

Profile

The Voice that Launched a Dozen Ad Campaigns

She's an actress, a successful local merchant, a resident of Sag Harbor, and if you heard her voice, you'd recognize it immediately from the many television commercials she has narrated. Lovelady Powell is her name, but her friends call her "Lovey."

Believe it or not, "Lovelady" is not the creation of some romantically inclined theatrical agent, but her real name. It has appeared in the credits of such films as "I Never Sang for My Father," plays like "Stop the World I Want to Get Off," and most recently in the new movie based on Xavier Hollander's book, "The Happy Hooker."

Lovelady plays the madam of a high class brothel in the film, she explained last week. But in real life, she sells antiques at her two shops in Sag Harbor and Southampton as well as products like mouthwash on television.

Although she has appeared on stage and in several films, many people will remember her best from the Lavoris TV commercial series she did not too long ago called "Ask Fran." Lovelady played a dignified and smoothly sophisticated woman, with spectacles and a very correct speaking voice, who advised the lovelorn and the socially troubled how to solve their problems. Bad breath, as Fran would have it, was their common flaw.

There are still those in Sag Harbor who call her Fran, still believing that to be her true title. But Lovelady doesn't mind that, nor does she mind being remembered for the commercial rather than her dramatic roles. "The series ran for two-and-a-half years," she recalled last weekend at her Sag Harbor antique shop, "Glad Hand." "It made an impression."

Lovelady, a speech major at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, has a voice and manner of speaking that are distinctive, soothing, and unforgettable. Customers in her shop may not recognize her face, but they all know that voice from somewhere. Indeed, it is the one that immortalized Madison Avenue's memorable phrase, "You've come a long way, baby," back in the days when Virginia Slims and other cigarettes were allowed to advertise on television.

Lovelady was born in Columbus, Ohio, and — being a "quiet and serious" child on one side and something of a ham on the other, she said — always wanted to be an actress. After two years studying speech in Northwestern's drama department, she raced off to New York to begin her career in the early 1950s. "I couldn't wait to go," she recalled. "That's why I left school."

Through that decade, she made a name for herself as a nightclub singer, broke into theatre and finally films, made many friends in the acting profession, and



Lovelady Powell, who plays a New York madam in the movie, "The Happy Hooker", in her Southampton antique shop. —Peter Booby

collected for herself some memories of good times. "We were all chums," she said. "Those were the days when one could do anything or nothing. I enjoyed singing in clubs — very much — and after work, about three or four in the morning, I'd be out with my cohorts having a wonderful time." She pointed out that those were also the days when New York's streets were friendly, even at three in the morning.

Her nightclub career lasted about nine years, during which time she lived in midtown Manhattan and later in Greenwich Village. She appeared at some of the city's most "in" nightspots at the time, like the Bon Soir, the Blue Angel, and Julius Monk's the Upstairs. With another young actor named Hal Holbrook, she opened her own club in 1954, called Upstairs at the Duplex.

Mr. Holbrook, who now vacations in Amagansett and is still a good friend, "was developing his Mark Twain character then," Lovelady remembered. Her business partner later took his re-creation of the author — to Broadway, scoring a hit

with "Mark Twain Tonight."

From singing, Lovelady moved on to acting when she landed a role in a summer stock production of "Maggie" with Betsy Palmer. She later appeared in productions of "How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying" and "Stop the World I Want to Get Off" with Joel Grey.

Just about the time she began seriously to dabble in antiques, a pastime that has resulted in the establishment of her shop in Sag Harbor and the opening of a second edition, "Glad Hand II," in Southampton this year, she broke into films in "I Never Sang for My Father" with Melvyn Douglas, Gene Hackman, and Estelle Parsons. Hers was a minor role, she recalled, but it did call for a love scene with Hackman.

"None of us were kids," she said of her role in the film. Love scenes "are serious work, and not the simplest thing in the world. It was handled very seriously, very professionally."

Interviewed in the midst of the "English country pine" antiques and scores of decorative pieces, most of them gleaned from English pubs, Lovelady was stumped for a minute when asked why she wanted to become an actress.

"I suppose," she said — after noting it was "a hard question" — "I have a need to express myself in a creative way. Beneath that, when one tends to be socially shy, there is often a 'ham' on the other side of the coin." Even so, Lovelady said she never hammed it up too much before her career began. "I was very serious and quiet as a little girl," she said.

But she hardly seems shy, moody, or a ham. Dressed casually in jeans and a work shirt, speaking softly with her distinctive voice — "My parents always told me to

keep my voice down. They didn't want me to have an Ohio twang" — she explained that running her two shops fulfills some of the same creative needs that acting does. "I can create a feeling here," she said, "decorating, placing things. It's an extension of expressing myself."

She opened the first Glad Hand shop in Sag Harbor in 1967, when she was still living in New York. At the time, she rented a house for weekend use which she finally bought. Together with an actress friend, Peggy White, who appeared in the soap opera, "The Nurses," she commuted to Sag Harbor on weekends and also opened a branch of the shop on Second Avenue in the city.

"I'm not a gypsy," Lovelady said, explaining part of the reason why her acting career is now no longer her prime concern, and why she quit the city in 1971 and became a full-timer in Sag Harbor. "I don't like to travel, and most of the acting jobs are in California now. Many of my friends are there." And because of the commuting, and despite the fact her New York shop was doing well, she decided in 1971 "it was ridiculous to stay in New York."

"I enjoy country living, and don't much care about the city except for acting work," which she still seeks, although with less of a passion than she pursued it a few years ago.

Her parents christened her "Lovelady," naming her after a family friend. The name seems perfect for an actress. But despite her name, her experience and her continued commitment to acting, Lovelady seems to prefer the country life for the time being, and the pleasures of minding the shop. —P.B.

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