

The I kons Interview: CAROL CHANNING



This Seattle native, has been making people laugh for decades. As a star of Stage and Screen she has made her mark on Broadway, on Television, in the Movies and on Record. Currently she is wow-ing audiences with her cabaret act *The First 80 Years Are the Hardest* based on her autobiography, *Just Lucky I Guess*.

I first experienced for myself the many talents of Ms. Channing upon watching her star as Muzzy in the film adaptation of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* which also co-starred her friends Julie Andrews and Mary Tyler Moore, With a performance that captivated me with her characters eccentricity and heart, I like many other young gay men fell in love with her distinctive voice, her wide "take the world in at a glance" eyes and her charming mannerisms.

Channing, the daughter of a Christian Science lecturer and newspaperman got her first taste of show business at a San Francisco theatre. This whetted her appetite for performing eventually inspiring her to make the move to New York City to pursue a career on stage.

She first took to the New York stage in Marc Blitzstein's *No For an Answer*, before moving to Broadway for *Let's Face It*, as understudy to Eve Arden. Her featured role in *Lend an Ear*, a musical revue caught the attention of Anita Loos who cast her in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in the role of Lorelei Lee, which became her breakout acting role, later revisiting the character for the 1974 stage production *Lorelei*. As Dolly Levi in *Hello Dolly* the musical based on the Thornton Wilder book and movie *The Matchmaker*, she solidified her iconic status to the theatre-going audience, both gay and straight. Among her other stage appearances include *Wonderful Town* replacing Rosalind Russell, George Bernard Shaws *Pygmalion*, and *The Millionairess*, and numerous revivals of *Hello Dolly*

On television she has appeared on episodes of *Laugh In*, *The Flip Wilson Show*, as Aunt Sylvia on several episodes of *The Love Boat* and has lent her voice to episodes of *The Family Guy* among others.

When not on stage Carol promotes her [foundation](#) which was created to raise and advocate to funding arts programs in the California Education system. She also takes time out of her busy schedule to attend and perform at charity events. Chief among them are charities that raise funds for AIDS Service Organizations, The American Lung Association, Arts programs, etc.

Without intending to, Carol Channing has achieved iconic status to the Gay & Lesbian community with her much loved stage personifications. Channing has long been a staunch supporter of our community by raising money and awareness for AIDS causes and speaking on our behalf. Enough that on February 25, 2002 the city of San Francisco proclaimed the day to be Carol Channing Day, in reward for her advocacy of gay rights and her appearance as the celebrity host of the Gay Pride Day festivities in Hollywood.

For my part I am pleased to give this wonderful actress and humanitarian her due with the launch of this "Ikons" interview. In addition to talking about her career, we found ourselves chatting a bit about her foundation, politics, and the AIDS crisis. (The answers that follow are her words except for those in { }. Those have been added for clarification purposes and to improve conversation flow, as has additional punctuation)



Stage Work:

No For an Answer
(Jan 5 and Jan 11, 1941)

Let's Face It!
(Oct 29, 1941 - Mar 20, 1943) (understudy
for Eve Arden)

Proof Through the Night
(Dec 25, 1942 - Jan 2, 1943)

Lend an Ear
(Dec 16, 1948 - Jan 21, 1950)

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes
(Dec 8, 1949 - Sept 15, 1951)

Wonderful Town
(Feb 25, 1953 - July 3, 1954) (replacement
for Rosalind Russell)

The Vamp
(Nov 10 - Dec 31, 1955)

Show Girl
(Jan 12 - April 8, 1961)

Q. Tell me-in your own words-who is Carol Channing? I am an incredibly grateful woman for what I've been allowed to do with my life.

Q. You are greatly admired among the theater community, but I think you know that. Who among the current theatrical community do you admire and why? There are so many worthy of praise ... and for many reasons.

Q. What has been the greatest challenge in your life or career? I'm 86. I've had a lot of them.

Q. Who were your major career influences? I couldn't possibly mention them all. George Burns and Gracie ... She chose me to replace her in the act with George. It's like being sainted in the cathedral. Sophie Tucker, Julie Andrews, Oh and Tallulah [Bankhead]! Marlene [Dietrich], Gower ... Champion, of course. Jerry Herman. I could write a book ... and I did. If you ever want to lose your friends, write a book. You have to lock yourself away and just focus on writing.

Q. Describe the most satisfying experience of your career? (What keeps you in the business?) The next thing I have scheduled is always the most satisfying experience. It just builds. Currently, it is working on educating others of the importance of the Arts in our school system ... From K through College.

What keeps me in the business? What else would I do? I am very excited that my [Hello] Dolly and Diamonds dresses [from Gentlemen Prefer Blondes] are going to be included in the Smithsonian after they renovate in 2008. They will also have items from others' careers ... Tippi Hedren, Rose Marie, Julie Newmar ... Oh many others, but I am just so honored to have something connected to my career on display.

Q. What are the factors that make you want to

Hello, Dolly!
(Jan 16, 1964 - Dec 27, 1970)
(left show in 1967)

Four on a Garden
(Jan 30 - Mar 20, 1971)

Lorelei
(Jan 27 - Nov 3, 1974)

Jule's Friends at the Palace
(May 19, 1974)
(benefit performance)

Hello, Dolly!
(Mar 15 - July 19, 1978)
(revival)

Legends!
(Jan 7, 1986 - Jan 18, 1987)
(national tour)

Hello, Dolly!
(Oct 19, 1995 - Jan 28, 1996)
(revival; farewell tour)



Partial Filmography:

Paid in Full
(1950)

The First Traveling Saleslady
(1956)

All About People
(1967) (short subject) (narrator)

Thoroughly Modern Millie
(1967)

Skidoo
(1968)

Shinbone Alley
(1971) (voice)

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band
(1978) (Cameo)

play a role? Do you have any favorite roles that you've played? You have to love the character. Even if they are the most hateful character, there has to be something about them you love to keep getting back up on the stage every night to recreate them. Every character I've played has been my favorite at the moment I was doing them. Right now, I'm loving "me", because I actually get to play "myself" in "The First Eighty Years Are The Hardest."

Q. When you choose to do a musical how important is the music to you compared to the actual book of the play or lyrics of the songs? When you have creative talents all working together on something, that's what makes a show special. If you're lucky enough to have a great like Thornton Wilder who wrote *The Matchmaker*, which was the story that became *Hello Dolly*, it makes it easier, but then if you're blessed with a talent like Jerry Herman to then give you words and music ... he does both you know ... well then you have the best of everything.

Q. My favorite Carol Channing movie and I understand it's yours also, is *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. It was the first time I'd seen you on screen. Why did you enjoy the role? Muzzy was just pure fun, with her green glass ring, but Julie made the experience such a joy. She was so supportive and wonderful to work with. She came in on one of her only days off to read a scene with me. It was a close up of me and anyone could have read the lines to me, but Julie knew how important it was for me and my character to be able to relate to her and her character, She just knew I was going to win the Oscar. Well, I didn't of course, but I did win the Golden Globe.

Q. Why have you avoided viewing *Skidoo* (I've never seen it either)? Is it that bad? I don't remember. I seem to have put the whole experience out of my mind. [For those who do not know *Skiddoo* was an all-star 1968 Otto Preminger film that cast Channing as the wife of a mob boss played by Jackie Gleason. The movie was so vilified by the press and the public that Preminger locked it up in his archives and Paramount has yet to issue it on video]

Q. How was it working with Jerry Herman? What made him so special to you? The man is a brilliant talented and dear friend who means the world to me. There is no one thing or incident that made him important to me, but hundreds ... no thousands. He is being honored by The Actors Fund on June 10th with the Julie Harris Lifetime Achievement Award at their TONY Awards party in Los Angeles.

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Alice in Wonderland
(1985)

Happily Ever After
(1993) (voice)

Thumbelina
(1994) (voice)

Homo Heights
(1998)

The Brave Little Toaster Goes to
Mars (1998) (voice)
(direct-to-video)

Broadway: The Golden Age, by the
Legends Who Were There
(2003) (documentary)

Awards party in Los Angeles.

Q. There is a saying that music speaks louder than words. In what ways does music speak to you? I just saw a concert with a symphony orchestra playing John Phillip Sousa and I cried it was so wonderful. Music can do that to you. It can stir up all kinds of emotions.

Q. You are one among many entertainers who value the performing arts, and providing courses of study in public schools to teach them. What makes them so important and what can people do to increase understanding about the arts? The arts are so very important. It is important to stress all arts are important, not just musical theatre. It increases your ability to do well in other areas like algebra. We are working very hard to raise the awareness of how important nurturing the creative side of a person is to the whole.

Q. Why do you think you have become an icon to the Gay community? I have no idea. I'm thrilled that I am. They always seem to know what or who is good and is going to be successful.

Q. In the theatrical community you have met many openly-gay entertainers. ? How did you deal with that realization? I don't. Its just never mattered to me. I never thought oh he's gay or he's straight. Why should it matter?

Q. When did you become interested in theatre? What can you tell me about your earlier experiences? How did your family react? The first time I stepped inside a theatre in San Francisco I was hooked. I didn't even know where I was. My mother and I were taking copies of the newspaper my father worked on around and I had to deliver it to the backstage door of the theatre. I felt like I was in church ... as if I was standing on holy ground. My family was always supportive. As a matter of fact, being a newspaper man, he chose a name for me that was specifically designed for the number of spaces required in a standard headline ... well at that time. So, maybe he knew something before the rest of us. I was always on the stage in school and Harry was in the band ... that's how we met.

Q. What advice would you give to a person who wants to pursue a career on stage? Stay focused. You gotta love it. If you ever find you don't absolutely love it, then find something else that you love to do.

Q. What are your opinions regarding our Gay Community? our strengths our weaknesses? I don't think about an individual that way. They're people. Black, white, tall, short.

Q. What advice would you give to a person who is newly identifying as GLTB? I can't. I'm not gay. I've never been in that position. So, I can't advise someone about something I have never personally experienced. I would hope we've reached a point that we don't have to identify ourselves as anything more than just people all created by God. God doesn't care, why should we?

Q. When you first heard about AIDS, What thoughts went through your mind? I remember the look of fear in the eyes of the Dolly boys when it first started to happen to the theatrical community. Some of them would just come into my dressing room and I would hold them and we cried. I kept thinking that they should be able to find a cure for this soon, but it's been over 25 years now. That is hard to believe. So many brilliant and talented people we've lost. Just think of the legacies that have been taken from all of us!

Q. What has been your involvement in the fight against AIDS? I've lost count of the events, shows, benefits over the last 25 years. Also the Actors Fund has events and fundraisers. I try and participate in as many of those as I can.

Q. What do you think we as people, or as a government, can do that we are not doing to stop the spread of AIDS and to raise funds for US programs? I wish I had the answer. We can't allow ourselves to become complacent about raising awareness.

Q. How do you feel the entertainment industry has changed regarding its involvement in

Links of Interest
Foundation Website Her Complete Filmography Wikipedia Entry
Bonus Materials
Article: The Carol You Don't Know Video 1: "The Story of Cecelia Sisson" Video 2: Jello TV ad (w/cast of "Hogans Heroes") Video 3: Carol Channing as the White Queen from "Alice In Wonderland" (1985 TV production)

fundraising for AIDS causes? Maybe we've all become more aware, or concerned rather, of our colleagues, more connected to ourselves and our families. Hopefully we've all become more responsible.

Q. How can the entertainment industry do more? Just keep doing what we can. I'm doing another AIDS event on June 27th in Concord NH doing a full show to benefit the AIDS Project.

Q. What sort of charitable organizations do you actively support? There are so many we try and help. I just did a show to help the Lung Association this month and fighting AIDS has always been important. We used to dedicate every Thursdays show of "Dolly" to raising money for those with AIDS.

Harry and I perform for retirement centers across the country. Harry has a thing for women over 90 you know. He just loves them. I can't wait till I'm 90 then he'll be just nuts over me.

Q. I understand that you recently set up a foundation to promote the Arts in the Schools. What can you tell me about the foundation and the work it does? The Foundation that Harry and I started has been formed out of necessity, I do hope you'll check out the website for more details, but it is so important that children or even college students, which are still children really, be continually exposed to the arts. There is proof that students do better in their academics when they have some kind of creative outlet in their life. And I think that includes sports. That's an art too don't you think? It enhances ones life and then it can't help but enhance society. And those who have a healthy dose of the arts growing up tend to be happier and make more money later in life ... Wait! That may be too strong of a statement. They definitely tend to be happier.

Harry and I just went up to Sacramento to meet with the newly appointed Secretary of Education Dave Long and other important people about the budget for the arts. I am so honored that they were interested in what we had to say on the topic. We've been appearing at universities all across California. Performing with the students at each and raising money for scholarships and the foundation. In the last year we've raised over two hundred thousand ... I think. Or maybe we should check that, but I think that's right. Yeah! OK.

Q. What would be your idea of a 'Dream Project'? What role that you haven't played would you just adore playing? I tend to just enjoy what I'm working on at the moment. The next thing or project always seems to be the "dream project."

Q. How do you see/Hope for in your life with-in the next 10 years? The same thing I'm doing now ... working. My family has such good genes, I'm going to be around a long time.

Q. How do you observe World AIDS Day? Doing whatever is asked of me, if I can.

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