events, co-sponsored by Cal State East Bay's Concord campus and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute/SCHOLAR-OLLI.

Additional information about the series is available at 925-602-6772 or online at www.concord.csueastbay.edu/events.htm.

By Elisa Lewak
Staff Writer

The acting group Impact Theatre will open "Impact Briefs 7: The How-To-Show," on Friday at La Val's Subterranean Theatre in Berkeley.

Impact Theatre has shown short plays for the past seven seasons but this will be the first show in a multimedia format that includes both drama and film.

Tom Hird, chair of the Cal State East Bay theatre department, has seen "Impact Briefs" in previous seasons and compares them to "Saturday Night Live" sketches.

"The plays are exciting, funny and provocative; all things I appreciate in theater," he said.

This year the plays and films are mock how-to shows with names like "How to Write a Play: The Rooftop Lesson" and "How to Ask the Scary Question."

"How to Survive A Goldfish Attack" relates what happens when your pet goldfish becomes jealous and tries to kill you, according to Melissa Hillman, Impact Theatre group member and CSUEB theatre professor.

When Hillman and her fiancé read "How to Gain Controlling Interest," written by Seattle playwright Wayne S. Rawley, they could not stop laughing.

"It took us 3 1/2 hours to read a script that would have taken only one hour to read, if we weren't laughing," Hillman said.

Alyssa Bostwick, a member since 2000, makes her directorial debut with "Impact Briefs." She acted in a number of plays and has done some writing.

"She has a lot of experience acting, a sense of humor and a

good deal of intelligence — qualities which make her a fantastic director," Hillman said.


Julie St. Germaine, a local actress and director, worked with Dave Dyson at "The Great Dickens Christmas Fair" in 2004, both directing and acting in "The Crumbles."

"Dave has done everything from Shakespeare to intellectual comedy," said St. Germaine. "He is a brilliant improviser and very giving on stage."

Their production of "Othello" is slated to run past its scheduled closing date due to popular demand, and move to Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco on May 5.


In this version Othello and Desdemona are an interracial lesbian couple.

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