

People & Places



This combination of photos shows rejected theatrical poster art from various productions, designed by Frank Verizzo and available for purchase. All proceeds go to the aid organization Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. (AP)

Television

Talks ending 'Insecure'

Actress Issa Rae gives new creatives a hand

By Gary Gerard Hamilton

Issa Rae remembers what life was like when she was starting out in Hollywood: no money, and just hoping for a chance to be discovered.

"It was about 'I just want the exposure. I need the right person to see me and see my work' and I feel like I can deliver from there," she said. "And then it was, 'I'm broke as hell.' If I could just have a certain amount of money to help me continue to do my work, then I'd be good."

It was a decade ago that the first episode of her viral webseries "Awkward Black Girl" launched. She ran out of money, then was saved by a Kickstarter campaign.

So Rae, now an aspiring entertainment mogul with a reported new \$40 million WarnerMedia deal, wants to lighten the load for others hoping to climb the entertainment ladder.

She's teaming up with LIFEWTR, PepsiCo's bottled water product line, and its "Life Unseen" campaign. They're hoping to shed light on 20 up-and-coming creatives in fashion, film, music and visual art from underrepresented communities.

Their content will be featured at LIFEWTR.com and their individual artwork will also be displayed on a collection of 20 bottles starting next month. There's also a #LifeUnseenContest on Instagram which includes a chance for five more artists to be mentored by Rae and provided \$10,000 each for future projects.

"It's always been a mission to make sure that people have a place within this industry," said the "Insecure" creator and star. "It's about opening the door, and even the talent that we selected, we hope that that will be their mission as well."

The campaign aligns with what Rae already does: extending her hand to pull others up. Industry colleagues and co-workers often sing her praises for offering opportunities in what's perceived as a ruthless industry. Last season on "Insecure," she tapped several young directors to lead episodes, like rising filmmaker Thembi Banks and Rae's own co-star, Jay Ellis.

"If you have the opportunity to give people the chance that they're looking for, then why not provide that opportunity? I have nothing to lose and I have only things to gain by watching passionate people deliver," said Rae, who recently won the NAACP Image Award for outstanding actress in a comedy series.

Succeed

Rooting for others to succeed, especially Black people who have been historically underrepresented in Hollywood, has been Rae's mantra. Her viral "I'm rooting for everybody Black" response during a 2017 Emmys red carpet interview was something she said off the cuff and is now found on T-shirts, stickers, pins and other trinkets.

"I still think about leaving the carpet that day and my publicist being like, 'Oh my God, you're everywhere!' And I was like, 'They didn't like the dress?'" she said, with a huge belly laugh. "Then she told me, 'Oh, no, everybody's saying this phrase.'"

Rae's Hoorae production company is now focused on the final season of "Insecure." Serving as co-creator, executive producer and lead, Rae says it's time to close this novel — even if the fans aren't ready.

"That's like being mad that you're reaching the end of a book. And I understand that sentiment — it's a compliment that people want it to continue. But you bought this book and you saw the length of it, and we're at the end of it."

But does she feel pressure to end the show in a way that's pleasing to both her and her loyal viewers?

"I have no doubt that if people don't like the ending, they're going to make it clear to me and make it known for the rest of my life," she laughed. "So in that way, yes, there is pressure, but I'm happy with where things are ending. I like stories ending."

Up next for Rae is "Rap Sh(asterisk)t," a series loosely based off the firecracker female rap duo City Girls, as well as a remake to the cult classic "Set It Off." She's also completed her first script for a movie she hopes to film soon. Hoorae is said to be juggling more than a dozen projects in various stages.

With magazine cover shoots and glamorous red carpet looks, Rae is far from those early lean years despite still hustling like one. So what would she go back and tell that awkward Black girl?

"She should not be afraid to dream big and to possibly dream even bigger," said Rae. "And you're still going to be awkward, so just embrace it." (AP)



Carly Pearce accepts the award for 'I Hope You're Happy Now' at the 56th annual Academy of Country Music Awards on, April 18, at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tenn. (AP)



Rob



Diddy

Variety

NEW YORK: Rapper Black Rob, known for his hit "Whoa!" and key contributions to Diddy's dominant Bad Boy Records in the 1990s and early 2000s, has died. He was 52.

Black Rob died Saturday in Atlanta, according to longtime friend and former labelmate Mark Curry, who said he was holding the hip-hop performer's hand at the end. He'd been hospitalized and suffered multiple health problems in recent years, and died of cardiac arrest, Curry said.

"Rest in power, King," Diddy wrote on Instagram. "You have made millions of people all over the world feel good and dance!"

Born Robert Ross and raised in Harlem, New York City, Black Rob started rapping even before he became a teenager. After signing to Bad Boy, he made striking guest appearances alongside labelmates in the 1990s and early 2000s, including Diddy's "Bad Boy for Life" and remixes of Total's "What About Us" and 112's "Come See Me."

He spun a 13-bar story of revenge on the 1998 posse cut "24 Hrs. to Live" alongside DMX, who died earlier this month.

His debut album "Life Story," released in 2000, peaked at No. 3 on the Billboard charts and went platinum, led by the infectious single "Whoa!"

"Whoa!" carried us through a significant point of our time in hip-hop," Curry said. "He always felt like he took the label on his back."

His second album, "The Black Rob Report," was his last with Bad Boy, and his career stalled due to legal troubles. He served four years in prison in connection with a 2004 hotel robbery. (AP)

HONG KONG: A Chinese painting from 1924 is expected to fetch at least \$45 million in an auction in Hong Kong, as collectors' appetite for art continues to rise even amid economic uncertainty brought about by the coronavirus pandemic.

The painting by influential Chinese modern artist Xu Beihong depicts a slave hiding in a cave and a lion. It is based thematically from ancient Roman mythology and Aesop's Fables, according to Christie's auction house, which unveiled the painting Monday.

Xu frequently uses the lion in his work to exemplify his faith in the rise of the Chinese nation. The lion in the painting is wounded, but remains dignified, righteous and proud — a symbol of the Chinese spirit, the auction house said.

The "Slave and Lion" painting is considered a groundbreaking work that inspired Xu's later paintings and one of the most important oil paintings in Chinese art history.

"Xu Beihong himself is one of the most important modern artists in China who has influenced generations of painters and artists," said Francis Belin, President of Christie's in Asia Pacific.

Theater

Memorabilia from Springsteen to 'Phantom' set for auction

Rejected 'posters' on sale to help artists

NEW YORK, April 20, (AP) — Letting the world see your failures is usually something most people try to avoid. Not for theatrical poster designer Frank Verizzo — he hopes you'll put his on your wall.

Verizzo is selling prints of his rejected posters for such shows as "Cabaret," "Equus" and "Matilda" with all proceeds going to the aid organization Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS.

"It's exciting for me because it's work that I particularly loved that I didn't think anyone was ever going to see," says the artist. "So it's kind of wonderful that they're now out in the world, for better or for worse."

The 16 posters included in the series — each goes for \$399 with a frame — were either rejected, never pitched or part of a group of submissions that Verizzo made that allowed only one winner.

One highlight is an alternative poster for "The Lion King." Disney, of course, went for Verizzo's stark animal mane stamp that has become iconic. But now people can mount an unpublished design of his which uses paw prints from King Mufasa and newborn Simba to illustrate both the past and the future.

Favorites

"There are a million reasons why a poster gets rejected for a show," he explains. "It's a room full of people. It's like one big beauty contest. Everybody has their favorites."

The offerings include an intriguing one for "Matilda" that uses letters of the alphabet to make up a graphic portrait of the imaginative heroine. Verizzo created it for the Broadway run of the musical but producers decided to keep the previous West End campaign.

Verizzo, who designs under the moniker "Fraver" — a combination of his two names — says opening his vault and helping fellow artists during the pandemic was a "no-brainer."

"The devastation in the theater industry was unbelievable. So many of my friends were unemployed instantly," he says. "I hope it raises a lot of money."

The project is in partnership with Gelato, the global production platform that enables artists to sell their designs to customers anywhere in the world using a network of local producers, which means carbon emissions are minimized.

Julie Ryland, who led the project for Gelato, said each poster takes you behind the creative process and in some

ways celebrates the people who work on Broadway who often aren't seen.

"Each one has a story. And and I think we crave stories during this time. We crave creativity," she said. "I don't think it's a coincidence that wall art has become so popular. Customers are just craving art and things to put up on their walls and bring into their homes now that we can't access it in other ways."

Campaigns

Posters play a key role in a show's life. Until word of mouth takes over, ad campaigns have to entice patrons to be willing to pay high ticket prices for something they may know little about.

"It's definitely the first thing anybody sees about any show. And the thing I like most about it is it's the thing that stays behind when the show's no longer around," Verizzo says.

The latest set — on top of a collection of his work, "Fraver By Design: 5 Decades of Theatre Poster Art from Broadway, Off-Broadway and Beyond," show Verizzo's range, which includes everything from woodcuts to elaborate typography to stylized illustration.

"This was a criticism I always came up against at school — 'You don't have a style. You don't have your own style,'" he says. "It's like, 'Well, I like all sorts of things. I like wood cuts. I like illustration. I like graphic design.' I don't see why I have to tie myself down to any one particular look or style."

To make his posters, Verizzo starts with a script and dreams up an image that can be shrunk down to the size of a postage stamp newspaper ad or blown up to be on a billboard.

"I read it quickly first and try to get visual impressions, which is really what I'm reading it for," he says. "Sometimes there's a theme that I see evolving that I think would be that I could express graphically."

He works so far ahead that often the script isn't finished yet and there have been no casting decisions yet. He tries to come up with something to "catch your eye or intrigue a possible audience member."

In addition to art for "The Lion King," Verizzo has made his mark on Broadway with hundreds of posters for such shows as "Sweeney Todd" and "Sunday in the Park with George."

He has no hard feelings if his design isn't picked by producers. "When I finally do get to the theater to see the show, I always understand why they

made the choice they did. It always makes perfect sense to me," he says.

Also:

NEW YORK: Bruce Springsteen, Hugh Jackman, Elton John, Bette Midler, Christine Baranski, Steve Martin and Tina Fey have all raided their closets to offer up personal items for a charity online auction, with one prize being a key prop from the worldwide smash musical "The Phantom of the Opera."

Doyle Auctioneers & Appraisers has unveiled the slate of stage and screen items for its live auction event on April 28, which includes a Wolverine jacket from Jackman's closet, glasses from John, and boots, jeans and a T-shirt from Springsteen. A portion of proceeds from every item sold will benefit The Actors Fund.

The highlight package includes a "Phantom" prop: A music box in the shape of a barrel organ with the figure of a monkey playing the cymbals attached. It is used in the prolog to set up the musical. The rare prop is from the West End production and the package also includes admission for two whenever "Phantom" reopens on Broadway.

"We are delighted to offer this extremely rare artifact for auction, supporting The Actors Fund, and I look forward to greeting the winning bidder at our first performance of 'Phantom of the Opera' back on Broadway," composer Andrew Lloyd Webber said.

Other items up for bids include Bob Mackie dresses from Burnett, a Dolce & Gabbana dress worn by Glenn Close at the opening night of "Sunset Boulevard" in 2017, a black sequin gown worn by Midler, a banjo signed by Martin and three gowns that Baranski wore for appearances at the Golden Globes, Emmys and Kennedy Center Honors.

More treasures include Celeste Holm's Golden Globe awarded in 1947 for "Gentlemen's Agreement," signed books from Julie Andrews, the dress worn by Fey to the 2013 Emmy Awards where she won for writing "30 Rock" and the leather suit Alan Cumming wore to the Tony Awards when he won the best actor in a musical trophy in 1998 for "Cabaret."

More one-of-a-kind items are an Oscar de la Renta gown worn by Renée Fleming when she sang at the Diamond Jubilee Concert for Queen Elizabeth II in 2012, a limited edition copy of the "Downton Abbey" film screenplay, and some leather jackets from the TV show "The Good Wife."

at a Sotheby's auction in Hong Kong. (AP)



NEW YORK: The tiny red hearts that appear under Instagram photos of kids, kittens and sandwiches can be a source of stress for many users, an insidious way of measuring self-worth and popularity.

Now Facebook says it's going to test out — again — an option for users to hide those "like" counts to see if it can reduce the pressure of being on social media. Instagram, which Facebook owns, will soon allow a small group of random users to decide whether or not they want to see the number of likes their posts and those of others receive.

The social media giant says it's also exploring the feature for Facebook. Comments will still be available for people who chose to hide likes — they just won't see whether it was 2, 20 or 20,000 people who liked their posts.

Instagram began hiding likes in 2019. While many users welcomed the feature, others, including some influencers, worried it might take away from the social media experience. At the time, the platform didn't give users a choice to hide or unhide the like counts.

"Some people found this beneficial but some still wanted to see like counts so they could track what's popular," the company said in a statement. Then COVID hit, and Facebook said it prioritized dealing with the pandemic. (AP)



Carrie Underwood performs at the 56th annual Academy of Country Music Awards on, April 17, at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tenn. The awards show aired on April 18 with both live and prerecorded segments. (AP)