

# Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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(C)7D

## Comedy star faces up to fun



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

By Ethel Simmons  
staff writer

**G**ETTING JO ANNE Worley to mug for the camera is easy. You don't even have to ask. The photographer, who wanted to shoot a variety of facial expressions, began snapping close-ups of Worley over the luncheon table at the Midtown Cafe in Birmingham.

Immediately, she went into an act, making funny faces and clowning around — even pulling the turtleneck of her black long-sleeved top up over her head. Then she turned back to the interview at hand, remaining energetic but no longer "on stage."

In person, Worley looks like the character she brought to fame on "Laugh-In," her huge, dark eyes accentuated by thick fake eyelashes and lots of eyeliner. She has a wide grin and tousled black hair.

She's tall — five-foot-eight and a-half, she said — but slimmer than expected. Worley doesn't come across as big and brassy, which is the way she appeared on "Laugh-In."

She claims, however, that on "Laugh-In" she played herself. And Worley said she has to watch out when doing other roles, so she doesn't play her "Laugh-In" part instead of the character in the script.

"I JUST DID me, bigger, quicker," she said of "Laugh-In." "They gave me the jokes that weren't too good. I would laugh after, and punctuate it."

Over the Midtown lunch, Worley



Besides her loud voice, Worley is known for her wild facial expressions that accompany comedy lines.



described the character she portrays in Neil Simon's all-female version of "The Odd Couple." The play, in which she co-stars with Sandy Dennis, is in its first week at the Birmingham Theatre.

Last week, after lunch she would head for rehearsal at the theater just a few doors away from the restaurant. Shiri Harris, public relations director for the theater, said that tickets "were going like gangbusters." A potent combination Worley, Dennis and Simon.

Worley is the Olive Madison half of "The Odd Couple." Olive, instead of Oscar, "produces a news program, as opposed to being a sports-writer," she said. Dennis is Florence (instead of Felix) Unger, "a separated housewife."

Unlike Oscar, Olive isn't really a slob. "She's sloppy. Her mind is into other things," Worley explained. In contrast to the character she plays, Worley said, "I'm Virgo with Taurus rising. I am by nature meticulous." Her husband, actor and songwriter Roger Perry, also is a Taurus. "Sandy is Taurus. That's why we get along," she said.

**DURING THE interview,** Worley was as pleased to talk about her husband as about herself. She said

they first met when she came to Los Angeles as young actress. He was playing Ensign Pulver in "Mr. Roberts."

She said when he was on stage, "There was a light around him, and there was no spotlight on him." She saw him in rehearsal and said to a friend, "Let's go see that guy with a light around him."

Was that light his "aura?" She said that must have been it, although she didn't know the word then, and she was the only one who saw the light.

"I knew I loved him," is her recollection of the feelings she first had for him. She only knew him casually, however, and they didn't really get together until years later.

In the meantime, they had a mutual friend, a songwriter whom Perry came to visit in New York, when she was working there at nightclubs in Greenwich Village.

**WORLEY SAID** she once told Perry, who then was married to another woman, "When you dump her give me a call." By the time she joined the cast of "Laugh-In," Perry had been divorced for several years.

She was in Las Vegas appearing

at the Sands with Dick Rowan and Dan Martin when he called. "Our first date was with Gypsy Rose Lee at a fundraiser in Los Angeles," she said.

Worley and Perry lived together for six years before being married. They have celebrated their 11th wedding anniversary. "I think it's good we didn't get together the first time round. Neither of us was ready for a relationship," she said.

The couple has shared the stage for many productions. "We usually do shows together," she said. Among these are "They're Playing Our Song," "Same Time Next Year," "Gypsy" and "Lovers and Other Strangers."

On television, Perry was one of the principals on "The Facts of Life" and is playing one of Jane Wyman's counselors on "Falcon Crest." As a songwriter, he has written music to Shaw's "You Never Can Tell," to be a musical version in Los Angeles. He also is involved in a staged reading of "Candidate."

Worley said her husband is coming to Birmingham in the middle of the run of "The Odd Couple."

Their home is at Toluca Lake in

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## Worley, Dennis paired hilariously in 'Odd Couple'

Performances of the female version of "The Odd Couple" by Neil Simon continue through Sunday, Nov. 30, at the Birmingham Theatre. For ticket information call the box office at 644-3533.

By Barbara Michals  
special writer

"The Odd Couple" has been synonymous for a mismatched twosome since the characters of Felix Unger and Oscar Madison debuted 21 years ago in the popular Neil Simon comedy. As currently performed at the Birmingham Theatre, Simon's new female version of the play is still hilarious.



Barbara Michals

The excellent cast stars Sandy Dennis and Jo Anne Worley, two fine actresses who work hard to ensure that their characters not only survive the gender transformation but are memorable in their own right as well.

Felix has become Florence (Dennis), a lovable neurotic obsessed with cleaning and hypochondria. Oscar is now Olive (Worley), the good-

natured slob who offers to share her apartment after Florence's marriage breaks up.

Much of the original witty repartee remains intact, while some of the gags have been slightly altered and others completely rewritten.

**THE MALE VERSIONS** of the characters remain inherently funnier. A woman in an apron com-

plaining she's slaved all day over a not stove seems all too commonplace compared to a man doing so. The women's weekly Trivial Pursuit game does not hold the same ritualistic significance as the men's poker game.

Nevertheless, the chemistry between Dennis and Worley works well and earns them plenty of laughs. Dennis, who has always excelled at playing neurotic women, does an impeccable job with facial expressions, voice inflections and comic timing.

Worley, the effervescent comedienne of television's "Laugh-In," still bubbles as she prods and cajoles the whiny Florence to make the most of her new single state. Worley adds a lot of warmth to the role. Olive is

no so much a slob as she is a woman with other priorities than the traditional concerns of housewifery.

The stars are backed up by strong supporting players. Lola Powers, Alice White, Julie Nesbitt and Jennie Ventris play the zany characters around the Trivial Pursuit board.

Kirk Thornton and Robert Hyman are wonderful as Manolo and Jesus Costazuela, Olive's Spanish neighbors. Their grappings with the complexities of English are predictable but still outrageously funny due to good timing and delivery.

**UNDER DIRECTOR** Philip Cusack, the laughs flow with perfect pacing, and entire production is pleasingly slick.

While Worley's bodily colored casual clothes are well-suited to Olive's personality, Dennis' loose, flowing multiple layers are far too laid-back for the fastidious Florence.

The inevitable clash of two mismatched individuals trying to live together seems even more universal than the battle of the sexes. One can imagine infinite variations on "The Odd Couple" in years to come.

Barbara Michals teaches high school English and journalism in Southfield. A theater critic for the last 12 years, she is an inveterate playgoer who regularly catches up on all the New York productions.

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