

Tootsie pop critic pursues plastic Dolly

By LYNN SLOTKIN

Now that it's all over, I know it would be easier to have an interview with a person suffering from bubonic plague at the corner of Queen and Yonge, than it was to have an interview with Carol Channing in her dressing room at the O'Keefe Centre. Carol Channing was set to play the O'Keefe Centre in 1970, for two weeks, beginning Monday, March 16. On Sunday, March 15 Miss Channing was on an interview show, The Morning After. Her interviewers were Danny Finkleman and Helen Hutchinson. Some of the interview went like this:

Finkleman: "Hi Carol."
 Channing: "Hello, Danny Finkleman and Helen Hutchinson. Let me guess Helen; does Vidal Sassoon do your hair?"
 Hutchinson: "Why yes. Actually he doesn't do it; his top man in Toronto does it."
 Channing: "Yes, I could tell because it has that look."
 Hutchinson: "Tell me Carol, you have boundless energy, and a reputation for never missing a performance. How do you do it?"
 Channing: "Well, Helen, I don't know. Just to drop two names, the Lunts once told me, 'My dear, find something that agrees with you and stick to it.'"
 Hutchinson: "Do you eat anything special?"
 Channing: "I eat everything as long as there's no DDT on it. I have a violent reaction to it. (Note: she travels with her own cook; her own food; and her own water, to ensure she does not consume any food sprayed with DDT.)"

Finkleman: "Yes, but what about never missing performances? How many performances of Hello Dolly did you do?"
 Channing: "Well, I did 1,268 performances. (Note: all of Channing's publicity blurbs say she has done 1,273 performances of Hello Dolly — who can you believe?) How do I do it? I don't know. I guess if I'm sick in bed, and I think of all those people who came all that way, well, I get sicker thinking of them being disappointed, so I do it. I find if you're honest with an audience, they understand. I remember I had what was diagnosed as acute bronchitis, so I asked the audience if they would mind me carrying around a hand 'mike' for the show. They were so understanding."
 Hutchinson: "Well, thanks for coming Carol. Good Luck."

Well, I was entranced, captivated. She was warm and funny, and seemed to be truly concerned with people. I felt an interview with her would be a prize for a project I was doing when I was in first year.

On Monday, March 16 I wrote her a letter explaining I was a theatre student who wanted to interview her for a major project. I also enclosed a Tootsie Roll Pop. (Names are easily forgotten. I hoped the 'pop' would stick in her mind.) For the next two weeks trying to get an interview became my all consuming preoccupation.

I couldn't afford losing the letter and 'pop' in the mail, so I drove to the theatre in between classes on that Monday and delivered them to Burt Jones, the stage door guard.

He was about 55, of medium height, and he wore black horned rimmed glasses that made him look mean. The fact that he already was mean didn't enhance his appearance. For some reason I seemed to bring out the worst in him.

The saying, "It's never as bad as you think it's going to be," just wasn't true in Bert's case. I expected the worst from him and I got it.

I handed him the envelope with the Tootsie Roll Pop inside, and asked him to please give it to Miss Channing.

Bert: "Is this another one of those silly suckers?" (Sometimes I would give them to performers playing the Centre who were especially good, nice or special.)

Me: (I was taken aback for a few minutes, but soon gained what was left of my composure, and said in my best university English) "Uh, yes."

Bert: "Well she's not gonna like this."
 Me: (I couldn't have him think I was silly or stupid or whatever derogatory thing he was thinking of me. I had to impress upon him how important the letter was. I got up the courage and said, "Well this is a request for an interview.")

Bert: (quickly) "Oh she never handles her mail, her husband does all that." (Her husband is Charles Lowe, her manager.)

I couldn't top that so I left, hurt and embarrassed. I was so upset I talked to myself and cursed Bert all the way back to school. It was a bad beginning.

By Thursday, March 19, I had heard nothing. I read in one of the papers that Channing was worried about a future London engagement at the Drury Lane Theatre, so I wrote her a three page letter containing every piece of information I knew about the theatre. Again, maybe she would be curious to know "what I was about."

I was going to see The Knacker's ABC at the St. Lawrence Centre that night, so I decided to go early in the hopes of seeing Channing or Lowe before the show, to ask about the interview, and to deliver the letter.

I got to the stage door of the O'Keefe at 7 p.m. I hoped Bert wasn't on duty; I didn't need any more aggravation. He wasn't; Ed Trochi was. He was tall, with a protruding stomach, about 55, and a nice man. If it was cold outside he would let me stand inside the door.

While I was waiting, Ed came out and told me Channing was already there. She had been at the theatre rehearsing for her one woman show since 11:00 a.m. but her husband hadn't arrived yet.

Finally, at 7:15 p.m. a tall, distinguished man carrying an attache case came down the street. I knew Lowe's face only from pictures in the papers. (They knew how to get a lot of publicity those two.) But when he passed me I didn't say anything for fear of being embarrassed if I was mistaken. It was him, of course, and I knew it the minute he went into the theatre and out of reach. I was depressed again. I went to see The Knacker's ABC and hated it.

When the play was over at 10:30 p.m. I went back to the stage door of the O'Keefe, to deliver the three page letter to Channing. There were about seven people standing outside the door waiting for autographs. They had their pens ready. I had my letter with an identifying Tootsie Roll Pop, on top, ready.

At 10:50 p.m. a cab pulled up. At 11:00 p.m. Channing peered through the glass stage door, saw the cab, and 'charged' out. She was like a streak, almost completely in black, except for her white wig; black boots, black coat, black sunglasses, and black hat with wild swirls of white wig sticking out of it.

She was terribly nearsighted, so much so that when I handed her my letter with the sucker on top, she thought it was a piece of paper and some kind of obscene pen because she said, "I'll sign, but just let me get into the cab first."

Her husband, who was close behind her was babbling something about her catching cold if she didn't get into the cab. She got in on one side, he on the other.

A little elderly lady handed her program to Channing to sign. "Have you a pen?" Channing asked. "Oh no," said the lady rather pitifully. The program was handed back unsigned.

I handed my letter and sucker to Joe Layton, the director, who got into the cab beside Channing. He handed them to her. Then the cab pulled off and was gone.

At the stage door

I asked Ed what time she came on matinee days. He said about 1:30 p.m.

On Saturday, March 22, at 12:30 p.m. I was standing in front of the stage door, my back to it, facing the street, and a parking lot, and surrounded by lots of pollution, waiting. What did I do while standing in front of the stage door, alone? Well, for some strange reason I looked at my toes a lot. I talked to myself trying to justify why I was there; trying to convince myself that I was doing was important, and to stick it out and not quit; and trying to convince myself that Carol Channing would give me an interview; after all she's nice. Just persevere.

I tried to look as inconspicuous as possible. I brought Dante's Inferno to read so that time would pass quicker, and so I would look like I had some purpose there. In any case, it was impossible. Nothing was more conspicuous than a lone person standing at the stage door, talking to herself while trying to read



Ace critic Slotkin keeps smiling

Dante's Inferno. I couldn't even concentrate on the book because my stomach was in a knot because I was worrying about whether Channing would give me an interview or not.

At 1:25 p.m. I saw my grade 13 French teacher crossing the parking lot towards the theatre. I didn't want her to see me. I remembered I wrote her asking her for a letter of recommendation to get into York. She never sent it. What if she saw me and figured this was what I had amounted to; a 21 year old person who had nothing better to do than stand outside stage doors. I kept out of her line of sight as she went up the street to the front of the theatre.

At 1:45 p.m. I deduced Channing and Lowe must already be inside, so I left. At 4 p.m. I was back at the door, this time facing it, waiting for Lowe (Channing never comes out between shows on matinee days, she sleeps).

To relieve some of the boredom and anxiety of waiting, I took a look over my shoulder, and there on the other side of the parking lot, to my horror and embarrassment was my French teacher, sitting in her car, looking at me. I quickly looked back at the door. I think I was really looking for a hole to crawl into and disappear.

Just then four people passed me on their way into the theatre. One of them mumbled to the others, "Look at the stage door Johnnie." I wanted to die. I was alone and nervous and strangers were being cruel, and my French teacher, I was sure, was boring a hole in my back with her gaze.

It took about five minutes before I got up the nerve to look around and see if she was still there. She was, only this time she had moved up to the near side of the parking lot, still staring. Then it dawned on me. She wasn't looking at me; she was looking at the door. She was waiting for Channing. I guessed she was too proud or snobbish or something to wait at the door. In any case she left after 10 minutes, and I gave a huge sigh of relief.

Ed let me stand inside the door at 4:30 p.m. He was nice.

Ed: "Miss Channing doesn't come out between shows, you know?"

Me: "Yes, I know. I'm waiting for her husband to ask for an interview."

Ed: "Oh you may have problems. Anybody but her. She's been rehearsing every day from 10:00 o'clock on."

Me: "Well, I've got to try."

Ed: "Nobody can kill you for that."

Me: (at 5:00 p.m.) "Well I guess he's not coming out. Thanks for letting me stand inside."

He said he was sorry that I was disappointed, but I told him I would try again.

Lotta Dempsey, a writer for The Toronto Star, had a column in the paper titled Be My Guest. The premise was that people would write into her with their dreams of a great day or evening's fun (as long as it was legal) and she (with the help of the Star) would foot the bill. So the person got some free fun, and she got an idea for a column. It developed into something like Queen for a Day).

On Monday, March 23, there in Lotta Dempsey's column was a story of how a 16 year old boy wrote her, asking to meet Carol Channing, a lady he said he idolized for years. Dempsey got him opening night tickets; he went backstage to meet her; he went to the opening night party; and he went to the Variety Club luncheon with her on March 26. I broke my back for a week trying to get an interview, a 15 minute interview, and what happened? Nothing!

That Monday, I wrote Dempsey, told her the situation, asked her to please make an exception and arrange another meeting — a short one — with Channing. I enclosed my phone number and address. By Thursday I heard nothing. Time was running out. The next day was Good Friday which meant no mail, so it looked like I would have to wait at the door again.

I phoned the O'Keefe Centre at 4:45 p.m. on Thursday, trying to find out Channing's rehearsal schedule for the next day, so I'd know when to start my vigil. The lady at the theatre didn't know, but she took my name and telephone number and said she would give the message to Lowe. This looked like my first bit of luck!

From 5 o'clock to 11 o'clock I didn't even go to the bathroom because I might miss the call. A difficult feat since I had the inclination from 6 o'clock on. He didn't call.

On Good Friday, March 27, I was outside the stage door at 9:30 a.m. It was sunny but cold. I forgot to bring a book to read. Because it was cold time seemed to pass slower than usual. Again my stomach was in a knot. I had to get that interview soon, because her last show was the next day.

I looked at my toes and the parking lot. Of course all the while I was reassuring myself that I'd get the interview. It would be against all decency, against all fairness, if she said no.

At 10:15 a.m. Channing's wardrobe mistress, Harriet Beal, came up the street, laden with two shopping bags. I opened the door for her. She flashed a smile and said, "How nice; thank you." A friend.

Then Ed let me stand inside the door, in the warm. Another friend. There was another man, Jules, standing there as well. He was with the moving company that transported the scenery from city to city. In the course of the conversation I told him I wanted an interview with Channing. He said, "These people (Channing and Lowe) are in a world of their own. They're strictly business. They have to be, there's so much of their money tied up in the show."

Ed didn't know what time Channing was due at the theatre. At 11 a.m. he took pity on me, I guess, and asked Miss Beal what time Miss Channing was coming. Not 11:30, not 12 but 2 o'clock she was due to arrive. My life was slipping away. I couldn't go home because by the time I would get there I'd have to come back. I left to find a drug store that was open so I could buy my lunch — chocolate covered peanuts. (This was my pre-Baby Ruth period.) No store was open so I went back to the car to talk to myself in peace, and to wait for death by starvation.

At 12:45 p.m. the familiar knots and butterflies came back to my stomach. I went back to stand by the stage door. At 1:15 p.m. I saw an apparition striding up the street. It looked like the Colossus of Rhodes in black knee-high boots, if the Colossus



Carol Channing only waved good-bye

were ever to stride anywhere in knee-high boots. It wore a black jacket, wheat coloured jeans, sun glasses and great swirls of whitish hair were flying all over the place. It was accompanied by the son of the Colossus of Rhodes. He was tall, with curly blond hair; he wore glasses and he looked like a chicken. He was carrying a tin pan covered by tin foil — I guessed it was food, and I surmised it was Channing and her son Channing Lowe. (Confusing isn't it? I'll refer to Sonny as Chan.)

Do you want to stand here for the rest of your life? Take a chance; hand her a sucker, wish her a good show and see what happens, and don't forget to ask her for an interview I thought.

I opened the door for them; gave her a sucker; and wished her a good show. The famous Channing voice said, "Why thank you." That was it. She gave no sign of recognition for the sucker. Damn. I quickly said, "Miss Channing, may I please have a 15 minute interview whenever it's convenient?" Then she said as she rushed inside, "You'll have to go through the theatre." I asked, "Well who do I see?" She said, "Jack Karr"; then she was gone.

It was Good Friday (what a laugh). Karr wasn't at the theatre, but Ed said he would be there the next day at noon.

By Friday night I was beginning to have my doubts about getting the interview, but I couldn't give up, after coming this far, which come to think of it wasn't very far at all. At 11 p.m. I was at the door again. All the same people came out of the theatre that had been coming out for the last two weeks. They still looked at me as if I was crazy. I just didn't have the energy to care what they thought at that point. Several people had gathered as well. I guessed they wanted Channing's autograph.

Harriet Beal came out. "You're still waiting here?" she asked. "Afraid so." I said. Then she asked, "Well what are you waiting for?" "I want to interview Miss Channing for a project I have to do." Then she said, "Oh, well good luck."

A cab pulled up outside the stage door. Channing, holding a jar of chicken soup (is there any other kind), Chan holding the same tin pan, and her husband holding his attache case, were all huddled inside the glass stage door, looking out; waiting for the cab to stop. The small crowd outside moved closer to the door so they could see Channing and ask for her autograph. I positioned myself near the cab so I could ask for the interview.

Then like a shot all three burst out of the door and headed for the cab. First came Chan with the left-over, then Channing with the soup; a girl asked her if she would sign a piece of paper. Channing said, "Sure I will." But then Lowe, with his attache case, came racing to the cab saying that there was no time and "doctor's orders, no autographs, doctor's orders." Channing was at the cab now, and I was just about to ask her about an

interview when the girl pushed by me, shoved a program into Channing's hands; she signed quickly, handed the program back; the door of the cab was shut; and the cab raced off — right into the bumper of the car in front of it. The cab shot back, and then forward on an angle, (this time completely missing the car in front).

The next day, Saturday, March 28 I was at the reception office of the theatre at 11:30 a.m. I learned that Jack Karr was not there and no one knew when he would be. I kept on trying though.

Her director, Joe Layton, praised her to the skies, in an article in The Star, saying that she was a great comedienne — just one look could break up an audience. She worked especially hard to learn her routines, which she memorized by rote (can you believe it you Stanislavsky students, BY ROTE!). He also said she was warm and generous and kind, and boy I thought my chances were still kind of good for an interview.

I decided to prepare myself for a possible meeting by seeing the last matinee. I was also curious to see if she was for real, or just a puppet whose strings were worked by a man carrying an attache case.

My attitude was one of ignored hostility, that is to say, I tried to ignore the fact that I went into the theatre expecting the worst. But the show was fascinating. She had the audience eating out of her hand. She made every line, every gesture seem like she was doing it for the first time, just for the audience. It wasn't the material that was so funny — it was the way it was delivered, with a wide-eyed innocence (a laugh since she's been married three times) a sort of dumbness. No wonder the audience laughed; she represented somebody stupider than they were; stupid yet loveable.

What an experience, I realize now that bewigged, stupid, rather talentless, insensitive woman just wasn't worth it. It took time but I eventually saw the light. Those people who passed me by, who were nice, were ten times what Channing could ever hope to be.

Oh well! But listen do you know any avid theatregoer, suffering from bubonic plague at the corner of Queen and Yonge Streets who would like to be interviewed by a 'sweet young thing' who gives out Tootsie Roll Pops?

But she did. I figured I had a chance. It just couldn't be a coincidence that all these good signs were looking me in the face. There was hope for me yet.

At 4 p.m. after the show, I went to the stage door to try and speak to Lowe, again. Harriet Beal came out and said to me, "I'm going to get you a bed. Didn't you see her yesterday?" I said, "Yes, but she charged into a cab before I had a chance to ask her." She gave me a sympathetic pained look. I gave her a sucker because she was so nice.

Finally Mr. Lowe came out, carrying his attache case, walking quickly.

Me: "Mr. Lowe, (He looked at me and smiled. Another good sign!) Could I please have a 15 minute interview with Miss Channing?"

Lowe: (almost to himself) "I never got the message. Well, try Jack Karr, he has all that information". (No I don't know what he meant by 'that information!')

Me: "I've already tried. He's not in today. Could I have an interview with you?"

Lowe: "No I'm afraid not. I have to make a long distance call."

Me: "Could I interview Miss Channing at 7:30?"

Lowe: "Oh my God, no not before a show. I'm very sorry." Then he was off.

I figured that maybe if I came back that evening before he went in, he would see how perseverant I was and give me a break and give me an interview. I was weakening. I set out to get a Channing interview, but I'd settle for a Lowe interview. (No pun intended)

I was back at the door at 7:15 p.m. It was freezing out. A tall man who looked like Ray Bolger came out and the Bolger nose asked me why I didn't stand inside the door where it was warmer. I said the guard, (Bert) might get into trouble. In actual fact I would have — remember Bert and I aren't 'close'. But even he had his kinder moments. At 7:20 p.m. he came outside to put a bottle of some amber stuff in his car. On the way he said, "Miss Channing's already in." I said, "I know. Thank you anyway."

At 7:25 p.m. I was nearly run over by a Red Cross 'lady' driving a Volkswagen. I was on the sidewalk outside the stage door, facing the street, standing beside a No Parking sign, looking at my toes, as usual. Suddenly I saw two headlights attached to a Volkswagen coming up the sidewalk toward me. I decided I had better move to the left quickly or I'd be impaled on the blunt hood for sure.

At 7:35 p.m. I looked through the stage door and saw Charles Lowe walking around back stage. I gave up. I wasn't going to get the interview. So I did what any 'normal crazy' person would have done, after trying and hoping so hard; I cried. I cried because I was freezing, frustrated, humiliated and broken. I tried pulling myself together by drying my face and calming down and I almost succeeded. But then I thought about how Channing had said that if you dream of something hard enough and wish for something badly enough, you would get it; then I thought about all that 'bunk' about God helping those who helped themselves and I cried some more because it was all false. What really was true was that if your success depended on someone saying 'yes' or 'no' it really didn't matter if you were perseverant or hard working or innovative or well qualified. What really mattered was whether you had luck and were the right colour, race, creed, nationality, height, weight, age etc.

I seemed to have been a glutton for punishment. There was no chance for an interview, but I just had to make some contact with that woman. Perhaps I just wanted her to notice me. I wrote her a letter wishing her luck, and saying I hoped we could have an interview some other time. I would also give her a Tootsie Roll Pop. (she would have to know who I was after she saw it, what with all the others I had given her.)

At 11:00 o'clock I was back to give it, and a sucker, to her. There were about fifteen people at the door. I saw Jules and told him I had no luck. He said, "I wouldn't do what you did. Nobody's worth it." I told him I felt she was. Then Channing came to the door, took a look and went back into the theatre. The 'Ray Bolger look-alike' came over to me.

He: "Are you still here?"

Me: "Well I went home for a little while."

He: "What are you waiting for?"

Me: "Well I've been waiting for Miss Channing to ask her if I could have an interview, but now I'm waiting to say good-bye". (I gave him a sucker and thanked him for being so nice.)

He: "This is on the Q.T. but she's going out the side door."

Me: "Oh, you're kidding!"

He: "No I wouldn't lie to you. She's going out the side door."

Sure enough a cab was rounding the corner. I raced after it and saw it pull into the driveway near the side door. Channing, still in black, but no sun glasses, got in. I handed the letter and sucker to Lowe. He said, "Aren't you sweet?". Then he handed them to Miss Channing and said something to her. Then she did something she'd never done in the two weeks; she turned toward me and smiled and waved. I returned the smile and wave. I followed the cab out the drive way. She was still waving, my letter in her hand. A few more waves and she was gone. Between you and me, I think her husband told her to wave.

What an experience, I realize now that bewigged, stupid, rather talentless, insensitive woman just wasn't worth it. It took time but I eventually saw the light. Those people who passed me by, who were nice, were ten times what Channing could ever hope to be.

Oh well! But listen do you know any avid theatregoer, suffering from bubonic plague at the corner of Queen and Yonge Streets who would like to be interviewed by a 'sweet young thing' who gives out Tootsie Roll Pops?