

ter. Steve Martin's Wild and Crazy Guy and Billy Crystal's Fernando, to name just two, have long since passed from celebrity into self-parody. Even last year's flash, Jon Lovitz's Pathological Liar, is passé already (quickly, now: how hip is someone who still goes around saying, "Yeeeahhhh, that's the ticket"?), and has been semiretired. So Carvey is handling the Church Lady with lace gloves. She'll appear on just eight of this season's 18 shows (the Liar, by contrast, appeared 16 times last season). "I don't want to burn it out," says Carvey. "I want, every time she appears, for people to be right on the brink of saying, 'Well, where the hell is she?'"

He pauses, then laughs. "It's weird. The character is so potent and so obnoxious that she'd insist on being the one who breaks through. My wife and I are starting to talk about her like she's a real person: 'Well, she had a good time tonight. That was a good show for her'."

Where does the Church Lady come from?

Strictly speaking, she was born during Carvey's childhood. Raised Lutheran, he grew up in "the kind of family who'd miss church, then go, then miss, then go, and I remember showing up and all the ladies would be very snooty." For just a second he screws up his face into the Church Lady's superior semi-squint, then drops it. "But I didn't want to make her specifically Catholic or Protestant or Jew because to me she's a generic judgmental person. There are people like her in every religion and even outside religion. I mean, I had teachers with the same attitude: 'All right, students, let's open our little books, shall we?'"

Later, he sharpened the character in California comedy clubs. He'd been inspired by TV sketch comics as a kid—Jackie Gleason, Red Skelton, Carol Burnett—and his act was less standup than comic theater. ("I can't tell jokes," he says. "I'm terrible at jokes.") It wasn't always easy to get over. "There'd be people drunk, spitting up, heckling me," he recalls. "And I was this unknown in a bar saying, 'Well, I'm gonna do this character for seven minutes. I'll see you later.' And I'd hear"—slurred drunk voice—"Where's the f---ing joke, man?" So trying to do theater in a bar made me work hard and do everything I could to grab attention. The characters had to be really potent." Last year, shopping for yet another new cast, "SNL" producer Lorne Michaels spotted Carvey at a club in Santa Monica and offered him a job. Carvey took it, moving with his wife to New York City.

Was this a good move for Dana Carvey?

Probably. Carvey is contracted to "Saturday Night Live" for five years, and seems comfortable. "The show has moments now



You be the judge: 'Church Chat,' with guests Walter Payton and Joe Montana

R. M. LEWIS—NBC

where it's as good as it ever was," he says. "It also has moments where it's terrible." But the bad moments are noticeably fewer this year. Michaels's apparent strategy for this season—to assemble an experienced cast and keep it relatively small, giving everyone a chance to shine—shows real signs of working. Among others, Phil Hartman (former leader of the LA comedy troupe "The Groundlings"), Kevin Nealon and Jan Hooks have given "SNL" its best lineup of comic actors in many seasons. "The cast fits," Carvey says. "We're all around the same age, the same sensibilities." The reviews have been good, and ratings are up an average of two points over last year.

Ironically, the show's renaissance may also have resulted from the fact that its hipness quotient has dwindled. "It's not so much of a must anymore," Carvey says. "If you're home on a Saturday night and there's no good movies on, well, maybe you'll tune in. We're judged by the work we do rather than being some hot hip thing. I think we're all more relaxed about the show now." Maybe the ghosts of the past have finally been put to rest. "A lot of our viewers are young enough not to get bothered by the legacy," Carvey says. "To them, it's, 'Well, it was Billy Crystal when I was in high school. These guys are pretty good. Chevy who?'"

Who else is Dana Carvey?

On a Monday in January, as Carvey sits for an interview in his ratty office at NBC, the Church Lady is on demand on two coasts: Life magazine has called about a photo spread, and a group sponsoring a San Francisco testimonial dinner for football

player Joe Montana wants the actor to tape a Church Lady intro. Carvey seems a bit relieved to talk about his other creations.

He's looking for opportunities to introduce Uncle Rico, a hostile Cuban, and to bring back Lord Christie, the 17th-century English noble who summons scared-stiff court artists to "Sketch me while I dance away!" adding gaily: "If you can't sketch me as I dance I shall shoot you!" His favorite character is Ching Chang, who in his first appearance on the show sang a lovely, tender "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face" to a chicken.

Maybe this bears explaining. As with the Church Lady, Carvey has a detailed subtext in mind for the character of Ching Chang: "His mother was British and his father was Chinese," he says, "and he grew up in Canton, and the only movie he ever saw was 'My Fair Lady,' which he saw 17 times. His mother sent him to America to set up a pet chicken shop. But on the way over he fell in love with these eight chickens and couldn't bear to part with them." And as an animated Carvey explains the hidden life of the young Chinese immigrant, something curious happens: the joke widens, and deepens, and you begin to sense the more complex emotions that lie behind the laughs—loneliness, love, innocence.

He stops suddenly. "I don't want you to think I'm crazy," he says, sounding a little sheepish about the elaborate character sketch he's worked out. "But this helps." It surely does. Dana Carvey gives "Saturday Night Live" something it has lacked too long—comedy with a sharply distinctive voice and a warm human heart.

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