## ENTERTAINMENT

It's a Sedelmaier!

At the making of another hilarious TV commercial

The morning sun slants down through the trees on the corner of 49th and Lamon, in a peaceful residential neighborhood near Chicago's Midway Airport. Neat two-story brick houses line both sides of the straight, level street. It is 8 o'clock and very quiet. From somewhere out of view there is a rumble. Then the sound of a motor accelerating, and suddenly a Checker cab comes skidding around the corner. But this is no ordinary hack: what it looks like is a Taxi From Hell. The windshield and roof have been removed, a pipe rigging extends from both sides of the car and a Panaflex film camera is mounted on the hood, shooting in. As the cab takes the corner an older gentleman goes careering across the back seat, shouts, "Twenty-five years!" and slams into the rear door. Sitting on the hood with his feet in the cab, the director squints through the viewfinder. "No," he says as the cab slows, dropping deftly into the voice of an old-timer to give the actor in back some direction: " 'Twenty-five years!' " he barks, quavery and indignant. " 'Twenty-five years!' Nick, hold one finger up when you say the line. Throw your finger up on the 'T' of 'twenty.' Now take it around again."

Four takes later the director will get the shot he wants and move on. Late this year, TV viewers in the West will see it as part of Alaska Airline's "Taxi"—the latest in a long, brilliant string of commercials known collectively as "Sedelmaiers."

Joe Sedelmaier. If you don't know the name you almost certainly know the work: The "Fast-Talking Man" for Federal Express; Clara "Where's the Beef" Peller for Wendy's; an elderly couple overrun by rabbits for Jartran Truck Rentals, and hundreds more. Each one bears the director's stamps: loopily discursive dialogue, actors with lived-in faces, a deadpan visual style that's equal parts Edward Hopper and Bugs Bunny. "It's like they're episodes of a comedy," says Alaska Airlines VP John Kelly, chugging hot coffee on the cold Chicago street corner. "People say, 'When's the next one coming out?' " In a curious tribute, Mattel Toys has just introduced Commercial Crazies, a trivia game based entirely on Sedelmaier's work. One toy critic has already predicted that many consumers will toss the game and keep the accompanying video cassette of Sedelmaiers.
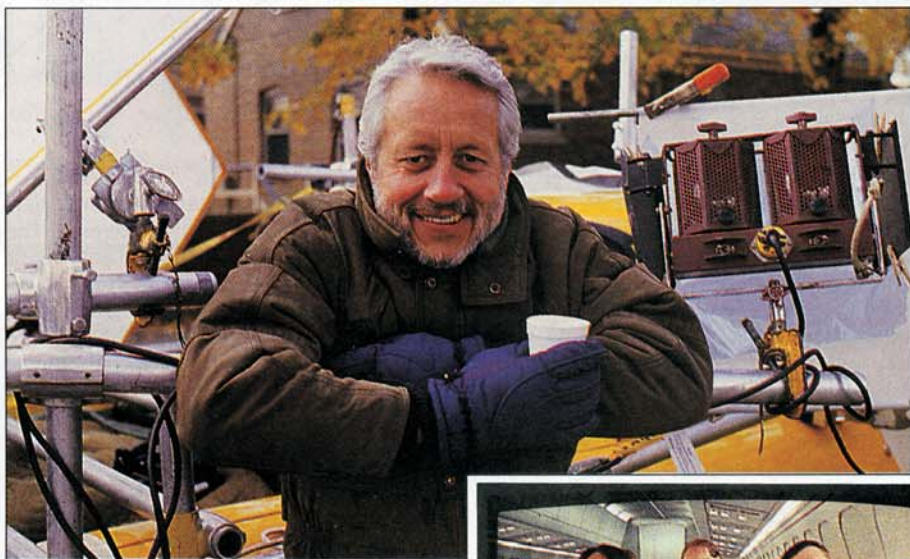
DAVID WALBERG

A penchant for lived-in faces: *Sedelmaier, 'Where's the beef?' ad for Wendy's (top)*

This is wholly possible. And it's just the latest in a long line of compliments and rewards Sedelmaier has earned for his work. Living and working out of Chicago, he charges clients a director's fee of $12,500 per shooting day, probably the highest in the business. He has won 59 Clios, the ad community's equivalent of Oscar or Emmy. But his greatest accomplishment is probably this: once and for all, he's put the lie to the old adage that *humor doesn't sell.* Wendy's reported a 30 percent jump in sales in the first half of 1984, after "Where's the Beef?"; Alaska Airline's Kelly says that recall—the proportion of viewers who remember the client's name after seeing a Sedelmaier—is so high it's "almost embarrassing." "I've heard a lot of ad people say, 'Well, we tried humor and it didn't work'," Sedelmaier says. "But I saw what they did and it was terrible. It wasn't funny. They hit you over the head. They insult your intelligence. I don't believe you have to do that. See, so many commercials are based on a punch line. But it's the *telling* of the joke that should be funny."

Now 53, Sedelmaier started out as an art director and producer for the Young & Rubicam and J. Walter Thompson agencies in Chicago and left to go solo in 1967. At first his work was fairly straightforward. But about a dozen years ago, "I decided I was

The style is deadpan: *Alaska Airlines ad*

going to do strictly humor, because I didn't think there was that much to be serious about in a commercial." The result was "Orgy" for Southern Airways, in which a passenger makes his way past a bacchanalian feast in the first-class cabin, crosses into coach and finds himself in what looks like steerage on the world's most brutal slave ship. "Most spots create a false problem and then solve it. 'Ring around the collar'," Sedelmaier says, his voice dripping scorn. "How many people really care about ring around the collar? Or, 'Don't squeeze the Charmin.' Mr. Whipple. The guy's a fool. He's an idiot. I can't identify with these people. No one can." But anyone who has ever flown coach can identify with the poor schlemiel in "Orgy"—an ordinary person trapped in a grotesque caricature of daily life gone haywire. "Orgy" was the first true Sedelmaier.

The style came further into focus with

'It's the *telling* of the joke that should be funny': *Commercials for Valvoline, Mr. Coffee and Wendy's*

"The Fast-Talking Man" for Federal Express. "To me," Sedelmaier says, "what made that spot funny wasn't the actor, John Moschitta—it was everybody else trying to keep up with him, pretending everything was OK. *That's* what's funny—when we're put into absurd situations and we try like hell to maintain our dignity." Federal was also Sedelmaier's first network campaign, and it made him a national name. Now so many clients come knocking that he turns away about 40 percent of the jobs he is offered. (He and Federal parted company several years ago. The current spots, clearly designed to look like Sedelmaiers, pale in comparison. "In the beginning I was disappointed," Sedelmaier says of the clone campaign. "I'm not anymore. Now, if I *liked* them I'd be worried.")

Total control: For the jobs he does take—some 30 a year—clients have to subscribe to some fairly unusual rules. Sedelmaier demands total control, but leaves room for accidents and on-scene inspirations: "I tell the clients in preproduction, 'This is where I want to go. But don't hold me to it'." It's not overblown to describe him as an *auteur*—he is involved in literally everything from writing the script down to supervising the scoring and even the film-to-tape transfers. "I don't sit down and do elaborate drawings of the set and then say, 'OK, go away and build me this'," he says. "I'm there when it's built." Sedelmaier Film Productions, housed in a building that used to be the Chez Paree nightclub, has just four employees—down from 12 when the company was started 19 years ago. "When you're small," he says, "you can't be incompetent. You gotta be good."

Most unorthodox of all is Sedelmaier's casting policy. If there is one. "I look for some-thing," he says vaguely. "They have a certain character. They haven't spent their whole lives looking at themselves in the mirror." What this means is that only about 10 percent of the people he casts are professional actors. Neighborhood playhouses are a frequent source of talent; that's where Sedelmaier found Nicholas Wolf, the elderly man in "Taxi," who is retired from the insurance business and was appearing as part of a program called "Senior Showstoppers." Joe Levato, cast in an Alaska Airlines spot called "Mankind," is an architect whom Sedelmaier's secretary spotted in a supermarket. In July, when Sedelmaier went back to his hometown of Orrville, Ohio, to shoot a spot for Valvoline ("Motor oil is motor oil"), a Bell Telephone employee named Walter Ralston showed up at the casting call. Sedelmaier recalls, "He said,

'Hi, Joe, how are you? And by the way, do you have one of our pens?' I thought, my God, this is terrific." Ralston got the part. The commercial, "Parade," Sedelmaier's 682nd, recently won a gold medal at the International Film Festival of New York.

Midafternoon on 49th and Lamon. "It's going well?" Alaska Airlines' Kelly asks Sedelmaier. "It's going well," the director says, "but so is the sun." Then Sedelmaier, who runs everywhere, tears off to coach actor Tony Strenski on the precisely correct way to stand there and watch a cab go by. ("Don't move. *Never move.* You're just standing there looking at the car.") He is two days into a three-day shoot and losing the light. But Kelly doesn't look worried. The spot, after all, will be a Sedelmaier.

BILL BAROL *in Chicago*