

The Lady In Red

Christina Applegate's Improbable Road To 'Sweet Charity' and Broadway

by Iris Wiener

Performing on Broadway has always been Christina Applegate's dream. But her current run on the Great White Way has exceeded even her imagination. For her starring role in *Sweet Charity*, she earned Drama Desk and Tony nominations, as well as a Theatre World Award. "Everything that happened to us, as far as the Tony Awards and all that, has gone beyond anything that I could have possibly even imagined," she says.

Along with Applegate's nomination at the June award ceremony, *Sweet Charity* was up for Best Revival of a Musical, and Best Choreography, for which Wayne Cilento took home a Tony. But the satisfaction for Applegate goes beyond awards and recognition. "The experience of those two and a half hours that I get to have every night with an audience is transformational, as an artist, as a human being, everything. So it's been pretty amazing," she gushes.

Ten years ago, if Applegate had been asked what she'd be doing right now, the answer would have been pretty simple. "I definitely didn't think it would be this," she

to producer Barry Weissler. "To me the show closing was due to my foot being broken, and that made me very sad. But it also made me fight harder to get it back. We're like survivors together. We really feel that. Before

every show we hug each other, we laugh and we play. You should see what goes on on-stage before the curtain opens. It's just silliness and fun. All of the actors are great, I'm very lucky."

When the curtain *does* open, it's safe to say that the experience is magical for the audience as well. With a book by Neil Simon, music by Cy Coleman, and lyrics by Dorothy Fields, *Sweet Charity* is a funny, passionate look at the misadventures of Charity Hope Valentine, a dance-hall hostess who always gives her heart and her earnings to the wrong man. "She came very easily to me," Applegate says about the character. "We all have broken hearts, and we all wish to have someone come into our life that's going to mend that, so I was able to relate in that way.

"We all want that. We all want to find the good in everybody and in everything that we're doing. We have faith in humanity. Unfortunately, as we get older we get a little bit jaded and things change, but we're always looking for someone to mend that part of us that's broken. But the great thing about this story is that at the end, Charity says, 'You know what, I am broken, and it's OK. I'm great because of it. I'm all of these things and more.' And she says, 'I don't want to be saved, Oscar.'



Christina Applegate performs "If My Friends Could See Me Now" - Photo by Paul Kolnik

thing like this. I knew ten years ago that my life was going to be...different. I thought I would have kids by now, but that's OK, I'm a couple years off."

The story of *Sweet Charity's* journey to New York has a fairy tale quality that has added special meaning to the show for the cast and crew. Last March, during the out-of-town production tune-up, Applegate broke her foot in the first act. The producers made the difficult decision to close the show, but Applegate wasn't ready to throw in the towel.

She made an immediate appeal



lesson. We don't need to be saved by anybody."

It delights the actress that the audience seems to be getting the message. "There are a lot of young girls that are coming to the show, and they're coming back five or six times, and I think that they're taking something away from it that is very positive. At the end of it is a sense of something that I think is very beautiful and inspiring in a lot of ways," she says.

Applegate's own life could provide similar inspiration. She was born in Los Angeles on Thanksgiving Day in 1971 into a showbiz house-

hold. Her mother was an actress and her father was a record company executive. The couple divorced soon after she was born, and her mother largely raised her. To say that show business is in her blood would not be an overstatement. She first appeared on television as an infant, and by the age of seven, she was appearing in commercials and movies. At 15, she landed her best-known role as Kelly Bundy in the successful Fox TV sitcom "Married... With Children."

Transitioning to live theater on Broadway, however, presented new challenges. "I'm not a singer. I was really insecure about it all the way through all of our previews and everything. Especially since I was knocked for it a lot, which just makes you feel even worse about what you're doing," she says. "After I broke my foot, something else took over. I didn't care about it so much anymore, and the funny thing is my voice is better than it ever was, and I think that's a testament to just putting your focus somewhere else and not caring about what people think or what they say."

Despite many years of experience as a dancer, Applegate was also put to the test with Charity's various dance numbers. "I was pretty OK with the dancing up until breaking my foot. Then it was really re-learning everything. When we started the show we didn't really tell anybody how injured I was because we didn't want anyone to think I was going to be out again.

It was really pretty bad when we first came to New York. Now, it's solid... knock on wood!"

Ultimately, however, Applegate believed in the strength of the production. "People don't realize how much they know this music, and

hopes to be back on Broadway again one day. "I heard they're doing a production of *The Pajama Game*; maybe I'll see what's going with that," she laughs as she considers the possibilities.

When asked her opinion on the

like to change that dress. I'd like her to put on a different outfit!" she moans, referring to the sole red dress Charity wears throughout the show. "I would also have her take a bath, because that's always what I want to do at the end of the show."

"I think that's a testament to just putting your focus somewhere else and not caring about what people think or what they say."

how explosive and wonderful the dance numbers are and just how funny it is. It's *such* a funny show. You get to go on a great journey with us. It's definitely a show for men also. After all, there are women in a lot of short skirts!"

New York suits Applegate well, and she

current state of theater, and the hype over the fact that a lot of adaptations and productions are pulling their creativity from pre-existing works, she ponders carefully. "I guess it's unfortunate that there aren't enough original plays that are being produced. I mean, you might have that on one end, but you also have *Spamalot*, *The Light in the Piazza*, *Spelling Bee*, *Doubt*, etc., so I think that there's a balance there.

"I don't know how much of the same thing you really want to see. It's the same thing we have in film right now. You've

Looking beyond Broadway, Applegate eventually wants to produce films and make movies that she likes. "I don't know what they are yet, but I want to make ones that I believe in, and be behind the scenes, and not necessarily be on camera. I think I need a break from hair and make-up. And then I can just come to work with a baseball cap on and absolutely no make-up!"

And as for those kids? "In ten years I see myself raising a family, and feeling secure enough to take time off. That's where I would like to be, in a place that I could feel OK to do one or two jobs a year and spend the rest of the year with my family

CHRISTINA
APPELEGATE
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Hazzard” and “Starsky and Hutch.” We’re re-doing everything! Hopefully we’re going to have a resurgence of creativity. Somewhere, someone’s going to come up with a new idea. But I think right now there’s a lot of original work on Broadway. The funny thing was there were only two revivals playing at Tony time, as far as Broadway musicals were concerned.”

If Applegate were given the chance to explore her creative side by giving Charity one more scene at the end of the show, she would make the most of it. “Oh man, I’d

and do things that I don’t normally get to do.”

But she doesn’t plan to hide from the spotlight just yet. “I want to go back and do more film, I think that I haven’t filled my full potential with that. I definitely want to continue in that arena. And then I want to come back to New York. In four months, I’m saying good-bye to the city, to my friends, to this particular life, which at times can be very taxing, but most of the time it is so rewarding. It’s going to be hard to adjust to not doing this. So I’ll definitely come back and do something here. That’s really what I want to do.”