

TELEVISION

Isn't He Special

Comic Dana Carvey gives 'Saturday Night Live' a lot of its liveliest lines—and so much more

films. The car that BB gets as a loaner from the Cadillac dealership is a Corvair, a legendary lemon of the early '60s and the product on which consumer advocate Ralph Nader built his reputation—Levinson's way of suggesting that the start of the consumer culture also marked a downturn in postwar American self-confidence. "You were starting to hear about Nader in those days," Levinson says and paraphrases a typical American consumer: "Wait a minute. You mean General Motors *isn't* building the safest cars in the world? You mean these chemicals are toxic?" All that stuff we never knew about. We'd always assumed that everything was the best for us." Even the year in which "Tin Men" is set, 1963, has a sad resonance, although John F. Kennedy is referred to only briefly. Levinson likes to bury his messages a bit.

Real talk: That comes through, too, in the way the movie is written. Loopily baroque-sounding at first, Levinson's dialogue eventually settles in the ear to reveal what he calls "the struggle to say things"—the sad, funny way real people circle helplessly around the point. When his wife, Nora (Barbara Hershey), proposes a picnic in a desperate attempt to put some zing back into their marriage, all Tilley can do is grumble: "I don't understand a picnic. We go someplace, we put a thing on the ground and eat. I don't get it. Why is that fun? You take the food you got in the icebox, you take it out in a field, and you eat it. I don't get it. I'm stymied." Actors don't often talk this way, but people do. Says Levinson, who writes in a rush and doesn't like to tinker with dialogue once he's set it down, "What I like is when dialogue sounds as if it's being made up all the time. Because in real life we *don't* know what we're going to say next. I love those beats, those pauses, when we're fighting to say something or saying something and having to back off—we do that all the time. That makes for interesting conversation, as opposed to conversation where you're trying to find a joke."

Levinson remembers a friend of his mother's kvetching about Marlon Brando, years ago: "He's never sure what he's saying. On the screen you want an actor who says something, who just says it." He laughs delightedly as he tells the story in a New York hotel room, 1987. Baltimore is miles away down I-95, and 1963 is gone forever. But people will see themselves in "Tin Men," here and now, struggling against changing times and their own isolation to be understood—a struggle that's both hilarious and heartbreaking. "I hope 'Tin Men' is funny even though it's sad," Levinson says. "It's dramatic, but it's comedic. Or it's comedic but it's dramatic. Or I don't know what the hell the mix of it all is. But I want people to say, 'Yeah. That's kind of it. That's the way people are'."

BILL BAROL

Live from New York, it's "Church Chat," the high point of this season's "Saturday Night Live." On this week's installment, an actress playing celebrity ozonehead Shirley MacLaine is explaining her theological beliefs to a sweet-looking gray-haired lady. "Jesus, Buddha and Muhammad were all great spiritual leaders," the MacLaine character says. The Church Lady purses her lips and arches a single eyebrow in disdainful disbelief. "So you give Buddha and Muhammad equal billing with Jeecus?" she asks in her pinched soprano. "Well. Who helped you with your little ideas, Shirley? Who could it be? Oh... I don't know..."

SATAN???" MacLaine, jarred, leaps from her seat. But the Church Lady is already moving on. "OK, I think we're all finished with you. Bye bye, Shirl. Well. Tomorrow is the Super Bowl. Harmless recreational event or vicious Satanic death ritual? You be the judge."

Who is the Church Lady?

"She lives alone," says Dana Carvey, the actor under the Church Lady's support hose. "She's never been married. She's in her late 40s, an avid churchgoer; she lives for the church. A bit of a martyr. She spends her holidays donating time to the Christian Youth League. She has a cat. She has little curtains and she looks out at the activity on the street." His voice softens. "She drinks alone a bit. She's kind of lonely."

Who is Dana Carvey?

"Young, versatile, talented, charming, a marvelous newcomer, a fresh-faced kid. Umm, wait. More buzz words."—A "Saturday Night Live" associate producer.

"No, wait. I have so much more to say about MEEEEEE."—Dana Carvey, overhearing.

Who is Dana Carvey?

Oh, all right. Dana Carvey is 31 and comes from Missoula, Mont., by way of California, where he won the San Francisco Standup Comedy Competition the year after Robin Williams placed second. He is currently a member of the strongest cast on "Saturday Night Live" in years. As creator of the Church Lady, it is his fault that millions of people all over America are looking at each other with pinched lips and one raised eyebrow apiece and muttering the Church Lady's prissily dismissive tag line: "Isn't that special?"

Carvey isn't unaware of the risks that come with having this year's bust-out charac-



GARY GERSHOFF—REXNA

Out of drag: At a recent 'SNL' cast party