

# Chapter 1

## LIFE UPON THE WICKED STAGE

"Belles beyond the blushing age  
Dare not dally on the stage."  
Louis Plotz – BROADWAY FABLES

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The dream had turned into the running-through-quicksand nightmare.

I was down in Orlando from Christmas through Saint Patrick's Day, doing seven shows a week as Aldonza in "Man of La Mancha." I had Star billing for a favorite role in a favorite play, it got me out of New York for the winter, I was making good money, and I hadn't worked a non-showbiz job in over fifteen years.

I was in Hell.

A promising relationship with a guy who was willing to work around my odd proclivities had been put on hold for ten weeks, while I had my first experience with Dinner Theater. You know the movie, "Soapdish," with Sally Field? Those scenes of Kevin Kline as Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman" at a Florida dinner theater don't quite capture the true hideousness of the genre.

Night after night we were mercilessly heckled by elderly drunks, who sprayed masticated meatloaf with the obscenities. My tender ballad, "What Does He Want of Me?" was punctuated by crashing crockery and frail old dames summoning the waiter. Sometimes, the genius of our work was too much for them: on more than one occasion, the performance was halted just long enough for the Rescue Squad to resuscitate and cart away a fallen spectator.

Adenoidal British theater historians on PBS tell us that this was very likely the way performances ran at the Globe during Shakespeare's day. So much for four hundred years of human progress.

I was the only out-of-towner, imported from the Big Apple to authenticate the producer's claim of "Top New York Talent." Never mind that the top New York talent was off in Los Angeles, starring in sit-coms. I was the Big Draw for this production. As such, I was given the full "Star" treatment, which consisted of lodging at a Days Inn on the Interstate, use of the company Pinto, a gasoline card and, every evening before the show, all I could eat at the BROADWAY'S BEST! Dinner Theater Buffet. I could eat a lot.

My leading man was something of a local institution and a real putz. Somewhere between sixty and the grave, he had the remains of a truly lovely voice and an odor somewhere between Old Spice and old hamburger. This relic was incredibly vain and dumb as a brick. He arrived late to rehearsals, refused to learn his lines, and made up staging as the mood struck him. There were few things more revolting than the sight of his lean shanks, embroidered with blue varicose veins, parading in short bun-huggers.

The Fossil heard a come-hither in every go-yonder; he breathed on my neck and whispered suggestively into my ear for weeks.

He woke the snoozing reptile in my DNA — I had a few crazed "Method" performances during which I relinquished my frontal lobes and abandoned myself to the prehistoric thing raging in my basement. On those inspired nights I would slap and kick him in dead earnest, and spit in his face with lusty loathing. Once I drew blood — in ten weeks, this was the only real pleasure I had.

The youngish tenor who played The Priest, a cosmetologist by trade, resembled Joel Grey as the Master of Ceremonies in "Cabaret" — that was just his street make-up. He *jetée*-d into my dressing room all during rehearsal week, begging to coif the liquid luster of my hair. Leapin' Leonard had the two prettiest songs in the show and sang them exquisitely. My praise engendered an invitation to his house one afternoon:

"Aren't you lonesome, all by yourself? Time to join the parade! Life is a Cabaret, Miss Thing. Come for tea."

Bored and starved for company, I hopped into the old Pinto and drove over. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

The house was right out of Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory, minus the Oompa-Loompas. Beyond the pink picket fence a pink stucco structure squatted under a red tile roof; each window sported a pink-and-white striped awning; gingerbread window boxes spewed fuschias. Every few feet along the front walk a pastel-printed windsock fluttered nervously.

I parked the car and was just getting out when the tiny house exploded like a piñata. A coven of elaborately gowned transvestites billowed like confetti through the French doors, twirling and crooning "Hello, Dolly" in piping falsettos. Two cruiserweights decked out, I swear to God, as Upstairs Maids pirouetted into flanking positions, hoisted me to their shoulders, and carried me with great ceremony around to the backyard.

Concealed by an eight-foot cedar fence this enclosure featured elaborate topiary, meticulously pruned into shapes of male genitalia at various stages of arousal. When I had been carefully deposited into a lawn chair, Leapin' Leonard made his grand entrance in a silver lamé body suit, featuring a brocade codpiece in front and his bare behind, behind. I assumed the codpiece was an improvised ad-on in deference to my gentility. Yeah, right. Leonard squealed, and peeled.

Thunderous applause.

My host proffered iced tea in a quart-sized beaker, and presented me to the assembly. They filed past one by one, decorously respectful.

*Deja-vu . . .*

*Ostrich feathers nodded over wide-brimmed chapeaux, sequins sparkled from low-cut bodices, shiny satin hoop skirts swirled in pastel waves . . . Max-Factored lads in top hats and tails squired legions of happy tappers, and everyone just smiled and smiled like the contented sink in a Babbo commercial . . .*

They peeked over paper fans and wiggled their Lee Press-On Nails at me from a safe distance for the next hour, while Leonard fussed with my hairdo and topped off my iced tea. The long-awaited finale, when I excused myself to use the bathroom, sent a giddy shudder through the appreciative throng.

Inside, the house was literally wallpapered with photos of Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe. Among the fringed lampshades in a corner of the living room, a life-sized color portrait of Carol Channing topped a dressmaker's dummy clad in a Victorian gown of solid silver bugle beads and red rhinestones. Miss Channing's ensemble was further enhanced by a six-foot scarlet ostrich feather boa. Here and there a stray Liza Minnelli or Barbra Streisand scrutinized my progress through pink and mauve kitsch.

The bathroom was barely large enough to turn around in, but that hadn't stopped anyone. The rosy marble basin, the gilt-framed mirror, the fat plastic cherubs with their nail-polished pink penises bespoke a clear artistic vision. Only the chenille toilet seat cover seemed out of place. One expected, at least, angora.

From behind the closed door I felt, more than heard, their mute approach. I peed as silently as I could. I waited. I flushed. An ashen face gazed at me from the mirror while I washed and re-washed my hands.

"Places. The call is places, please."

It was said that Bette Midler's career was built on afternoons like this one . . . I took a deep breath and opened the door. Carefully choreographed outside the bathroom they parted like a frilly Red Sea to my bewildered Moses.

The company followed in two straight lines as Leapin' Leonard — now wearing a lavender tutu and pointe shoes — spun me around and waltzed me past Liza, Barbra and the others, out the door. At my car, he tendered a wistful smile, kissed me on both cheeks, blinked back tears.

The beautiful voice trembled, "Why would I waste my time with you?"

Without missing a beat I responded, "Time is erased when I'm with you . . ."

Together we harmonized the coda, "Nothing replaced my time with you . . . You were The Music in My Life."

I graciously let Leonard have the high note.

"Les Girls" applauded. Top New York Talent that I was, I took a bow, blew a kiss, and got the hell out of there. I stared straight ahead until the end of the block when, like Lot's Wife, I glanced back for an instant. In my rearview mirror a dozen silk handkerchiefs danced like butterflies, waving my departure.

This one memorable day was the extent of my social life in festive Orlando.

The other actors were local community theater types, most of them stuck in grueling day jobs that sucked their lives dry. A handful were as skilled as any actors I ever worked with, but they lacked the fortitude to face the competition and instability of a career. This tended to make them resentful of me, and lent their conversation a mosquito-like drone of complaint. Their open hostility was balanced nicely by obsequious groveling

The most taxing of these other players was the company's pea-brained ingenue, a thirty-four-year-old concessions clerk at Disney World whose father worked for the Ringling Brothers Circus during winter hiatus. Somewhat long of tooth and loose of virtue for playing virgin-parts, she was in the middle of a torrid and none-too-private affair with the married production manager, who played the role of Sancho Panza in our show. The cast was treated on occasion to her soprano voice shrieking, "Oh, God, harder!" from a backstage utility closet during intermission trysts with the Little Shit. This was the only musical number for which the audience sustained respectful silence.

Ah, yes, the weather. It was the year the citrus crop of Florida was ravaged by one of the coldest winters on record. Instead of hanging out by the pool to work on a tan or strolling through lush gardens of bougainvillea, I huddled in my motel room day after day, pleading with the maid to stop bothering me, and measuring my expanding thighs in expanding horror.

I learned to tell time by soap opera plots — here's Erica, it must be noon.

There wasn't even any sex. I had expected to keep my hinges oiled for the duration, choosing from an array of admirers nightly. The actual "array" were the fags in the cast, who admired only my lavish make-up case, and the few ambulatory lotharios from the audience who had the chutzpah to come backstage after the last chorus of "The Impossible Dream" — pursued in droves by doting widows.

"Be careful what you wish for . . ." played on an endless loop inside my skull and for the first time in my life, I didn't want to be in a show.

Leonard is vocalizing. It's "Lucia" — the Mad Scene. Closer, closer. His head appears around my dressing room door.

"Are you gaining weight? I have a marvelous idea for your hair!"

Leonard *bourrées* to the mirror, squeezes a zit. He's wearing the lavender tutu.

"Where's the brush, Miss Abigail?"

"Half hour. The call is half hour, please."

Oh, God . . .