

Well, hello Carol!

Star of Broadway and the screen, Carol Channing is bringing her one-woman act to Springfield on Nov. 18.

By Andrew McGinn

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If 85-year-old Carol Channing ever gets bored between now and 100, she could always try and beat her own run as Dolly Gallagher Levi. But she's anything but bored right now. Channing is a pop culture icon on the go, taking those googly eyes and that nasally rasp on the road with a one-woman retrospective, "The First 80 Years are the Hardest." She'll perform the show, packed with stories and songs, on Nov. 18 in Kuss Auditorium. Channing received a Lifetime Achievement Tony in 1995, and even if she decided then and there to hang it up, no one could have faulted her. Her career has taken her from the stage to "The Muppet Show." And in part because she made it from "Password" to "Super Password," her fame has transcended generations. But her refusal to take a final bow will be her legacy — she's the ultimate trooper. And, unbelievably, she's one who still gets jitters. "I'm always nervous before the show," she confessed. "This could be the audience that just doesn't get it."

Q: At this age, what do you get out of singing "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" for probably the millionth time?

A: You see, it's the audience I've got my mind on. Not me. The audience hasn't been doing it for the millionth time, and I'm singing it for people that felt enough about me to spend their hard-earned money and buy a ticket. You can't think of yourself at a time like that. An audience is an X-ray machine. They know if you're really re-creating an emotion or not. It's no joke. The reason you get paid is for just that.

Q: Have you ever thought about a time when you'd retire?

A: Well, that would be dull, wouldn't it? I mean, really dull. You'd just sit there and get involved in your own little world and — ugh. I can't think of anything worse. Can you imagine how exciting my life is? I'm in one theater after another about every third day.

Q: Any idea the number of times you've stepped onto the stage as Dolly?

A: It was over 5,000 performances, and I never missed a one. I missed a half of one in Kalamazoo. Mr. Merrick (producer David Merrick) called me and said, "If you're going to miss a performance, Kalamazoo is the place to do it." I had ovarian cancer all during the second year of "Hello, Dolly!" on Broadway and then on into the road tour, so I had to keep going back to New York for treatments on weekends.

Q: Ever been interested in doing much drama?

A: It's the basis of good comedy.

Q: Does comedy just come naturally for you?

A: I think some people are built for comedy and some people aren't. I saw "Hello, Dolly!" the movie and I thought I was watching "Medea." I really did. It's the saddest thing I ever saw. And I thought, "Gee whiz, those

lines were funny." Of course, naturally, I'm prejudiced. They didn't want me for the part.

Q: Along those same lines, back when they were casting the movie version of "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," did you want to reprise your stage role?

A: Oh, certainly. I wanted movies, but they didn't want me. Oh, by the way, the "Hello, Dolly!" movie — they lost so much money on it, they still can't afford to take the sets down. Isn't that a tragedy?