

By STEVE BORNFELD

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Why are you such a "bitch"?

"I'll tell you why I'm a bitch!" says the former pint-size TV meanie to a giggling audience in a video clip. "Do you have any idea the (expletive) I have had to put up with? At least once a day, someone has called me a bitch to my face every day since I was 11 years old!"

Blond curls and black heart. Such was the essence of playing devious Nellie Oleson on the exceedingly wholesome "Little House on the Prairie," what her impish portrayer, Alison Arngrim, refers to as "like having PMS for seven years."

Channeling that into a show of funny reflections, faux-outrage and backstage dish, Arngrim brings her long-touring, one-woman "Confessions of a Prairie Bitch" to the Onyx Theatre tonight for a two-weekend run, with a companion autobiography released earlier this year. Serious issues crop up in the book, such as incest at the hands of her brother and her AIDS activism after the death of "Prairie" co-star Steve Tracy, who played her husband on the show. But "Confessions" concentrates on gossipy good fun. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome ...

The "Bitch":

Question: Your dad was a Hollywood agent and your mom was a voice actress (of Casper the Friendly Ghost!). What's it like growing up in a show-biz family?

Answer: Everybody who came to dinner was on television. Until I was 7, I didn't know that everybody in the world didn't have a TV show.

Q: You tormented Melissa Gilbert's character on "Little House," but you're real-life pals. Do some people actually think you hate each other?

A: I was at a party at Melissa's house a few years ago, and this was grown people, mind you. One woman, she worked for a studio, her husband was a producer, she's drinking a margarita and says, "When did you guys decide to bury the hatchet and make up?" Melissa looks at me and says, "Did we have a fight I don't remember?" Then it dawned on us — she means the show. We thought, You're in the industry, are you crazy? Good Lord!

Q: You don't hold back in "Confessions," claiming another actress was the "real bitch." And that would be?

A: Melissa Sue Anderson. She acted like she thought Melissa and I were juvenile delinquents and she was the real actress. If you look at (Gilbert's) career, she's done dozens of TV movies and was president of the (Screen Actors Guild). You look at Melissa Sue Anderson's on imdb.com, you go, "What?" Something very screwy was going on with her.

Q: So ... Michael Landon really didn't wear underwear under his pants?

A: That's true. It was the '70s, and guys were wearing tight jeans and no underwear and being very Hollywood.

Q: What was he like on-set?

A: He was great but he was completely bananas. He was married three times, had, what, 87 children? He

drank and smoked and told the filthiest jokes and was out of his gourd. He was mad, crazed, like a 13-year-old boy. When the show ended, he blew up the set.

Q: Given how hated Nellie was, what was it like at personal appearances?

A: We (Arngrim and Katherine MacGregor, who played her mom) went to this posh private school in costume. Not only did nobody want our autograph, but small children cried and ran. I was at a Christmas party and someone threw a McDonald's cup of orange soda at my head. It's sort of freakish. But actors always say they want people to think it's real. Well, I'm here to tell you that can be accomplished but it's kind of dangerous.

Q: You've written that playing Nellie has helped you psychologically. How?

A: I got through sexual abuse as a child. I was also very shy. Here I was playing this person who wasn't afraid of her anger, all this dark, awful stuff. Other people would be sitting on all this anger and here I was given this tremendous opportunity to spit it all out, and in front of people. How therapeutic is that?

Q: Didn't you worry about typecasting as such a, well, bitch?

A: I like scaring people, going BOO! Sometimes (producers) say, "Maybe we can get someone like Nellie Oleson?" Why not Nellie Oleson? I'm available.

Q: You originally auditioned for the parts the two Melissas got. Any regrets?

A: Oh, yuck! I say "Thank God!" I make fun of Melissa Sue, but I'm impressed neither one of them went on a tri-state killing spree. If I was being held to that image of a perfect little girl all the time, I'd go out of my tree. Anything I do now looks nice by comparison. I have a totally unfair advantage.

Q: Do you ever watch the show now?

A: Hell, yeah! I have nine seasons on DVD, I have it in French and I just got the German DVDs. I start laughing when I watch it. It's like the most twisted home movie ever because I remember what we were doing while we were filming it.

Q: How did you escape the sad fates of so many ex-child stars?

A: The way Michael ran the set had a very good effect on us, so we're not as screwed up as everyone else. Our slogan would be: "Little House: No arrests, no convictions, we're very proud."

Preview

"Confessions of a Prairie Bitch," starring Alison Arngrim

8 p.m. today, Friday, Saturday, Aug. 12-14

Onyx Theatre, 953 E. Sahara Ave, inside The Rack

\$25 (732-7225; www.onyxtheatre.com)

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