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## THEATER REVIEW;

### Back Where She Belongs: Carol Channing Reminisces

By MARGO JEFFERSON

One singular sensation Ev'ry little step she takes One thrilling combination Ev'ry move that she makes. From "A Chorus Line"

She walks onto the stage in a silver minidress with sequins the size of quarters and shoes to match. That hair, which could be a cap of feathers or a silky bird's nest, has been blond for years. Now it is a pale silvery gray.

Carol Channing has been in show business for about 60 years. Her appearance in the Singular Sensations series, at the appealingly small Village Theater through tomorrow, is a conversation about those years. They were among the best in musical theater. (On her first visit to the William Morris Agency, she sat in the waiting room with Betty Comden and Adolph Green on one side and Alfred Drake on the other.)

People think of Ms. Channing as the "Hello, Dolly!" archetype, or as a cartoon who might have come to Ralph Barton or Al Hirschfeld in a dream. But she began with multiple personalities; in a 1940's revue by Marc Blitzstein she brought those of Ethel Merman, Beatrice Lillie, Sophie Tucker and Gertrude Lawrence to one song. She played a French movie star and a British Christian Scientist in a second revue, "Lend an Ear," directed by Gower Champion. (They were reunited in 1964 for "Hello, Dolly!") But her parody of a 1920's flapper in "Lend an Ear" led her to stardom. In 1949 she opened on Broadway in "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," playing Lorelei Lee, the grammar-splitting gold digger from Little Rock, Ark., whose wide-eyed cunning hides a robber baron's business methods.

"This is my 'Battle Hymn of the Republic,'" Ms. Channing announced before singing Lorelei's anthem, "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend." Part of Ms. Channing's brilliance depends on her enunciation. She handles each vowel, each consonant, each syllable with the care and relentless glee Lorelei bestows on diamonds.

The audience jumped to its feet more than once. We were watching a master performer. At 83 she contains her effects, but still has more to give than most performers half her age or younger. In the "Singular Sensations" series, between now and early February, musical theater figures (Donna McKechnie, Betty Buckley, Kitty Carlisle Hart and Cy Coleman among them) will talk about their lives and times with Glen Rovon, the host and musical director. He is cordial without fawning or intruding. The simple format is attractive. The performers should be good storytellers, though, and Ms. Channing is. Part of it is timing, and part is content. The timing enhances the tale of how a teenage Carol learned a song phonetically (and gesture by gesture) from a performer in the high-style Russian revue "Chauve-Souris."

Her cheery nonstop patter is meant to deceive. After all, this is the woman Blitzstein called "a satirical chanteuse." The story of her first appearance at the celebrated Café Society Uptown feels like showbiz chitchat until the club owner insists that Carol get a bodyguard. "And, well, a bodyguard functions as a husband, as Patty Hearst will tell you," she says with no break in tone or rhythm. The audience hoots with laughter, and she looks a bit concerned at the outburst, then goes on politely as if nothing had happened. "And so I fell madly in love with mine," a gun-toting black man named Stanley.

How did she fall in love with the theater? She was an only child who invented playmates by imitating everyone she knew. There are hilarious stories, with imitations, about Merman, Tucker and Ann Miller. She sings her signature numbers from "Hello, Dolly!" She also does a version of "Razzle Dazzle" from "Chicago" that (even though she was still learning it the night I was there) should be filmed and put right into the movie as a deluxe dream sequence. Everything's there: the cynicism and charisma, the slow buildup, chorus after chorus, which a performer needs to handle as carefully as conductors handle Ravel's "Bolero": some suave shimmies, a strut, a few percussive kicks and a touch of the Black Bottom. On top of all this Ms. Channing is very smart. I found myself thinking that someone should have given this woman a talk show years ago. No one did, so let's hope she just goes on talking -- and singing -- anytime, anyplace and everywhere.