

In Times Square to press the flesh, and show some, to promote shows

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Visitors to Times Square are inundated with marketing pitches, like an array of oversize electric billboards stretched across office buildings and the crowded streets jammed with comedy-show hawkers, tour-bus operators, 6-foot-tall Cookie Monsters and the occasional Naked Cowboy.

To compete with the attention-grabbing street performers, theater producers are asking their own street hawkers to dress up, and sometimes take it off.

To promote the musical "Chicago," playing at the Ambassador Theater, Theatre Mama, a specialty and event marketing firm in New York, hired a troupe of dancers to greet tourists in Times Square and pass out fliers for the show. The dancers learn the choreography for the show and perform in teams of two while dressed in red leggings, a black blazer and a black bowler hat.

"We've always believed that people don't buy a product, they buy a feeling," said a partner at the firm, Timothy W. Wooster, who refers to the dancers as theatrical brand ambassadors. "We'll capture that energy that people will feel when they see the show."

Jaclyn A. Kulchinsky, a 26-year-old actress who has been waving her jazz hands in Times Square since April, said she was drawn to the job for the flexibility, which allows her time to audition. The eight-hour days can be long, Ms. Kulchinsky said, but she found it fun to perform in front of a group of strangers, even if she sometimes has to use Bob Fosse's fluid choreography to slide away from a groping hand.

"The tourists really like us," she said. "The New Yorkers on their way to work keep their heads down and walk by."

Mr. Wooster said the Times Square promotion, which started last January, had generated interest in the show. "The girls are great because they'll have people come back to them and say, 'Look, we got our tickets to the show,' " he said.

Theatre Mama is also using street performers to promote "Wintuk," a show from Cirque du Soleil at Madison Square Garden. Its promotion in Times Square, which runs through Sunday, features actors dressed as a family of snowflakes. Theatre Mama also has a mobile team of snowflakes that visits towns within 60 miles of Manhattan.

Dressed in puffy white costumes that look like something out of a Dr. Seuss book, the actors bring a taste of "Wintuk" to tourists who might not be familiar with the show.

"It's more than a flier; it's an impression that goes beyond that," Mr. Wooster said. "You're giving them something to remember, an experience. If you're not making a connection with that person, you might as well be throwing the flier on the ground."

To promote "Wishful Drinking," Carrie Fisher's solo show at Studio 54, the Roundabout Theater Company wanted to go beyond the typical sandwich boards.

"We wanted to do something a little bit more active than someone standing there and passing out a flier," said David Steffen, the Roundabout's director of marketing. "The difference here is that we look for a hook, something to attract some attention, hook the impulse buyer."

So six days a week, actors dressed as Ms. Fisher's well-known alter ego, Princess Leia, roam Times Square.

"They buy into the whole spirit of the thing, putting on the wig," Mr. Steffen said of the actors. "You have to own it, you can't be shy about it."

The men hired to promote "Naked Boys Singing," an Off-Broadway show at the New World Stages, throw modesty to the wind and, on warmer days, walk around Times Square wearing little more than bath towels wrapped around their waists.

"We took an old-time barker and put a real-time spin on it," said Carl D. White of Martian Entertainment, which produces the show. He added that the street team could increase box office sales by 10 percent to 15 percent on an average day.

"There are 1.6 million people walking through Times Square," Mr. White said. "Stick a 'Naked Boys' barker in the middle of that, and it can have an impact on sales."

Tony Guerrero, one of the two men flashing skin for the show, acknowledged that they both wore something underneath their towel, presenting the "the illusion of being naked when we're not."

Mr. Guerrero, who took this job to help pay the bills between acting gigs, said he enjoyed interacting with tourists, especially those on tour buses, but he added that not everyone appreciated public displays of nudity. "Some people get offended," he said. "But it's not like we're being overly sexual."

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