



Sunday, November 5, 2006

A chat with Carol Channing

Carol Channing will perform at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido at 2 p.m. Nov. 12. Here are excerpts from my interview with her:

What's the backstory of your name?• My father's wanted a euphonious name to go with Channing. In those days Carol was an unusual name. My father was a newspaperman, the city editor for the Seattle Star. He wanted me to be in show business, and he knew that 13 characters are the most that can fit in a linotype newspaper headline. So I always get my full name in the headlines.

Why aren't you negative or critical of others?• Because I like to look through clean windows. When I'm critical of others, it's like I'm looking through dirty windows.

Your parents were religious, right?• Yes. Dad embraced Christian Science just before I was born — from my mother. He finally became editor in chief for all the Christian Science publications.

When did your career take off?• I got a job in Boston at the Colonial Theatre in the musical "Let's Face It." Eve Arden was in it with Danny Kaye. Danny watched my audition and said, "Oh, go on, hire her; she's built exactly like Eve Arden, and you'll save a mountain on costumes for her as Eve's understudy." So I got the job because they wouldn't have to get a whole new set of costumes for me. They were so good to me. Eve gave me an opportunity to do the show when she got a cold and decided to sit out a matinee. I had a wonderful time.

Was George Burns one of your mentors?• Oh, yes! He was a genius. The least of his talents was performing. George was like Flo Ziegfeld. He taught me how to say a line. He fixed the lights for me, and the orchestration; he had Gracie fit my costumes for my Las Vegas act. He gave me the Marlene Dietrich moves for my act. He was a Renaissance man.

George was born with dyslexia and could never read a book. At school they said he was mentally retarded because he couldn't read. Then George started tap dancing on street corners and found he could bring in money to his mother, who had 11 children.

They didn't know what dyslexia was in those days, so George had to go on animal instincts, and he learned fast how to support his family. He wrote seven books, but he had to dictate them; he never read a book. He had to have everything read to him.