

# MY 17.8 SECONDS OF FAME

For better or worse, your first pay cheque can shape the way you think about a day's work for the rest of your life

BY JAZZ KUSCHKE



**Pay Day** It's a scary world out there, son. Save every cent you can.



**Audition Line** The writer's first job was as a sick kid in a TV ad.

#### WAS RICH AND FAMOUS ONCE. ALMOST.

It was a TV commercial for a cold and flu drug and I was the token kid. Pretty forgettable by most accounts, it didn't see much airtime and got pulled before the winter was over. I like to believe that was due to a bad concept rather than my shitty acting, but to confirm that I'd have to dig out the VHS tape and VCR from my parents' garage. Oh, don't think I haven't searched YouTube – this story would be very different if it was on there.

Okay, so not quite famous. But rich? Heck yeah! Well, in the eyes of a nine-year-old anyway. I got paid R1 500 to lie in bed and rattle off a couple of corny lines explaining just how I'd gotten the sniffles. A nasal "my mommy says I got sick 'cos I was running around outside without a jacket", or something similarly unimaginative. Then, I think, I had to jump out of bed, throwing the covers as I went, shouting (very, very excitedly), "But that's not true! They came

out of the sky in a bright spaceship and zapped me with a laser." "Mommy" then comes into the room, puts her hand to my forehead, mutters something about a high temperature and chucks the meds down my throat. Which, of course, sorts me out. Like I said – crappy concept.

I don't remember all the details of the commercial. But what is burnt to memory, clear and permanent as the first open-faced wave I ever surfed, is how I blew the cash...

That first payday took care of a snazzy surfboard, custom-shaped by Glen D'Arcy from J-bay, a fishing lure-coloured wetsuit with long legs and short sleeves ("good for paddling" the surfer dude behind the counter assured), a board leash and a couple bars of Mr Zog's "best for your stick" surf

#### Where They Started Out

We did a quick snap poll in the MH office to see what casual jobs some of the people here have done. Here's what they revealed:

**Editor** – sold fragrances. ("I graduated from being the annoying guy who tries to spray you as you walk past to being a fragrance consultant – that's right, consultant.")

**Deputy Editor** – worked in a video store. ("Like Tarantino, but without the fairytale ending," he says.)

**Fashion Director** – wrote an obituary for a community newspaper.

**Associate Editor** – petrol pump attendant.

**Marketing Manager** – bicycle shop clerk.

**Designer** – waiter.

**One day's (much too easy) work meant I could afford everything I'd ever dreamt of. Not the most realistic working debut**

## Hello Hollywood

You too could become an actor. Brush up on your acting and vocal techniques on a 12-week acting course at City Varsity ([www.cityvarsity.co.za](http://www.cityvarsity.co.za)). Then register to receive info on open castings and auditions at [www.talenttext.co.za](http://www.talenttext.co.za).

wax. Plus, I had some change left over to pimp out the board with war-paint stickers. Rad, right?

Not exactly. One day's (much too easy) work meant I could afford everything I'd ever dreamt of. Not the most realistic working debut. For me, it created a completely unnatural view of what the "real" world is all about. In short, it turned me into a brat. Something which is not ideal, according to Raj Naran, career development educator at the Counselling and Careers Development Unit of the University of the Witwatersrand.

"The type of first job that a person engages with, often sets the foundation for future growth and development," he says. "It is through experience that you are able to get a sense of your strengths,

weaknesses, values, interests and personality-coping mechanisms."

Can you really blame a grade four kid for acting like a spoilt rascal when he has no comprehension that the lady with the funny hair, who's painting his face into pale sickliness, is also getting paid? And the camera-operator dude wearing his cap back-to-front. And the guy telling him to do it all again – "be more excited when you jump up this time" – as well.

Looking back, I wish I'd been more switched on. It would've been a lot easier to deal with the eco-tripping career waiters when, as a broke student, I took a bartending job at a flashy cocktail joint, or after varsity when I became the "eternal intern". It would've been so much easier to accept what every nine-to-fiver knows: the corporate world is nothing like Hollywood and starring roles come from hard work only. With good reason, reckons Naran. "We benefit from the experience of entry-level work. It allows us to learn through experience and coaching," he says. "Most senior managers have gone this route and will, no doubt, tell you that the learning at the lower rungs of the ladder is invaluable," says Naran. You've got to pay your dues, but the "learning at the lower rungs" he refers to, doesn't just mean how to do your job. A huge part of it is the understanding of team dynamics and learning how to navigate the inevitable office politics.

"Through time spent in trainee positions, individuals are able to engage with the world of work at a pace that allows them to get a realistic sense of themselves, their abilities and how their personalities lend themselves to different situations," says Naran. In other words, besides teaching you how to perform what you were hired to do, it helps you suss out casual alliances. (Some offices are more like *Survivor* than others.) Who drinks coffee with whom? Who sends each other funny emails, Web links and talks about last Saturday's game? Every organisation has its own set of unwritten rules, unspoken rivalries, friendships and groupings of opinion. My first experience of this was when I took a job as a barman and later on an extended internship at the first magazine that would have me.

If only I'd known that despite my obvious (to me) talent, I was but one link in the production chain. And an outsider really; not part of the inner clique. Teamwork (and, dare I say, resilience) is learnt much faster when you wait tables or pack crates.

**Emotional intelligence will make any young person valuable in the corporate world**

But the dues paid off – I'm now a magazine writer and living the lifestyle I dreamt of. So forget how badly your first gig paid. Get over the grudge against the power-tripping restaurant manager who chewed off your ear for the smallest thing, and forgive every stuck-up housewife who never tipped you for the pizza delivery. Instead, thank them for equipping you for the real world. "Recruiters generally indicate that students who have engaged with stressful work situations adapt a lot better to the world of work and are generally much more rounded in the skills they bring to the workplace," Naran says. Waiting tables or working behind a bar leads to dealing with difficult customers and working with others who are often under stress themselves. "Making this a positive learning experience will require a lot of self-awareness and the development of a lot of emotional intelligence. These qualities will definitely make any young person valuable in the corporate world," he says.

As for my lucrative acting career, I went from flu meds to food – a small part in an instant soup promo and a voice-over (which included singing) for a rice ad. Neither paid very well. Then I thought I'd cracked the big time when I got invited to a casting for a mini-series. I auditioned to play Daisy de Melker's son, whom she apparently poisoned along with two husbands (she was the second woman to be hung in South Africa). I couldn't play piano or cry on demand, so didn't get the part. In the process, I learnt what I know now were my first, and most valuable, lessons in real-work life: learn to be versatile and grow a thick skin. **MH**

## First Job 101

### The best way to break into today's tricky employment market

According to Viv Gordon, founder of the marketing, advertising, public relations and publishing recruitment agency Viv Gordon Placements, 2009 has seen a marked downturn in the number of jobs available. "We have found that companies are being very conservative with regard to employing and are putting more workload on existing staff members in order not to add to their salary bill," she says.

So how is a graduate on the hunt for a first job supposed to get his break? Gordon recommends doing unpaid internships to gain experience and improve your CV, but warns that it needs to be in a relevant company and "that you be given responsibility to do some actual work. Job shadowing is not really suitable, as you do not experience the extent of the work by just observing," she says. When you do get an opportunity, make the most of it. "Learn to be computer literate and know the computer packages such as Excel and PowerPoint in addition to the traditional Word Processing packages. Realise that you are going to start at the very bottom of the ladder and that you might do work that is menial – do not shy away from this. It shows that you are keen and willing to learn."

Besides work experience and possible post-graduate study in a carefully chosen field, Gordon believes it's a good time to start your own business. "Find your inner entrepreneurial self," she says.

## HOT TIP

"One of the most common misconceptions is that new work seekers often believe that the qualification they acquired is sufficient to excel in the world of work," says Raj Naran, career development educator at the Counselling and Careers Development Unit of the University of the Witwatersrand. "Having an understanding of roundedness is often the key to looking beyond the qualification and developing skills and experience that are valuable in the world of work." His advice: do as much part-time work as you can and get involved in committees, teams and organisations.