

WEEKEND ENTERTAINMENT

One-woman show to explore humanity, humor

Twice the Child" is the name of the one-woman show opening tonight in Ojai, the most recent installment in the Theater 150 Solo Series, performed by actress, model and comedienne Cheryl Hunter and continuing for the next two weekends.

The partially autobiographical monologue samples selected moments from the lives of people who have influenced the actress. Employing humor and a healthy bit of pathos to move her stage vehicle, Hunter guides the action and the audience through her personal quest for meaning in life.

"My hope is that the material relates to people, wherever they're at," Hunter said. "I think that search for the ideal in life, whatever that means to any individual, is a very common part of the human experience."

For Hunter, whose face has graced magazine pages and whose talents have contributed to films, television and stage productions in the United States and abroad, the search for significance has been both elusive and fruitful.

Even as a young person, she knew her direction was destined to be divergent, recalling a pivotal revelation.

"I saw this Christmas movie with an island of misfit toys," said the actress, laughing as she recalled the collection of slightly irregular dolls and unpopular playthings sequestered in Santa's alterna-

tive workshop. "I felt like that." It was during her teen years that Hunter determined she could play her storytelling prowess into an acting career. She skipped school one day to put together a plan for her life.

"I thought school was going too slow," Hunter said. "I needed to regroup."

The neighborhood magazine stand provided her with the information she sought. "I read in Glamour magazine about solo shows, and that they were looking for people who were attractive. And, if they were a model, they could break into acting."

Hunter took the bait and embarked on a modeling career. She saw modeling as a stepping stone to her ultimate goal.

Along her life journey, the model-turned-actress befriended an 89-year-old woman named Lulu. She found the experience of knowing and helping the woman so rewarding that she began volunteering with elderly people. It was through Lulu that the actress met Evelyn, a retired actress who had performed in old time radio and on Broadway.

"Evelyn is really the star of the show," said Hunter, who borrowed from the real-life Evelyn to create the character of a star-struck and somewhat debilitated dilettante for "Twice the Child."

In one part of the monologue, a humorous and slightly surreal parallel is drawn between Hunter the ingenue and Evelyn the former ingenue. Hunter takes



Cheryl Hunter
Felt like misfit toy

Evelyn along to an audition. Once again in her element, Evelyn is transformed into career adviser — she tells Hunter to be a star player so that she will be the obvious choice when a star is needed.

"Her advice seems so completely irrelevant at the time," Hunter said as her character's response to Evelyn. However, her character decides to heed the words of the thespian and work toward stardom.

"What she proposes is so much better

than the direction I'm going, anyway." Twisting and turning and taking a number of detours along its way, "Twice the Child," finally results in resolution. According to Hunter, the performance closes with a certain satisfaction and sense of redemption.

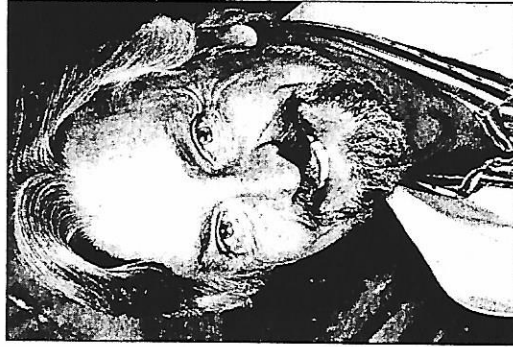
"The message is one of coming to terms with and being pleased with whatever we've got," said the actress. She said the play is an entertainment and that it is not intended to be interpreted as a life lesson. Kim Maxwell-Brown and Dwier Brown are co-producing this production of "Twice the Child." The husband-and-wife producers are also the founders and owners of Theater 150.

"The performance is touching, it's funny, it's self-deprecating," said Maxwell-Brown of the production. "She is unbelievably charming and a joy to watch."

The Solo Series at Theater 150 wraps in July, with the presentation of Peter Dennis in his one-man theater show titled, "Bother!" The play has received a number of awards and honors, including the Drama-Logue Critics Award for Outstanding Achievement in Theatre-Concept and Performance and the L.A. Weekly theater award for Performance in a One-Character Show.

Following the Solo Series, Theater 150 will host the annual Playwright's Conference. The conference showcases the works of some of today's most prolific and prestigious playwrights.

"Twice the Child," will be playing at 8 p.m. tonight through Sunday and June



Peter Dennis
Star of "Bother!"

25-27 at Theater 150, 918 East Ojai Ave., Ojai. Tickets are \$20. Reservations are strongly recommended, as seating is limited. For information, call (805) 646-4300.

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Exotic quest builds friendships

Area woman links veterans of burlesque

An avid student of vaudeville for more than 15 years and a lifelong fan of all things theatrical, Jane Briggeman found a new avocation and founded a newsletter after a chance meeting with a retired burlesque dancer.

It was in December 1994. A friend introduced Briggeman to a

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She decided to help Tanayo find her friends.

Briggeman's mission in life soon became that of ferreting out and contacting every burlesque performer she could find. Relying on old photographs, newspaper ads, accounts of old times and the vivid memories of those who she located, Briggeman garnered valuable information to aid in her search.

"You don't find names like 'White Fury' or 'Rubberlegs' in the phone book," Briggeman said with a laugh. She said that, even when she finds performers, obtaining information from some individuals is difficult. "There's got to be trust factor there."

When Briggeman began her search, she was living in Iowa. She started out with a small list of names, addresses and phone numbers, but they were all on the West Coast.

It was the collection of people behind the list of names that drew Briggeman to California.

One morning, she threw a few possessions into her car and set out for Southern California, ultimately stopping in Ventura County, where she unloaded her pets, a few clothes, a word processor and her list of contacts.

"If I can't find the information, I go where the information will most likely be," Briggeman said.

In June 1995, Briggeman and 25 newfound friends from burlesque got together for their first Southern California reunion. The get-together rekindled old friendships and provided Briggeman

with fuel for a follow-up form letter.

The response to the letter was overwhelming and she developed the form into a semi-regular publication — The Golden Days of Burlesque Historical Society Newsletter.

"I admire Jane," said former burlesque star and Southland resident Stacy Farrell, who performed as "Eartha Quake." "I don't know where she gets her ambition."

Farrell began her career as a chorus girl at the Follies Theater in Los Angeles. She said that working in burlesque in those days meant more than looking pretty.

"You had to know how to dance," Farrell said. "We did tap, ballet, toe and jazz." Farrell said the dancers played scenes with the comics and paraded with grace and personality — always smiling at the audience.

For Farrell, the newsletter and the occasional get-togethers with other dancers are like staying in touch with extended family.

"I even met girls who I've heard of who were big stars back east," she said enthusiastically.

New and old stories are passed at the social events. Fun and fond memories mix with tales of the notorious. Briggeman and Farrell share the same opinion of one particular dancer named Rose La Rose who took her act a bit far.

"She ruined it for everybody," said Briggeman.

"I followed her act," Farrell said. "They must have thought I was from Sunday school or something."

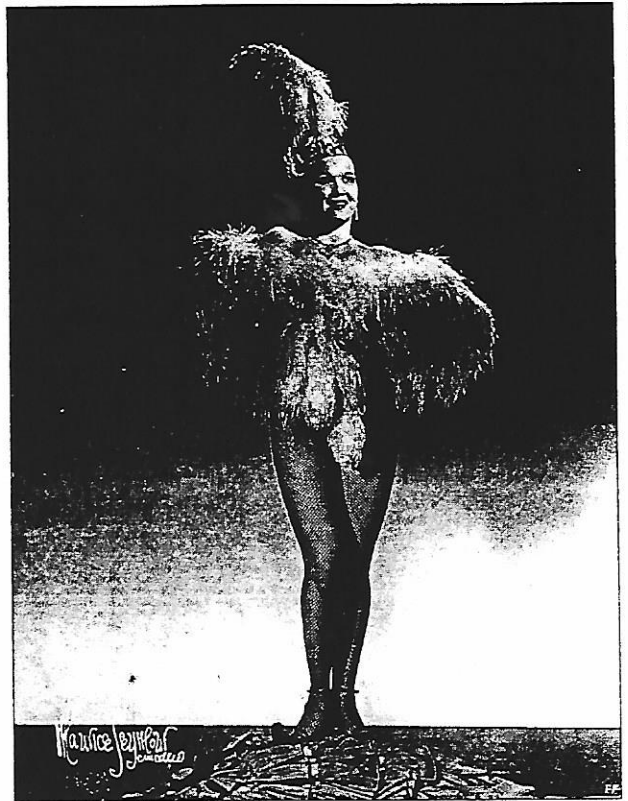
Social coordinator by chance-turned-newsletter publisher, Briggeman began receiving requests for information about the whereabouts of particular dancers and comics, leads on additional entertainers and an assortment of personal new items for publication.

Gleaning information from her sources can be tricky, she said. Many of the dancers who look younger than their years have been less than forthcoming with information linking them to any particular era.

"If you want to connect old friends, you have to at least know a decade," she said. Among her finds are one dancer and one comic in their 90s, and the real "Electra" of Gypsy Rose Lee fame who is now in her 80s. Briggeman has become close friends with several of the performers.

Briggeman has brought together a number of former burlesque notables.

Former Gypsy Rose Lee show chorus girl Betty Rowland; comics Dexter Maitland and Jimmy



Burlesque-era historian Jane Briggeman's research has connected and reconnected numerous performers from the more risqué side of vaudeville, including comic Jimmy Matthews, left. Others, such as the dancer known as Val de Val, remain a mystery for now.

Matthews, specialty dancer and talking woman for Abbott and Costello, Mimi Reed; and Larry Kane — the house singer for the famous Hudson Theatre in New Jersey — are among the burlesque alumni who are reunited courtesy of Briggeman. To date, she has located close to 200 people.

She plans to develop an archive for the newsletters and open a small museum space to preserve the memory of burlesque. In the meantime, with the help of her 200 new friends and others, she continues searching

for entertainers.

Briggeman showed several photos of as-yet unidentified performers, including a black and white glamour shot of dancer Val de Val, circa 1950-something.

"I'd really like to find her," said Briggeman. "She's one of my favorites."

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Elvis tribute set for Saturday

Performance will benefit Cal Lutheran

T H O U S A N D O A K S
Decked out in a wardrobe of flashy jumpsuits, Raymond Michael mirrors the persona of rock icon Elvis Presley in the annual "A Tribute to the King of Rock 'n' Roll," scheduled for the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza on Saturday.

More than a mere musical rendering of a legend, the 8 p.m. show is a remarkably entertaining and historic Elvis Presley retrospective.

"I approached it like Hal Holbrook approached Mark Twain," said Michael of the show he has performed for 26 years.

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A classically trained singer and, in recent years, an award-winning educator, Michael determined that his

impersonation would be a cut above the run-of-the-mill Elvis acts. The singer developed his upscale act by obtaining and studying rare reel-to-reel footage of Elvis in concert.

His realistic portrayal of the rock star includes musical charts orchestrated to sound like the originals and costumes designed by the creator of Elvis' costumes, Gene Doucette.

Between numbers, Michael explains how the songs came to be written and illustrates some of the tunes with colorful anecdotal stories.

"I don't take on the persona of Elvis," said Michael. "I talk in Elvis' style, but I do it in the third person."

Michael discovered his Elvis abilities in 1972 when hypnotist George Sharp visited California Lutheran University. Sharp hypnotized a panel of students, including Michael, on stage. As part of his show, Sharp asked Michael to imitate Elvis. Michael amazed the student audience with his impromptu performance of "Blue Suede Shoes."

Michael was a freshman voice major, football team member and student body vice president at the time. He was not an Elvis fan. He knew "Blue Suede Shoes" only because his roommate liked the song.

Over the years, Michael has performed throughout the



Raymond Michael will bring his realistic portrayal of Elvis to the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza.

United States and on network television, and also overseas. He was honored as the No. 1 Elvis illusionist in the world in a 1996 World Wide Web poll. According to Michael, television music host and rock maven Dick Clark has named him one of the ten best Elvis impersonators in the world.

A bodyguard for Elvis, a backup singer and other members of Elvis' former entourage have made special cameo appearances with Michael.

Proceeds from the show support the performing arts at California Lutheran University.

Jim Wilber is serving as musical producer for the 11th annual California Lutheran University Elvis tribute fund-raiser. A fellow classmate of Michael's and an alumnus of the university, as well as a fine musician in his own right, Wilber has watched Michael perfect his impersonation.

"He is so good at his movements and sounds, he truly is the king of the people who

know The King," said Wilber. "He gives the audience their money's worth." The producer said that the show has been easy to organize because everyone enjoys participating and wants to help support the university's performing arts program.

The show participants take on the roles of jazz band and backup singers. The personnel are primarily CLU alumni, and their day jobs runs the gamut from professional musician to stock broker and publisher's representative. Audience members who look closely may spot Conejo Valley Symphony conductor Howard Sonstegard amid the tuxedo-clad singers.

Michael said he is pleased that audiences have responded favorably to his act. To date, his efforts on behalf of the university have raised more than \$100,000.

Apart from his sometimes busy performance schedule, Michael teaches musical show production and directs the chorus at Moorpark High School.

He advises for the Associated Student Body and the school newspaper.

"Teaching gives me a stable life," said the showman. "I'm blessed with two worlds." The performer and educator said that his performing arts students tend to listen to him because he is actually "out there in the trenches."

The Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza is located at 2100 Thousand Oaks Blvd. Tickets for the Elvis Tribute are priced from \$10 to \$35. Founders Circle ticket purchasers will join Raymond Michael backstage for a preperformance reception. Tickets and information are available at the Civic Arts Plaza box office or by calling the box office at (805) 449-ARTS.

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Gene Blevins/Special to the Daily News

The cast of "The Odd Couple," with women as the leads, will kick off a run of shows at the Marquee Dinner Theater tonight.

Female cast engenders 'Odd' version

CAMARILLO
An unorthodox pairing of the female persuasion aims to amuse Marquee Dinner Theatre guests tonight when Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple" opens. Directed by Don Pearlman, a cast of eight players will depict eccentric co-dependent roommates Olive Madison and Florence

Unger and their circle of friends.

"It hasn't been done and most people aren't aware of it," said Pearlman of the show featuring women in the lead parts.

Unlike its male counterpart, the female version of the play never made it from Broadway to the big screen or television.

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"So many people have seen the original, they'll be thinking of Olive and Florence as Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon," Pearlman said, referring to the stars of the 1968 hit film.

Matthau and actor Art Carney portrayed Oscar and Felix, respectively, in the original 1965 Broadway production. Jack Klugman (Oscar) and Tony Randall (Felix) played the roles in the television series.

Broadway audiences were first treated to Simon's alternative version of "The Odd Couple," featuring Rita Moreno and Sally Struthers, in 1970.

For Dee Anne Helsel and Gail James, mastering the personalities of Olive and Florence was almost as easy as not cleaning house. "For me, Olive is the perfect character," said Helsel. "I'm not a natural slob, though I do appear to be."

James, who portrays Florence, admits that she is actually more of a messy Olive than a tidy Florence in real life, though she enjoys acting out the idiosyncratic nose-honking routine and other quirky behaviors that Florence exhibits.

"This is a person who could make Mother Teresa crazy in two weeks," said James. The actress said her main challenge was keeping neurotic Florence within the bounds of believability as a person.

Though the female version of "The Odd



Dee Anne Helsel, left, plays Olive Madison to Gail James' Florence Unger in the female version of Neil Simon's comedy, which was first performed on Broadway with women in the lead roles in 1970.

Couple" is looking at its 30th birthday, James said certain societal and cultural issues contained in the script are as valid and important now as they were in the '70s.

"The drama beneath the comedy points to a piece of something that happens to a lot of women," said James, adding, "If something happens to the family unit, like a divorce, they don't know how to deal with it."

Judy Weaver, who plays Sylvie, agreed that social causes are more clearly defined in the women's script. She said that acting out divorce, loneliness and life struggles has brought the cast closer together.

"We don't even know if we're following the script anymore," laughed Weaver. The actresses concur that the dialogue almost seemed to flow without any assistance in recent rehearsals. "Everybody takes care of each other," said James, referring to the players as well as to the characters they assume.

Some of the funnier business in the show will revolve around the Costazuola brothers — two upstairs neighbors with whom Olive and Florence are enamored — and the

inimitable comic writing of Neil Simon that demands an intelligent, attentive audience.

In addition to Helsel, James and Weaver, the cast includes Susan Burns, Ron Ford, Bill Hillstrom, Theresa Secor and Lynn Sherman. Helsel might be remembered from her featured roles in "Cagney and Lacey," "The Bob Newhart Show," and "Hill Street Blues," among other television series. When she is not acting on one stage or another, James is operations manager for a division of Schlumberger Ltd.

"The Odd Couple" will run tonight through Feb. 20. Tickets are \$35 for adults, \$33 for seniors, and \$28 for ages 12 and under. The price includes a buffet dinner, the show and gratuity. Doors will open at 6:30 p.m.

The Marquee Dinner Theater is at 340 N. Mobil Ave. in Camarillo. For tickets and information, call (805) 484-9909.

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Play recalls student massacre in Mexico

OXNARD powerful drama juxtaposing a love story with a saga of political uprising will be performed at the Petit Playhouse in Oxnard for the last time Saturday night.

"October Ended a Long Time Ago" commemorates the 1968 Tlatelco Square massacre of students demon-

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strating for democracy in Mexico City.

"None of the violence taking place in the world was as terrible as what the Mexican government was visiting upon its citizens," said director Christine Aerenlund.

Aerenlund was in Mexico City when government troops and police armed with automatic weapons opened fire on demonstrators and passing civilians. The slaughter has been called the Kent State of Mexico and more frequently has been compared to the 1989 Chinese Tiananmen Square massacre.

Observers at the Tlatelco Square on Oct. 2 claimed that more than 300 hundred died in the attack. For 30 years, the government has insisted there were only 30 fatalities. Including the student faction, thousands of unsuspecting

men, women and children were injured as a result of the government action.

Students carefully selected the October date to voice their discontent. The protest took place only 10 days before the opening of the Olympic Games in Mexico City.

With reporters from every country on hand and the eyes of the world focused on Mexico, the students hoped to lay their cause before an international audience.

According to Aerenlund, who was working with the Canadian Olympic delegation, reporters were among the first on the scene when violence erupted.

"The Olympic reporters knew something was going on and were trying to get into the square," said Aerenlund. As she and a co-worker drove through the area, they picked up an American reporter. "We arrived at the plaza just as the military shut it down," she said.

Playwright Pilar Campesino attempted to premiere "October Ended a Long Time Ago" in December 1970 in Mexico City. Claiming they were acting for moral and political security, Mexican officials shut down the production before it could open.

Campesino took the play to the United States, where it premiered at the New York City Community Center in 1971. In September 1974 the drama finally opened in Mexico City.

In the Oxnard production, Lourdes Solórzano and Fabian Morales star as

Elena and Mario, two mismatched lovers caught up in their own intimate conflict while friction between government and students escalates and political struggles rage around them. Performed in Spanish and English titling, the metaphorical stage drama takes on a multimedia character including actual student film footage captured Oct. 2, 1968.

"October Ended a Long Time Ago" is a production of the Teatro de las Americas, organized almost six years ago. According to Aerenlund, who is the company's artistic director, the intense drama represents a departure from the norm.

"The productions have been all comedy up to now," said Aerenlund. "This play is a risk, but something we have to do."

Teatro de las Americas was organized to entertain and educate audiences of all ages through the presentation of Latin American and Spanish works. The company intends to build a bridge of language and understanding between cultures. Local bilingual talent produces, directs and performs three plays each season.

"If we're building a bridge, we can't speak Spanish only," said Aerenlund. "Through these performances, we learn about ourselves and share what we learn with the other cultures where we live."

According to Aerenlund, the Oxnard production of "October Ended a Long Time Ago" has stirred up interest and some memories. After each performance, she

said, people from the audience have approached her to relate personal stories about the events in October 1968.

One woman who lived near Tlatelco Square spoke of running away from the popping gunfire. For others whose friends and relatives were killed or wounded in the massacre, the play has proved therapeutic.

The director cautioned that the drama might not be appropriate for children younger than 12. "The play is intense and pretty rough."

The play will be performed at 8 p.m. at the Petit Playhouse at 730 South B St., Oxnard. Tickets are \$10 or \$7 with valid student identification. For more information about "October Ended a Long Time Ago" and Teatro de las Americas, call (805) 984-3222, Ext. 1.

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