

# The Face Is So Familiar

*On stage at OU's Rupel Jones Theater, he was known as Randy Staley.  
Now he is James Staley, an actor with one of those faces  
TV and movie fans recognize instantly,  
even if they cannot call him by either name.*

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a Broadway lead — at \$350 a week."*

By SHIRLEY DODSON COBB

James Randall Staley could be described as the “pleasant, next-door neighbor type.” His sincere smile, easy-going manner and direct, engaging countenance are reassuring. A new resident on his block in Southern California would be comfortable asking to borrow a wrench or sending a child to retrieve an errant baseball from the transplanted Oklahoman’s yard.

He has a slim, strikingly beautiful wife named Barbara and two handsome children, Ryan, 12, and Darren, 9. Together the Staleys reside in a ’50s-style single-story white stucco, an attractively furnished, expansive home with a pool. They appear to be the stereotypical California family.

But James Staley’s face is familiar to more than just his nearby neighbors. He is recognizable as the man in a Miracle Whip commercial awakening from the nightmare of a refrigerator without salad dressing. He is recalled as the accommodating vice president of the United States in Goldie Hawn’s “Protocol.” He is remembered as the curt American ambassador who severs aid to Egypt on the television mini-series “Sadat.” His face calls up all these images—and more.

In 1970, as “Randy” Staley, he earned a University of Oklahoma fine arts degree and began a career that would blend Broadway and off-Broadway performances, financially fruitful network commercials and challenging character actor television and movie roles. His successes have been a tribute to perseverance as well as talent.

Sophomore Staley met graduate student Barbara Stegeman in 1966 when they appeared in the OU production of “Barefoot in the Park.” Within two years, they were married and in pursuit of their common goal.

“We were both ‘theater people.’ It was crazy, insane,” James says of the anti-establishment environment of the ’60s. “We were a career-oriented twosome—not into making money. We thought it would be very romantic to be actors traveling around the country doing theater. We never looked beyond that. We didn’t even consider children.”

The newlyweds stored “useless”

wedding gifts, like toasters and waffle irons, at the Stegemans’ Tulsa home. “We didn’t want anything that didn’t have a handle,” James recalls. They took only a color television set—an essential—when they left to accept an engagement with the Milwaukee Repertory Theater.

Fresh out of college, the pair thought \$75 a week was the end of the rainbow. “With two checks, we were making \$150 a week,” James says. “That was as much as anyone needed—for a while.”

“It was enough,” Barbara insists. “No children, no house, nowhere to go to spend money.” She explains that their social life came free of charge. “The very wealthy people had a lot of fun parties. There were constant social events.”

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Then, what Staley calls a “turning point” occurred. Accepting a master’s program scholarship from Brandeis University, he appeared with Maureen O’Sullivan in “The Glass Menagerie.” The star’s agent asked Staley to come to New York.

“We were only going to stay for one day,” Staley remembers. “But at my first audition, my first day in New York, I got it—understudy for a Broadway lead—paying \$350 a week.”

That break saved virtually years of legwork, the actor contends. At his agent’s urging, Staley dropped the name of “Randall,” or “Randy” as he was known at OU, for the more formal “James.”

In 1971 the couple entered what Staley calls their “starving artist period.” He is quick to add that when Ryan and Darren were born, they began another chapter titled “reality.”

For almost seven years, Broadway and off-Broadway roles were intermixed with another vocation—waiting tables, a throwback to his college days as a Ming Room waiter in the Oklahoma Memorial Union.

“Sometimes I could make more waiting tables in one night than I could for six nights in the theater. I would clear \$250 a week compared to \$125 acting,” Staley explains.

His acting ability came in handy. Promoted to maitre d’ at a posh New York restaurant, Staley often was asked to recommend wines to complement the cuisine. “Talk about a BS artist,” he says. “I never even had French. So I would just point to one and say, ‘Oh, this would be good.’ And they would buy it.”

Barbara assisted on the economic front. “My mother was really upset. I had earned my master’s degree and was waiting tables.”

Though Staley was in the top one percent of actors in New York—those actually working—roles were limited. If not cast in an upcoming Broadway production during August/September auditions, he would have to wait an entire year for another attempt. Staley decided California offered more opportunities for work; he borrowed \$2,000 to travel west.

Staley had seen his former out-of-work New York friends appearing on television programs and believed he could do as well. “I was the last one staying in New York because I was working; they had left because they weren’t working. Three weeks after arriving in Los Angeles, I had a job on ‘The Jeffersons.’”

Residuals from a few commercials provided the Staleys’ initial living expenses. “We have always had a method to our madness—a conservative business approach,” James chuckles, explaining the lucrative field of TV commercials which has undergirded his multi-faceted career.

In 1974, while on Broadway appearing in “Of Mice and Men,” Staley was approached by a top commercial agent seeking new talents. A subsequent meeting, however, ended with the youthful actor being dubbed “not the commercial type.”

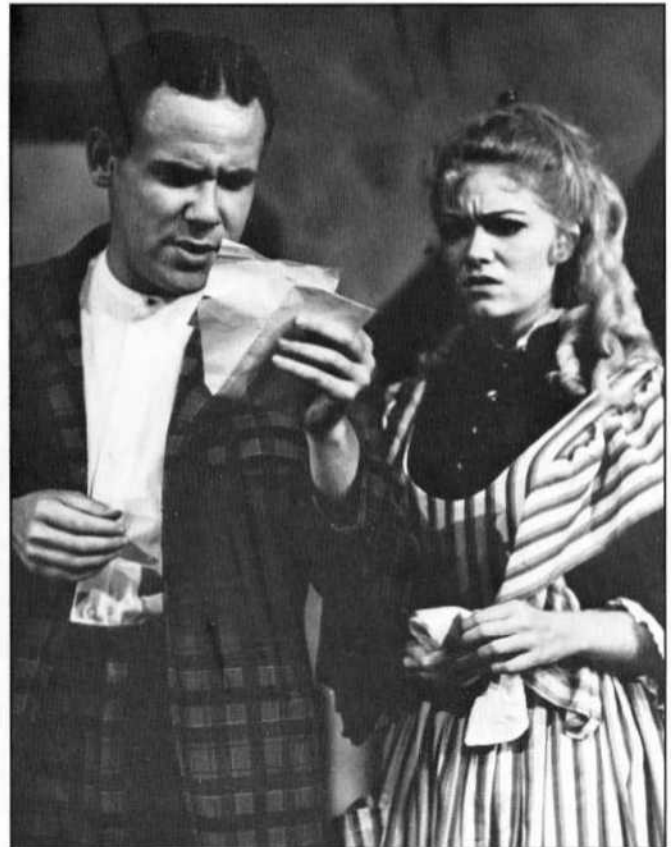
The remark only heightened

*AT RIGHT: "Randy" Staley and Barbara Stegeman are pictured in the 1966 OU production of "Barefoot in the Park," the first of many collegiate stage appearances that preceded their joint assault on the professional theater.*

*BOTTOM LEFT: Cast as the American ambassador in the OU summer theater's "Romanoff and Juliet," Randy Staley, left, bargains with the General, played by William Levis, '68 BFA.*

*BOTTOM RIGHT: Randy, shown here with Kathy Widner, '69 BFA, appeared with Barbara in the Southwest Repertory Theater Company's 1968 summer production of "Ladies in Retirement."*

Photos Courtesy of OU School of Drama



Staley's determination to prove the agent wrong. More than 300 national commercials later, the Oklahoman takes pride in his achievement, noting, "One of the reasons I've been able to persevere is television commercials."

"It's the best scam left in town, although I may go to 30 appointments over a period of two months and strike out 30 times. Or I may get three commercials in a row—or just one that's like selling the big (insurance) policy," Staley says of the residuals which pay every time the commercial is broadcast. "And when your boat comes in, you sock it away. You buy a house or make an investment you can rely on."

Competition for commercials is increasing. "Actors used to go from television into movies," Staley says. "Now the established stars want television because it pays well."

In the highly competitive arena of commercials, television and movies, the Staleys keep a careful watch over finances; records of income and expenses are stored a fingertip away. "We have a computer at home, and we enter every residual check," James says. "Barbara does a monthly readout. We know what we're making; an accountant in Beverly Hills does the taxes and other stuff. With all the other anxieties, I don't need a financial anxiety."

"You can plan (your budget) with commercials," Barbara explains, "and that's made our lives a lot easier. Until the past two years, commercials generated two-thirds of the family income; now, only one-third of the dollars come from this source."

"I'm solvent because I have different avenues," continues James, who has appeared on such television series as "Magnum, P.I.," "Remington Steele," "Simon and Simon," "Love Boat," "Trapper John," and "Golden Girls" and has had numerous movie roles, including "Foxfire," "Vacation," and "The Last Word," co-starring in "American Dreamer" and "Sweet Dreams."

"If one well runs dry," he quips, "I dip into another."

Staley claims that his ability to "blend" is a major factor in landing commercials. At 5 feet 10 inches, the partially balding, slightly stocky actor contends that he is not striking

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*James Staley, shown above with co-star JoBeth Williams in the 1984 "American Dreamer," has had numerous movie roles and is a frequent television guest star.*

enough in appearance to distract from the product. "I'm just an average Joe selling something. That makes for a good supporting actor; the product is the star."

Whether in commercials, on film or video tape, the former Midwest City resident deems his role as the supporting character actor acceptable. "To be a star takes a lot of luck. I think my particular niche is on a TV sit-com."

In the past 12 months, a succession of requests for Staley to "guest star" in such roles has emerged. "This last year has been really exciting. Would I fly to Hawaii for 'Magnum'? Would I do the 'Newhart' show?" After giving an understated, affirmative reply, Staley admits to hanging up the telephone and uttering a primeval yell. "At my age, after persevering all this time, this is what I've been wanting to hear."

Staley has used to his advantage the slight paunch and receding hairline that come with advancing age. "Looking older has actually helped me work more," he says.

Still, he uses the tricks of the trade. A hairpiece, purchased last year, effectively changes his appearance. "In private life, I would never wear it, but for show business, it's been a wonderful gimmick. I have five different sets

of publicity pictures, depending on the role. If you don't want a bald, chubby guy, I lose 15 pounds and put on the hairpiece."

Staley's talents evoke memories of the late Jack Benny, a tongue-in-cheek seriousness punctuated with witty remarks. "He makes jokes all the time," Barbara says. "I may not laugh, but then he talks to his mother, and she always laughs."

Staley admits that his mother, Midwest City resident Helen Hampton, is a great audience. "I have my highs and lows; all actors do. Some weeks you have people saying you're the hottest thing around; other times, you wonder why anyone would hire you. An actor hears both sides all the time. To make a living in this field, you have to deal with rejection. Of course," he laughs, "I can type 40 words a minute, and I'm a heck of a waiter, so I don't have to be an actor."

While James has learned to live with the employment uncertainty, Barbara eventually opted for another career. After the birth of their first child, she turned down her agent's offer of a job in Chicago. "I decided that one actor in the family was enough."

"It's harder for women," James contends. "You can come in and make a



*The down time inherent in an actor's career has given Staley quality time with his sons. Here with son Ryan's soccer team, Staley, kneeling at right, has a room full of trophies, awards and letters of appreciation which have come his way in seven years as a volunteer coach for flag football, baseball and soccer.*

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Scott Harrison

*In typical Southern California style, Darren, Ryan, James and Barbara Staley pose by the backyard pool. With his "average Joe" looks and ability to "blend" in increasing demand, James may be proof that nice guys don't always finish last.*

commercial, do a series or get a movie, but over five years or so, everybody is weeded out, and you have left the people who really play hardball."

"I like going to work every day," Barbara interjects. Several years ago she enrolled in California State University in Northridge to earn a second master's degree, this time in speech therapy. Presently she works from 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. with youngsters in three Los Angeles schools.

Barbara's new career and the irregularity of James' acting schedule have enabled them to share the homemaker role, an arrangement which also has given James quality time with his sons. Seven years ago, he started coaching youngsters in flag football, soccer and baseball. He admits that youth sports have become an obsession; one room in his home is a showcase of his teams' accomplishments with trophies, awards and letters of appreciation.

As a youngster Staley tried without success to earn accolades in sports, then turned to other avenues of achievement. "Drama always seemed to be short of guys—and there were always pretty girls," he explains.

While at Midwest City High School, Staley garnered five state awards for speech. At the University of Oklahoma, he appeared in scores of productions, including "Thurber Carnival," "Man and Superman" and "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie." James and Barbara both were cast in "Romanoff and Juliet," "Ladies in Retirement," "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and in "Lysistrata," a featured presentation during OU President J. Herbert Hollomon's inaugural weekend.

"The University of Oklahoma was a great experience," Staley says of the collegiate career which won him the School of Drama's Van Hellin Award. "Today, college students need preparation for both film and television, classes in auditioning, what to say, how to get an agent, how to prepare a resume."

For someone who spent the first 22 years of his life in Oklahoma, acting has opened doors worldwide. Staley muses, "Alaska . . . Paris . . . Hawaii . . . It's exciting. But," he adds with a twinkle in his eyes, "I will not have my role as a homemaker belittled." ☺