



CHOICE VOICE

RANDY THOMAS IS A WOMAN OF FIRSTS — the first woman to announce the Oscars, the Tonys, the SAG Awards, the Miss America Pageant and the National Democratic Convention. She was also the first announcer — male or female — to do the Oscars, Tonys and Primetime Emmys in a single year. Thomas is currently the voice

of *Entertainment Tonight* and *The Insider* and has narrated documentaries for Animal Planet and Discovery Channel, but may be best known as the voice on the commercials for Hooked on Phonics.

In her new book, *Voice for Hire: Launch and Maintain a Lucrative Career in Voice-Overs*, cowritten with colleague Peter Rofé, Thomas offers some advice about the trade.

Q: You started in radio — how and why did you transition to voiceover?

A: As I started to watch radio consolidate, everything was changing. If you were a high-priced personality, if you didn't do a morning show, then you really weren't safe anymore. So I thought: Where can I go after radio with the tools that I've developed? Voiceover was a natural extension. In 1993, when I was chosen to announce the Oscars, that really clarified my thinking. I knew my destiny involved promo and live announce.

Q: Were the Oscars your first big break?

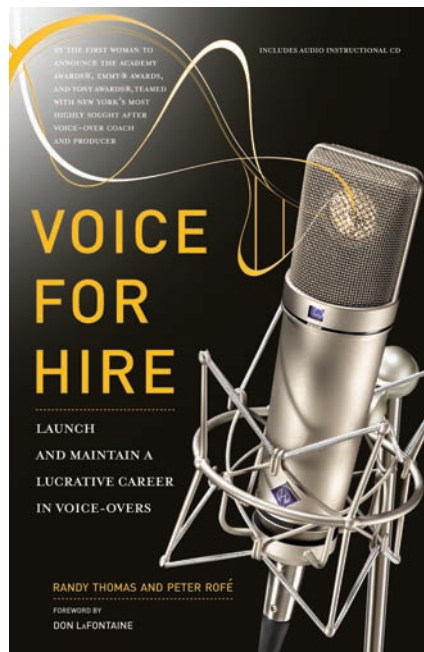
A: That would be, certainly, my *big* break. But the first indication that I was on the right path came in 1986 when I was on KMET [radio] in Los Angeles and was asked to do the commercials for Hooked on Phonics. I did those until just a few months ago.

Q: What are the challenges of live work?

A: If you don't get it right between the page and the microphone, it can be very embarrassing because the world hears your mistake — of which I've made a few. But you can always endeavor to get that perfect show next time. It's not really that something might happen — it's inevitable that something happens, whether it's in my control or out of my control — it's how you react to it. Having been on the radio for twenty years before I became a live announcer has made me comfortable when the red light goes on.

Q: How has the business side changed over the years?

A: I audition every day for something. That never ends. But the ways in which you reach out to buyers have changed — branding yourself, marketing to set yourself apart, understanding how to create that total package. In the old days we would send out a reel-to-reel or a cassette, then we moved on to sending out CDs. Today you create a website [www.randythomasvo.com] and have your MP3s available for people to hear. Now I have the best of both worlds. I have a home studio [on the Gulf Coast of Florida], but I also get to go to Los Angeles and New York and interact with



everyone. It's nice to see everybody I work with — and then to get out of their hair.

Q: On-camera actors and announcers use facial expressions and gestures to help sell their message. How do voiceover artists convey warmth, authority, humor or whatever the client is looking for?

A: It's understanding the client and the message, reading through the copy, internalizing the message and then delivering it. To just read words doesn't do anyone any good. You have to really take it in and bring it to life — give it some meaning. If you let the words speak, it gives you the direction of where you need to go.

Q: Animation voiceover artists have repertoires of funny voices. Do you have alternate voices for straight reads?

A: Yes. The key is to have — within whatever area of voiceover you have targeted — as much of a range as possible.

Q: So your Hooked on Phonics voice isn't the same as your Academy Awards voice?

A: Correct. [For the Oscars] it's the big, projected voice, trying to bring a sense of specialness and world class to the read. You're rising to the occasion because it's so huge. But for Hooked on Phonics, or when I was the voice of the Disney Channel, you go into that higher range, maybe how you would project if you

were talking to a class of kindergartners [*in a young, peppy voice*]: "Hi! How are you doing? Guess what? Today on Playtime Disney we're going to...." You have to bring that sense of enthusiasm. You can't fake it because kids can feel that insincerity even if they don't understand what it is.

Q: Is announcing the Oscars, Emmys and Tonys the most exhilarating aspect of your work?

A: Well, it's exciting because it's live — the threat of your career ending later that same day will heighten all of your senses. But I love everything I do. I even love the auditions — it's always a creative challenge to figure out what they're looking for without the benefit of having the client communicate with you.

Q: A cold or laryngitis could be devastating. How do you protect yourself?

A: One of the keys is to avoid sugar, dairy, wheat — anything that creates acid in your system, because that is where disease can manifest. If you can keep your system alkaline, it gives you good probiotic immune support.

Q: What are a voiceover artist's most valuable tools, aside from the voice itself?

A: A critical eye to look at the copy and understand what the buyer needs, as well as a critical ear to hear the subtle nuances of a read and know how to make it better — if you get the benefit of hearing your take. Those of us with home studios get to do that. If you're truly in the moment with your copy, you're not listening to yourself.

Q: What has been one of your favorite TV-related jobs?

A: When I got the call last summer to come to Denver to be the voice of the final night [of the Democratic National Convention] at Invesco Stadium — they called me on a Tuesday afternoon and I was on a plane Wednesday and announcing live from Invesco Field on Thursday — that was really crazy. I was the first woman to do a Democratic convention, in Boston in 2004. So I've had the gift of being a woman who's done a lot of firsts. I don't think about that too much — I just keep looking for another door to kick in. —Paula Hendrickson