

Carol and Dolly Together Again

By Steve Warren

At least two things are sacred to Carol Channing: the Christian Science faith she was raised in and *Hello, Dolly!* By the end of our recent 30-minute conversation she must have felt she'd fought the Devil on both fronts. But who won?

We didn't disagree about *Hello, Dolly!* I'm almost as enthusiastic as she is about the 30th anniversary production. With Channing reprising her Tony-winning (beating Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl*) role for a two-year international tour, it's like traveling by time machine to a pivotal moment in musical theater history.

But once I'd upset her by questioning her church's attitude toward gays and lesbians, her guard was up and she misinterpreted my most innocent questions. Troupier that she is, she managed to wrap things up on a friendly, hospitable note, but not before telling me it was "the most down interview" she had ever given.

It could have been the standard Carol Channing interview, but I've done that before — about the drama/dance major at Bennington College who signed with legendary agent Abe Lastfogel; was spotted by author Anita Loos in the revue "Lend an Ear" and chosen to personify her Lorelei Lee in the musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, but would lose the role in the film version to Marilyn Monroe; affirmed her place in history with *Dolly*, which she's *schlepped* all over America and to London several times, racking up more than 4,000 performances in the title role without ever missing a show.

I wouldn't have raised the gay issue if I didn't believe Channing to be totally without prejudice, but I verified it by taking her back to *Dolly's* opening in 1964: "It was five years before Stonewall and the start of the modern gay and lesbian movement. But you were in the theater. You must have known you could go out for coffee after the show with certain dancers and hairdressers without having to defend your virtue."

She laughed and agreed, so I pressed on, asking if she remembered when she first became aware of gay people.

"I was always in the dance world — ballet," she began, then switched to another tack: "I think it's like racial prejudice. When did you first become aware of East Indians? Jews? You're not aware of them. You're aware of individuals ... Everybody meets a *person*. They judge a person by who he is. You either like them or you don't like them. You go toward him or away from him."

That's the way it should be, of course, and the way it is to a great extent in the world of the theater, where Channing has spent most of her 70-plus years. She recently declined to tell Larry King



Carol Channing and *Hello, Dolly!* composer Jerry Herman. The new *Hello, Dolly!* tour will be in Charlotte in late March. Channing has performed the show over 4,000 times without missing a performance.

her age because, she said, Christian Scientists don't believe in birthdays.

The daughter of a Christian Science lecturer and teacher, Channing talks about her religion enough that it seems fair to question her about it. "How did you reconcile your own acceptance of gay people with your church's rejection of us?"

The unflappable legend flapped. "That's not true! I know two (Christian Science) practitioners who are treating AIDS patients and the first thing they do is give them a big hug because that's what they need."

I explained that however she and other admirable individuals may behave, official church doctrine was cited as the reason the Christian Science *Monitor* fired a woman for being a lesbian several years ago.

"I don't see how they can call themselves

Christian Scientists (if they discriminate)," Channing replied. "It's not in any of Mrs. Eddy's writings." (Mary Baker Eddy founded the Christian Science Church.)

Condemnation of homosexuals is not in any of Jesus's writings either, but that doesn't stop a lot of so-called Christians from discriminating.

It's ironic that Channing told me, in discussing the character of Dolly Gallagher Levi, "People who boss people around and matchmake and tell people what to do don't think they are funny. I think she's hilarious."

Channing promised to look into Christian Science policies regarding gays and lesbians and get back to me. I'm not holding my breath, but it could happen. Certainly a respected, highly visible member of the church is in a better position to change things than you or I. It was in the hope of sparking such a reaction, not of upsetting the esteemed actress, that I perhaps exceeded my journalistic privilege.

After that I couldn't say anything right. Having heard conflicting reports, I asked whether her friend Jerry Herman, who wrote music and lyrics for *Hello, Dolly!*, *La Cage aux Folles* and other shows, is officially out. If not, I tried to explain, I didn't want to out him unintentionally.

"He's been out for years," she snapped, as if the question had been a stupid one. "He was grand marshal of the gay parade in Los Angeles and he asked me to be his co-grand marshal and we just rode all over Los Angeles in that big parade." (If that proves Herman is openly gay, does it also prove Channing is lesbian?)

"I am not an expert on gay matters," Channing said. "That's your department. I am not carrying a banner for anything but the theater. All I know is who makes the greatest creative contribution. That's the only standard there is. If you do the job, nobody cares if you're black or white or green."

Offering Channing a chance to echo publicity claims that the current tour is the biggest and best possible *Dolly*, I suggest that it's been more

successful than her last tour with the show, which began in 1982, and ask whether that was a lesser production. She assures me the previous tour "made lots of money for the Nederlanders" and that she loves the show too much ever to be associated with a second-rate company.

Earlier she had spoken of how Lee Roy Reams, under Jerry Herman's overall artistic direction, had been "religiously faithful to Gower Champion's original choreography and direction. It would be a sacrilege to change Gower Champion's direction or choreography or Jerry Herman's music and lyrics.... This show is our cathedral," she is fond of saying. Did you think I was exaggerating about the things Channing holds sacred?

On another note I suggested that Channing start rehearsing "Hello, Billy!" for the 1996 Democratic National Convention — it may be the only way Clinton can get reelected. After she sang "Hello, Lyndon!" at the 1964 convention it became the theme song of the Johnson campaign.

"Wasn't that wonderful!" she recalled. "I was so proud to have done that. Every time he made a speech he'd say 'Where's mah girl?' and they'd play my recording of that song." I didn't remind her how the Johnson presidency turned out, but answered in the affirmative when she asked if I'm a Democrat. "I am too," she said pensively.

At least we managed to connect on one point. Meanwhile, I had discovered that Carol Channing, unlike her image and unlike Mehitabel the cat, the Don Marquis character she gave voice to on record in the mid-1950s and in an animated feature in 1971, is not "toujours gai."

It wasn't a pleasant interview, but it revealed a touching streak of humanity in someone whose outsized performance have often left her regarded as a living cartoon.

Hello, Dolly! will run Mar. 28-Apr. 2 at the Belk Theater of the NC Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, Charlotte, with daily evening and weekend matinee performances. Tickets are \$20-50. For more information call (704) 372-1000.

Not an exact "Science"

What is the attitude of the Christian Science Church, toward lesbians and gays? We asked Kentner Scott, who founded Emergence International, that church's queer caucus, in 1986.

"The church is very homophobic," he affirmed. "There is no justification for it in Mrs. Eddy's writings," which form the basis of church doctrine, but they've been distorted by homophobes using "little statements taken completely out of context."

Scott said that while the church has aligned itself with the conservative end of the Christian mainstream in this regard, "the remaining church members are basically geriatric and not too well informed." Their homophobia is more passive than active.

The lesbian fired by the Christian Science *Monitor*, Scott recalled was Chris Madsen. "We've lost track of her but I believe she still lives in the Boston area." Emergence International will hold its next convention in Boston, in October 1995. "We won't have any confrontation with the Mother Church because that's not our style," he said, but he promised, "We will be very visible."

An Emergence member recently applied for membership in the Mother Church, stating that he was gay, Scott reported. "The clerk said that was no problem. This may be a symptom of change within the church, or it may be a response to their rapidly declining membership that they'll take anyone they can get."

Scott also added a piece to the Carol Channing puzzle. Before her father, George Channing, became a Christian Scientist, he said he had been the stereotypical hard-drinking, cigar-chomping editor of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.