

Carleton Carpenter recalls MGM days

By ETHEL SIMMONS

When Carleton Carpenter was a young contract player at MGM, he and Debbie Reynolds sang a song together, "Aba Daba Honeymoon," about a couple of loving chimpanzees. The song, released from the sound track of their film "Two Weeks With Love," was a sensational hit, which earned them a gold record. Later they collaborated on "Row, Row, Row" for another gold record. Carpenter and Debbie still get together, he said, to sing "Aba Daba Honeymoon" at Hollywood benefits. "When we're 130, we'll come out on crutches, still singing that monkey song," he said with a laugh. The tall, slender actor with close-cut hair and gentle eyes still looks a lot like the younger he was in his early movie-making days.

HE DOESN'T mind being remembered for such a "goody thing" as the novelty song, Carpenter said. Interviewed at Meadow Brook Theatre, where he opens tonight in "Arsenic and Old Lace," he compared his own claim to fame with that of Meadow Brook's Artistic Director Terence Kilburn, who was a child actor and played Tiny Tim in the movies.

"Terry will always be Tiny Tim," Carpenter said.

Always stagestruck, Carleton Carpenter fell in love at the age of two with an actress who used to stay with his family in Bennington, Vt., when the season ended.

He started in show business at the age of four singing "When You and I Were Young, Maggie," a song he coincidentally did 20 years later.

He toured as a magician all over New England when he was nine and appeared in two Broadway shows before he was out of high school.

Carpenter went on to Hollywood where

ing a small part in "Lost Boundaries." He calls it "a super film" about a black family that passed for white. The Museum of Modern Art has a print.

He arrived on the MGM lot at the time there was a schism in the studio between founder Louis B. Mayer and his successor Dore Schary.

THE FIRST movie set he was on for "Annie Get Your Gun," the movie musical in which Betty Hutton replaced Judy Garland, who was originally scheduled to star in the film.

When Carpenter went to the movies to see Judy Garland in "In the Good Old Summertime," he recalled, "I had my contract in my pocket."

He was cast in Miss Garland's last film, "Summer Stock."

"I had an earlobe and elbow in every other shot," he said.

Besides performing in more than 16 major motion pictures, Carpenter has been starred or featured in more than 20 Broadway shows. In the last five or six years, what he has enjoyed most is the work he has done off-off Broadway.

In 1972, he performed in a Playwrights Workshop production of "Rocky Road" for which he did not receive any salary.

DOING TV commercials is one way to pay the bills, to afford the luxury of indulging in creative stage work. Carpenter is the off-camera voice that urges you to "munch a bunch of Fritos."

He also was spokesman for Purina Dog Chow for a long time. The actor knew Meadow Brook's Terry Kilburn in California and had to turn down an earlier opportunity to appear in a production on the Oakland University campus near Rochester.

"I love it here. It's a heaven experience," he said.

"You wouldn't believe the set they've done. You could move into it. It's super professional work, more than you

"Arsenic and Old Lace," the comedy classic by Joseph Kesselring, is about two little old ladies who murder nice gentlemen boarders to free them from suffering any unhappiness.

Carpenter stars as Mortimer, the ladies' nephew, who is the only one in the family or household who is not a little crazy.

"He's sane enough to tie everything together," Carpenter said. Cary Grant played Mortimer in the movie version of the Broadway hit.

MORTIMER'S AUNTS are played by Jean Barker as Abby and Jeanne Arnold as Martha. Jean Barker is short and round.

"She was born in Josephine Hall's body—that's Terry's line," Carpenter said.

"Arsenic and Old Lace" is sold out for its run through Feb. 22. An extra matinee has been added for Feb. 17, however.

"It's a lovely cast," Carpenter said. He has worked with Jeanne Arnold, who frequently stars at Meadow Brook, in Theatre East in California.

"Jeanne Arnold is fun," he said. Of Jean Barker's role in the play, he said, "She's dear in it."

Besides his stage work, Carpenter has pursued a writing career that began with writing short stories for magazines. In 1972, he started writing mystery novels and has had many of them published.

He also has written a musical, "Twofers," with two other writers, and is "step into the second act" of a show, "SRO," which stands for "Single Room Occupant," which he says he is writing with Geraldine Fitzgerald in mind.



Carleton Carpenter has come a long way since those early days under contract at MGM, but people still remember him for that "goody song," "Aba Daba Honeymoon." (Staff photo by Stephen Cantrell)

CARPENTER'S NEWEST movie is "Graduation" with Farley Granger. The thriller, which has not been released yet, was shot in New Jersey. He appears in the early section of the film, playing a 1945-style emcee at a high school party.

Last December, Carpenter appeared at Stratford in Dickens' "Christmas Carol" in which he played two female characters, a tradition in English pantomime.

During 1980, he also played one of the two stepsisters in "Cinderella" of the St. Louis Municipal Opera. Last year was, he said, "The year of the drag!" which he says he is writing with Geraldine Fitzgerald in mind.

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