

STAGE WEEK

A POST-'NICHOLAS' 'GIFTS'

By JANICE ARKATOV

When Los Angeles last saw Jane Carr, she and her fellow "Nicholas Nickleby" cast members were setting their caps for Broadway. Now the British actress is back (more on the New York experience later)—happily resettled and hoping to forge a new career. For starters, she opens Saturday at the Coast Playhouse in the West Coast

premiere of Mark St. Germain and Randy Court's "The Gifts of the Magi—The Los Angeles Musical." "It's an amalgamation of two O'Henry stories ["The Gift of the Magi" and "The Cop and the Anthem"]," she offered. "In the first, the man's got a prized possession: the watch his great-grandfather gave him—and the wife's got long, beautiful hair. He sells the watch to

buy her combs, she cuts off her hair to buy him a chain for his watch.

"I'm in the second [alternating] story—originally written as a man's part, changed to a girl's so I could play it: an out-of-work, vaudevilian performer who's come on hard times, is desperately trying to get arrested over Christmas so she can spend the time in jail, rather than on the streets.

"I'm doing my American accent," she added, "which is rather strange. But the run is nice and brief—only two weeks over Christmas—and then I can go back to being unemployed again! There was a lot of interest when I was here before, and I'm simply chasing it up. 'Hello, I'm back, do you remember me?' And I wear my 'Nicholas Nickleby' T-shirt.

"I was offered a series in England, but I decided not to take it, because I'm loving it here. And if I don't strike while the iron's hot, I'll never come back. So I promised myself I'd stay out here and do it. That is, 'til the money runs out."

Impressions of our other coast? "It was my first trip to New York," the actress explained, "and what a culture shock! Going from lazing around the pool here to all those tall buildings and screaming sirens and tooting of horns and taxi drivers driving like maniacs. Such a hard time getting about. Too many people in too small a space.

"The audiences were very different too: less noisy, I'd say. Those lovely audiences in L.A. who whooped and yelled and yipped—and so did [New Yorkers] by the end of the show, but they sat rather more quietly during it." As for the abbreviated run: "Many people had seen it five years before. And it also had something to do with being the wrong time of year. People who could afford to pay \$100 a ticket were still in their country houses.

"By the end, we were [sold out], and I think we could've gone on longer. But we'd been to-ing and fro-ing for so long, not knowing what was going to happen next, that we all gave up the ghost, really. It was very muddling."

"Pasta, Dread and Maze!" "Those are the three elements of life I've created this piece from," explained actor John Medici, whose one-man show opens Wednesday at the Back Alley Theatre.

"The pasta refers to my ethnicity as an Italian-American, my mother, my father, the Catholic Church—all the things that nourished me, growing up in New York. The dread is all the spiritual questioning I've done: who I was, what I was doing here, what it all added up to. And maze! [Yiddish for luck]—is the good fortune, the chutzpah [nerve] you need to succeed.

"I go back 20 years ago, when I was working the borscht belt as a young comic [and in an effort to homogenize his image, changing his name from Giovanni D'Medici to Johnny Armen]. And I play all the characters: my parents, my

uncle Paolucci, the priest who taught me to speak Latin, the nightclub owner, the agents who rejected me, the other acts."

The show had its beginnings two years ago at a Theatre East workshop: "I got up and told stories about my childhood and the other members said, 'You must write this.' Since then, I've been rewriting, re-nourishing, re-confirming. I think when you get to be over 40, there's a need to sum up the first half of your life, look back and try to fit it into where you are today."

For those who thought that Winnie the Pooh was just for kids, Peter Dennis would be happy to change your mind. The British actor arrives Wednesday at the Stage Lee Strasberg in "Bother!" a one-man theatrical reading of the stories and poems of A.A. Milne.

"I was introduced to the stories at the early age of 36; I'd never heard of them until then," he said. "I used to go out with girls and play with trains—or was it go out with trains and play with girls... But then I began reading them. And on Winnie's 50th birthday [in 1976], I was persuaded to do a late-night show at Cambridge University Theatre. I thought 11 people would come—but the theater was packed.

"Children get one thing from it, adults get another," said Dennis, who's performed the work in several countries (although this will be his first visit to the States).

The common ground, he adds, "is life. These characters are just like people you know. You say, 'Isn't it a lovely day?' and they say, 'Yes, but still, probably, rain later.' That's

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