

Fans meet stars at store opening

By Victoria Diaz
special writer

At the grand opening of Gaynor's Discount Health & Beauty Aids store in Farmington Hills' Orchard Place Mall Saturday, hundreds of local fans got a chance to meet and talk with two of the number one "soap" in the Detroit area.

James Mitchell and Candice Earley, who play Palmer and Donna Cortlandt on ABC's "All My Children," signed autographs and fielded questions from the large crowd at Gaynor's for much of the morning and afternoon. After a bit of encouragement from Mitchell, Earley (who began her career as a coloratura soprano) also sang a couple of songs for the enthusiastic, predominantly female audience.

Later, the two took time out to lunch at Confetti's in West Bloomfield and to talk more about themselves and the daytime drama on which they appear.

Earley, who grew up in Lawton, Okla., looks, in person, like the little-girl-next-door-on-her-way-to-becoming-a-glamorous-actress. She nibbled on a salad and declared she couldn't remember ever having wanted to do anything except perform. "I was a ham to begin with," she said. "I don't think there was any hope for me to do anything else."

AFTER STUDYING drama at Trinity University in San Antonio for a year, she dropped out to marry the director of one of the plays she had appeared in there. The couple, who were later divorced, moved to San Francisco in 1969, where, shortly afterward, Earley launched her career with an appearance in "Hair."

Eventually, she went on to perform with the touring company of "Jesus Christ, Superstar" and the New York production of "Grease." The casting director of "All My Children" spotted her in a Manhattan restaurant one day, wondered who the "well-scrubbed, fresh-faced, Midwestern-type" was and, a few months later, Earley became, in her words, "daytime's first hooker."

"Singing is my first love, though," emphasized Earley. "And I'd go crazy if I couldn't sing. I'm just really fortunate that they incorporated my music into the character I play on the soap."

Mitchell, recently chosen "Favorite Villain" and "King of the Crumbs" by soap fans in a contest sponsored by Daytime Digest, began his career in the 40s as a dancer with the American Ballet Theatre. He performed in several Broadway musicals, appeared in the film version of "Oklahoma" (in which he danced the part of Curly in the famous "dream sequence"), and acted in "The Edge of Night" and "Where the Heart Is" before joining the cast of "All My Children."

His most recent film was "The Turning Point." A native Californian, Mitchell



ABC's "All My Children" stars Candice Earley and James Mitchell sign autographs.

all lives in Manhattan, but still maintains a home in the Los Angeles area. When he has the time, he teaches dance and movement for actors in the theatre department at Yale University and Juilliard.

"THERE ISN'T much spare time, though," Mitchell said Saturday, between bites of chicken and pasta and sips of white wine. "Working on the show takes up a great deal of my time. In fact, when I do the show, my whole day is shot."

Earley and Mitchell said their work day on the set of "All My Children" usually runs close to twelve hours. They do one show per day and generally take about two weeks in advance. "People think we walk in at 12:45 in the afternoon, sign our make-up on, and leave the building at 2:15 after we've taped the show," said Earley.

"The first call is at 7:30 in the morning," said Mitchell. "And you never get called any later than 8. The director has his entire show blocked out on paper and we do the first blocking out in a bare room with no props. (Blocking out has to do with the movement of the actors from place to place during a performance). Then, about 10, we go down stairs and start camera blocking, so that the cameramen can get their assignments. We break for lunch about 12:30, then have a dress rehearsal, then begin taping at about 4 or 4:30. And taping takes maybe 2 1/2 to three hours, depending on the complexity of the show, how many lines are blown, things like that."

Earley and Mitchell said they usually receive each script about two weeks before taping and that radical last-minute changes in the script are extremely rare.

When asked what had been their all-time favorite moment on the show, both answered, "our wedding night." "I got to rip her negligee to shreds," added Mitchell.

"And I loved it," laughed Earley.

WHAT'S IN store for "All My Children"? Will Silver manage to sabotage Erica's career? Will Greg recover from his accident? Will Palmer and Donna find happiness in the little town of Pine Valley? Will Opal make the best-dressed list?

Earley and Mitchell didn't say. They did, however, reveal that one of America's most popular comedienne plans to visit Pine Valley in mid-April. "Carol Burnett is going to play one of Myrtle's old friends from her 'crazy days,'" said Earley. "The character she's going to play will request a song from me. It's called 'Daddy's Little Girl.'"

After lunch, it was back to Gaynor's (via chauffeur-driven limousine) and more autographs to sign, more questions to answer, more smiling to do, more clever patter to exchange with faithful fans.

"I've watched the show for years," said Concepcion Ederle of West Bloomfield, standing in line, along with about 200 others, for an autograph and a chance to see the two stars up close. "It gives you a break from your own problems. And my twenty-year-old son, who lives in Anchorage, Alaska, he watches it every day."

"My boys, 17 and 18, watch the show, too," said Jeanette Nussio of Bloomfield Hills. "I tape it every afternoon so they can watch it when they get home later in the day."

Cynthia Sherman, a resident of a group home in Oak Park, said she never misses a show. "And Palmer and Donna — they're my favorite characters," she said.

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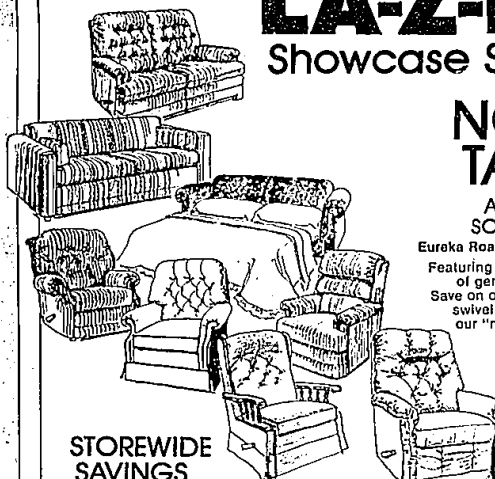
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