

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons



Thursday, January 10, 1991 (16)

(D3C)

Her own style

Actress plays role a different way

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

LYNN WINTERSTELLER is not Judy Holliday, but she doesn't claim to be.

The tall (5 foot 10), slender actress with raven hair stars as Ella Peterson in "Bells Are Ringing," a role Holliday made famous on Broadway in the musical "Bells Are Ringing" at the Birmingham Theatre.

"The show was written exclusively for her," the pretty and charming Wintersteller said.

"I saw the movie (Holliday also starred in the movie version) once. The director asked me to see it."

But when Wintersteller went into rehearsal for the show, and began doing a Holliday-style characterization, the director said that was not what was expected of her. So she developed her own interpretation.

WINTERSTELLER HAS starred on Broadway in "Annie" and has appeared off-Broadway in "Gifts of the Magi," "Nunsense" and "Closer Than Ever."

"I'm known as the off-Broadway queen, I think."

In "Closer Than Ever," with songs by Richard Maltby and David Shire, she played opposite Tyne Daly and Debby Boone. Wintersteller was nominated for the 1990 New York Drama Desk award.

given by the critics for her work in the musical.

"She's my inspiration," Wintersteller said.

teller said of Daly. "I saw her perform as Mama Rose in the 'Gypsy' port Ethel Merman made famous, and Tyne made it her own."

THIS HELPED Wintersteller discover the strength to do her own thing as Ella Peterson in "Bells Are Ringing."

"Everybody thinks of Judy Holliday, but the director said, 'No. You have to find parts of you.' On the third day of rehearsal I thought of Tyne Daly who had the courage to make Mama Rose her own."

Wintersteller certainly doesn't bear any resemblance to the blonde, buxom Judy Holliday.

"Because of my height and carriage, I come across as more graceful. I'm not a typical dumb blonde. There's not a real ditzy edge to me," such as Holliday had.

Wintersteller said she found a helpful edge instead for her character, who works at a telephone answering service and gets involved in the lives of her customers.

She also acknowledges that Holliday had a quirky voice and that hers is quite different. Some critics have been unhappy that she hasn't appeared more like Holliday in the role, she said.

That's valid — to be zanier."

THE CURRENT production of "Bells Are Ringing" originated at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, Conn., and is presented jointly, on the local scene,

by the Goodspeed and the Birmingham Theatre. The musical runs through Sunday, Jan. 27.

"It has the same production, sets and cast."

Because the Birmingham stage is bigger, the sets look bigger here and the skies at the top are visible. At the Goodspeed, "We never saw them."

METROPOLITAN, DETROITERS may remember Wintersteller from her appearance at the Fisher Theatre in the role of Grace Farrell, who is Daddy Warbucks' secretary in the musical "Annie." The show was in Detroit almost a full year.

Raised in Sandusky, Ohio, Wintersteller comes from a family of three boys and three girls.

At 13, she worked in summer theater there. She also spent two summers performing in shows at Cedar Point amusement park in her hometown in the 1970s.

She studied acting at the University of Maryland and worked around the Washington, D.C., area, understudying the actress who originated the role of Grace in "Annie," whom she had understudied in the musical "Charles and Algeon."

Both shows are by Charles Straus.

SHE ALSO was understudy on the national tour of "Annie" before moving into the role of Grace on the national tour, then on to Broadway.

"It was a Cinderella story. You don't hit New York that fast. I had an angel on my shoulder."

She thoroughly enjoyed the role of Grace.

"I played off and on in about four different casts for four years. It was a Carole Lombard-type role, with beautiful '30s costumes. She was an elegant lady, and quirky. The charm of 'Annie' was the kids."

WINTERSTELLER is married to actor Mark McGrath, who played the Pharaoh (the Elvis Presley-like character) in "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" at the Birmingham Theatre about five years ago.

He also did a revival of "Little Me" with Jimmy Coco and was in "Three Musketeers" on Broadway.

David Shire, who wrote the music for "Baby" (with lyrics by Richard Maltby), is developing a one-woman show for Wintersteller.

"David and I respect each other a lot. He has written a lot. He wrote a lot of film songs."

WINTERSTELLER FIRST met Mark McGrath when both were appearing in "Baby."

"We played husband and wife but didn't start our relationship until after the show was over. We've been together seven years, and have been married two years. He's from Cincinnati, but we met in New York. We had a lot of things in common."



STEPHEN CANTRELL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

In "Bells Are Ringing," Lynne Wintersteller is a helpful Ella Peterson instead of a ditzy one.

Good acting and directing help focus intimate drama

Performances of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of "What I Did Last Summer" continue through Sunday, Jan. 27, on the Oakland University campus in Rochester Hills. For ticket information, call the box office at 377-3300.

A.R. Gurney Jr.'s play "What I Did Last Summer," like his best-known hit "The Dining Room," mocks the hypocrites and emotional constipation of his own kind — the proper WASP, boarding school and country club set.

In "Last Summer," Gurney's semi-autobiographical, coming-of-age play, he records his first insights into the foibles of class, insights he learned under the tutelage of a straight-talking woman he met when he was 14 and summering on the Canadian shore of Lake Erie, where all the moored people of Buffalo

gathered.

The first-acting and astute directing of Meadow Brook Theatre's "Last Summer" largely overcomes the feeling that Gurney's intimate, six-character play seems a bit awash on the big, broad Meadow Brook stage.

"LAST SUMMER" calls for a set as intimate as the play.

Miles of latticed wood and multilevel decking on the set don't downsize the broad stage and make it the simple and honey playing-space for which the play seems designed.

Despite drawbacks in the set, director Terence Kilburn captures the ideal minimalist staging when he can, with a couple of benches that double as a cat and direct focus to the characters and the role of imagination in theater.

In "Last Summer," the main character, Cathie, is an insolent, big-



Cathie Breidenbach

mouthed 14-year-old, energetically played by John Seibert.

When teenagers grow critical of their parents' worlds, they either rebel with energy and a torrent of words — a rebellion that can be entertaining provided you are not the parent under attack — or they grow sullen and taciturn and their rebellion lacks both animation and the liberating relief of noise and humor.

Kilburn wisely opts for the first rebellious teenager scenario. He has Cathie charge around stage full of agitated adolescent energy and

speaks his feisty truths in a tone that is naughty rather than nasty.

Seibert strikes just the right balance as a spirited, boyish rebel but never a mean one.

STAR OF the Meadow Brook production, and the audience favorite, is Jeanne Arnold as Anna Trumbull, the part Indian, nonchalant older woman who opens Cathie's eyes. Anna has made a career out of championing individualism, ridiculing presumption and living with a passionate disregard for protocol.

Anna speaks truth about every-

thing from the robber barons of Buffalo to the class conspiracy of grass, which she claims was invented for the English aristocracy to play games on.

Arnold takes a sympathetic role and makes it richly her own.

DURING THE 1945 summer of Cathie's temporary defection from hallowed WASP ways, his father is off fighting in the Pacific. His mother, his sister and he are spending the summer at their cottage.

Jane Lowry is sympathetic as Grace, Cathie's harried mother.

Grace may be a bit reserved, excessively careful and proper — all the characteristics that make WASPiness the brunt of jokes. But darn it, she is a genuinely nice, caring woman, and she carries off, with grace befitting her name, the wife challenges of parenting two teenagers alone.

Alexander Webb as Cathie's Canadian buddy shapes his vowels

into a believable Canadian accent and voices his resentments against American presumptions.

Shirley Ann Kaladjan as his friend Benny and Trace Lyn Thomas as his sister Elsie emerge as more than mere foils, giving background to Cathie's story. They are individual characters of their own.

GURNEY'S DIALOGUE thrusts and parries with pointed sarcasm, but his barbs make only flesh wounds.

His play succeeds in being witty, yet kind and gentle. Like the born and bred WASP he is, Gurney spares the audience uncontrolled emotion and indulgent excesses. He keeps his balance, disarms us with humor and succeeds in making his point.

Cathie Breidenbach of West Bloomfield teaches college writing classes and works as a freelance writer.

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