



DIVA TALK: Chatting with Carol Channing, Divas "Unplugged" and News of the *Wicked* Gals

By *Andrew Gans* □ 07 Oct 2005

News, views and reviews about the multi-talented women of the musical theatre and the concert/cabaret stage.



Carol Channing

CAROL CHANNING

The Café Carlyle may have Elaine Stritch, but Feinstein's at the Regency will offer another Tony-winning actress in her eighties this month. Carol Channing, who remains the quintessential Dolly Levi, will play the posh Park Avenue nightclub Oct. 11-22. Channing, whose Broadway resume also boasts *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Lend an Ear*, *Wonderful Town* and *Lorelei!*, has titled her new show *The First Eighty Years Are the Hardest*. Cabaretgoers can expect to hear the veteran performer dazzle with such signature tunes as "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend," "Little Girl From Little Rock" and "Hello, Dolly!" as well as her reminiscences about working with such theatrical legends as Mary Martin, Ethel Merman, Gower Champion, Neil Simon and Sophie Tucker. Channing, who was recently awarded an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts, recently spoke with me about her upcoming New York engagement as well as life with her new husband, Harry Kulljian. That brief interview follows.

Question: Tell me about your upcoming shows at Feinstein's at the Regency. •**Carol Channing:** Well, it's the first time I'm playing myself! I've been lucky that I never had to play a character that wasn't monumental to me. . . . [This show] began with an interview [during the *Singular Sensations* series Off-Broadway], and it got a whale of a good review [in the New York Times], so I [have since performed it in] Sonora and all around California and all around everywhere! It varies with each audience.

Q: What songs will you be performing? •**Channing:** I do "Razzle Dazzle." I do songs I haven't done and songs I have done like "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" and "Hello, Dolly!" and "Before the Parade Passes By." And I tell about my life — with Sophie Tucker, my life-long friend, Tallulah Bankhead, with Ethel Merman, with Mary Martin, whatever the audience seems to cotton to.

Q: Have you ever played an extended run at a New York nightclub? •**Channing:** Yes, way back I used to play the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria, the Empire Room. Everybody was to the right and left and nobody in front of you, so I wish I'd had a sandwich board. And then I played the ballroom of the Plaza Hotel.

Q: You're still performing in your eighties. What do you think is the secret of your longevity? •**Channing:** I don't know, I didn't notice it was so long. [Laughs.] I don't know, I have no idea. I was just made a Doctor of Fine Arts by the University of California Stanislaus. And I make house calls! It's a great honor. It's the first time in decades that they have given an award for Doctor of Fine Arts, and it was a unanimous vote, and it was a standing ovation afterwards. I'm very proud. There are 23 extensions to the University of California, and I'm going to do master classes, lectures and things like that for them. And, my husband Harry and I have formed a foundation, the Doctor Carol Channing Endowment of the Arts, and we are going to try to bring the arts into focus. This Friday is my first lecture at the University of California.

Q: What are you going to discuss? •**Channing:** I'm going to do the show. The students are playing for the orchestra, and boy we've been rehearsing. What I realize is at that age [they] don't really know what discipline is, and they forget, so we have to have another rehearsal the day before the show and one more the day we do the show.

Q: Elaine Stritch is also playing New York now. •**Channing:** Isn't that great? She's doing fabulously.

Q: Have you two ever worked together? •**Channing:** No, but she's my friend. Oh, I adore her. We've been friends for years. I write her fan letters. [Our friendship began] by my writing a fan letter to her.

Q: There's been talk of a revival of *Hello, Dolly!* Is there anyone you think would make a good Dolly? •**Channing:** Me, I'm the only one! [Laughs.] As I say, who's going to play the older Dolly? People call up and say, "I want to do a movie about you," and I say, "Who's going to play the older Carol Channing?" [Laughs.] By the way, if they do get a Dolly, they have to get somebody with a sense of humor. Wouldn't you think? It is a comedy, but you never guessed it from the movie. [Laughs.] But [Barbra Streisand] was brilliant as a singer. Boy, she's our greatest singer. She's a great singer, but Dolly wasn't. Dolly wasn't such a great singer. [Laughs.]

Q: You were married again about a year ago . . . •**Channing:** Two years — we were just counting it this morning — two years and five months we've been married.

Q: What's marriage like this time around? •**Channing:** This is my first marriage. Oh yes, honestly and truly. This is my first regular marriage. It's just wonderful.

Q: You had known your new husband Harry when you were younger. •**Channing:** Yes, we met when I was 12 and he was 13, and we went steady together. He was the leader of the school band, and I never got off the school auditorium stage. We became very close. I thought he was the most beautiful thing I ever saw. He looked biblical. . . . We dated from the time I was 12 years old, and then he went to military school and I went on to college. . . .

Q: There's also a talk of a revival of *Legends* with Joan Collins and Linda Evans. •**Channing:** Joan Collins, I think she'd be marvelous in it.

Q: How do you remember your time doing that show? •**Channing:** Oh, I loved Mary [Martin]. It was a terrible experience though . . . so we just held hands through the whole thing.

Q: What was the experience like for you going back and writing your autobiography? •**Channing:** I wanted to share [my show biz stories]. What's wonderful is I played over 5,000 performances in *Hello, Dolly!* and I never missed a show. I never missed one single show. It wasn't because I was [so] healthy. I did three shows in a wheelchair. I was sick and I got a virus in every town, and then I passed it around the company, and then they'd reinfect me. That's the way we staggered around. The funny thing is that [performing is] healing. For selfish reasons, I never missed a show. At the end of every show, no matter what was the matter with me — including cancer — I found after the curtain went down, that I either felt better or I was getting cured. . . . It's a healing process. I give a little bit of my soul to the audience, they give a little bit of appreciation back, and it builds and it builds, and by the end of the show, we're all well and healthy. . . .

Q: When you were writing, did you enjoy revisiting the different periods in your life? •**Channing:** Yes, I just cuddled up to Ethel Merman. I cuddled up to the people I was writing about, Betsy Cronkite, Walter Cronkite's wife, all the people I wrote about.

Q: Do you remember your first time on a stage? •**Channing:** Well, my goal from the time I was seven years old, I remember very well. I asked my father, "Can I lay down my life right now?" It was my first time on the school auditorium stage. I was seven years old, and I remember Daddy said, "You can lay down your life at 7 or 17 or 27 or 77, it doesn't matter. These are the happier people, those that are carrying some kind of banner." And that's true. I'm happier. I guess we're supposed to go through terrible things in order to learn. I'm back with Harry, and I have to tell you I didn't know the harmony and the peace and caring about each other that it was so rare. This is my first marriage . . . It's just something that was a blessing. It's just like as if I were 12 years old again and Harry's 13. Seventy years separation. He had a beautiful, magnificent 60-year marriage, and I had a miserable 42-year marriage. It just wasn't a marriage, that's all. But now, here we are, and, as I say, it's just a blessing.