

THEATER

Her voice has that throaty, brash, give-'em-hell, Ethel Merman kind of gusto. Currently touring with the Tony Award-winning smash hit musical *Chicago*, Lea DeLaria wedges in a phone interview with *Just Out* between rehearsals in Seattle.

Before that, the cast whirled through Denver, Cleveland, Toronto and Providence, R.I., leaving a trail of standing ovations and droves of satisfied Broadway show aficionados.

With the action centered in a women's prison, DeLaria plays the part of the warden, Matron Mama Morton. She's the gal to see if you need a lawyer or you want to make a phone call; whatever you need, ya gotta ask Mama.

"You know, the women trade me money and sexual favors for whatever I can get," DeLaria explains.

"Everyone always plays her very tough, but I go after the irony of calling her Mama, yet I play her like a daddy. She's a big butch daddy, which is really fun. Nobody else plays her this way. Yeah, that's what I bring to the role, a little lesbian authenticity!" she laughs.

"And then you know, I sing the bitch out of the song; I really kick ass with the song. And

people seem to really like it, it usually stops the show and that's great. So you can't complain about that," DeLaria says. "But the acting part is the really fun part for me because I get to do this very positive portrayal of a really butch dyke. She's a very working-class, very charming butch dyke."

Pumping out eight intense shows every week with *Chicago*, how does DeLaria manage to keep her character fresh?

Before responding with words, DeLaria roars with a deep belly laugh.

She says: "I try to have 30 or 40 orgasms before I go on; it always gives her a little smile.... No, that's just part of the job. What separates the men from the boys in this business is your ability to give 100 percent. And, these are not small houses we're playing to; these are 2,000-seat auditoriums and they're sold out every show. So, you feed off the excitement of that audience."

DeLaria isn't stingy with compliments when talking about *Chicago*: "It's a fabulous, fabulous show. It's got some fierce actors in it, some really good people. The dancers are magnificent and"—here her voice booms to a mock stage shout—"the women are gorgeous! I couldn't be happier. When I realized I was going to do

At a theater near you

In Portland with the Broadway hit *Chicago*, Lea DeLaria dishes with *Just Out*

BY SUZANNE SIGMUND

Chicago, I was like, 'Oh my God!' because the women in *Chicago* are notoriously gorgeous women; that's the whole idea of the show. And then they're half naked, you know."

There's the belly laugh again, a shade more lascivious this time.

"And I'm paid to do this! The only bad thing is, I get my own dressing room. So I don't get to dress with them—but other than that..." she exclaims.

DeLaria's name has become huge on the Broadway circuit lately, making her a hot asset to the *Chicago* cast. Recently, she appeared as Marryin' Sam in the musical *L'il Abner* in New York City. She's received the highly prized Obie Award, a Theater World Award and a Drama Desk nomination for her role as Hildy Esterhazy in *On the Town* at the New York

go-to girl, definitely. And I've been getting a thing for Uma Thurman lately. A total thing. Her and Cameron Diaz—I've just been losing my mind over her lately.... It's hard for me to separate the talent from the beauty. Except for Sandra Bullock, because I don't find her talented at all, but I'd bang her in a second! I'd do her in front of my parents!"

She is unquestionably the consummate professional. Still, even DeLaria gets besieged with those pesky stage butterflies before show time.

"It becomes something that you use," she says. "Plus, I think, I'm going to go out on stage, there'll be a pretty girl out there who's going to see me and she's going to go, 'God I want to meet that big handsome butch!'"

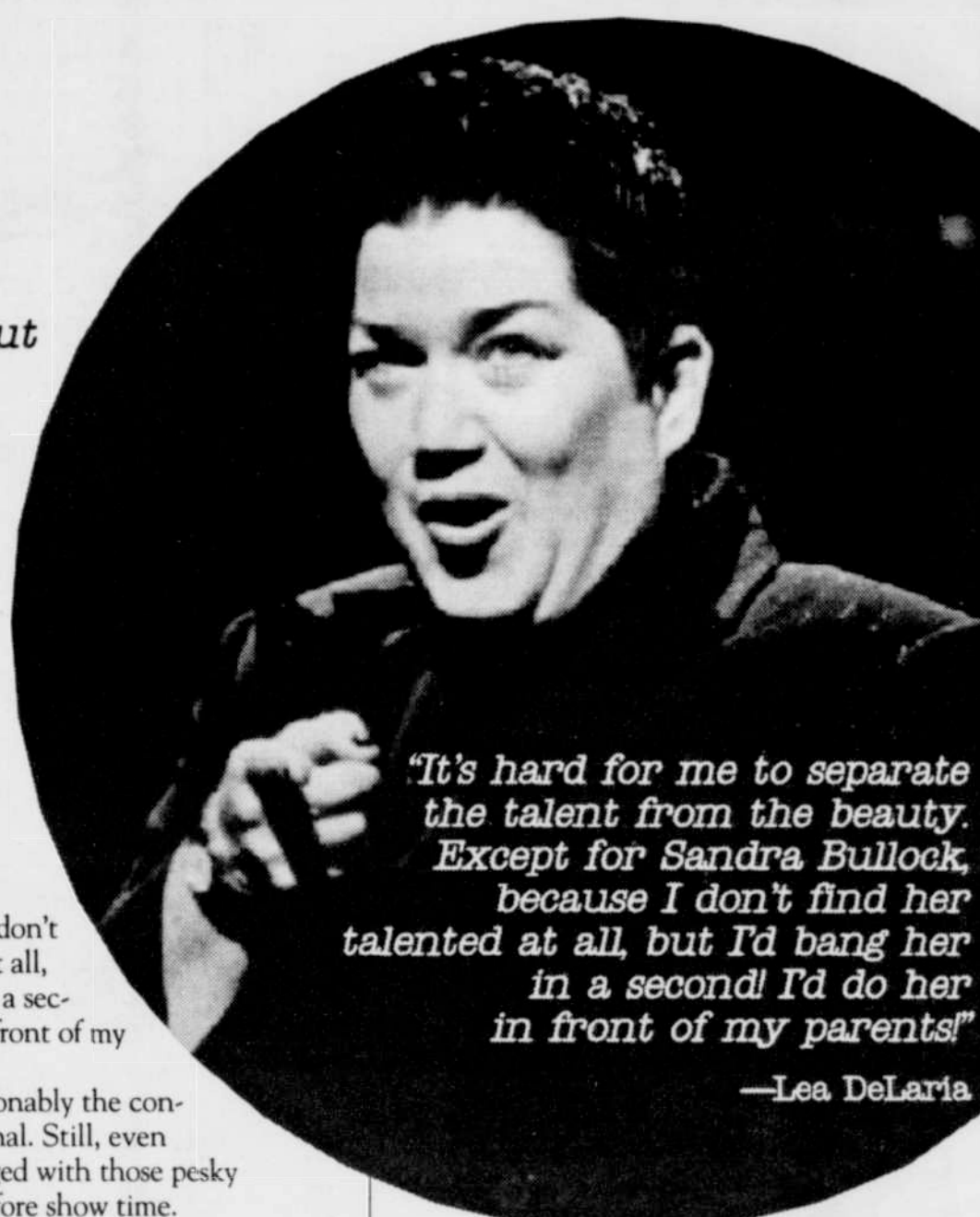
Success for DeLaria has come swift, in big capital letters, and it doesn't seem to be slowing down one whit either. Starting in San Francisco as a stand-up comic in the '80s, she appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show* several times in '93 and was an instant hit.

And the best part?

"I was always out; I've never been in the closet. That, to me, has been my gift. That's what I'm most proud of," she says.

"The fact that I'm starring in a Broadway show, I do have these awards; I've been able to do all of this without ever once being in the closet," she continues. "It's like, Sarah Schulman was interviewing me for *New York* magazine, and she said she didn't think anyone had ever done that. We were trying to figure that out because the rest of them—k.d. [lang] and Ellen [DeGeneres] and all the others—were in the closet, became famous and then came out. I chose to be out from moment one."

After her next Broadway gig in New York, DeLaria won't have a second to rest on her laurels. She's been working on an HBO special, she's got a book deal with Phantom Doubleday (*Lea's Book of Rules for the World* comes out



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—Lea DeLaria



Lea DeLaria (left) sings with Stephanie Pope

Shakespeare Festival, a role she'll be reprising again on the Broadway stage this fall.

And then there's television. You name it, she's been on it: *Friends*, *Politically Incorrect*, a season with *The Drew Carey Show* (as the female Drew in dyed blonde hair and a pair of Drew's geeky Pindexter glasses), and appearances with Andy Griffith in *Matlock*. Plus, a juicy part in the mainstream hit comedy film *First Wives Club* with Goldie Hawn and Bette Midler.

OK, I've got to ask: Among all those Hollywood luminaries, whom does DeLaria lust after?

"Well, there's always Sigourney Weaver; I love a girl you can shimmy up. She's one tall drink of water, that one," she muses. "She's my

next year), a screenplay is in the cooker, and she's featured in two films—*Homo Heights* and *Edge of Seventeen*—currently making the festival circuit.

"It's not that I'm not going to do stand-up. I'm always going to be a dyke stand-up. But, it happens," DeLaria explains. "Look, it happened to Robin Williams, it happened to Rosie O'Donnell. The reality is, where are you gonna find the time?"

She adds, "As a stand-up, I was talking about gay issues and straight issues and politics. I've always been very lefty. I was able to do that in a large arena, in a large format. I've always felt that I'm making a difference. And the queerness doesn't matter."

"That means that I've effected a change. As they said in *Out* magazine, as far as they know, I'm the only one who's been allowed to play straight roles and gay roles, and I hope that continues for me," DeLaria says. "That's what was always important to me: changing the world—that and getting laid. And I've been able to do both."

■ *CHICAGO*, part of Portland Opera's Best of Broadway series, is showing at the Civic Auditorium in downtown Portland from July 14 to July 26, with evening performances and weekend matinees. Call 241-1802 for show times and ticket prices.

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