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THE HEART OF DIXIE

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Dixie Carter slides out of a black Jaguar with feline grace.

As befits one of the stars of television's "Designing Women," she is wearing designer clothes--from big red sunglasses to high red heels.

She's come to town to play a leading role in the Long Beach Civic Light Opera's production of "Pal Joey," which opens at the Terrace Theater Saturday night. She glides into the company's administrative offices clutching a small handbag and a plastic bottle of designer water.

"Excuse me," she says sweetly as she sits down and takes off her glasses. "Sometimes I forget to take them off. It's so rude to keep them on."

Rude is not a word anyone would associate with Dixie Carter. It seems unlikely the slender Southern beauty has committed many, if any, social faux pas in her lifetime. So it isn't entirely surprising that she instinctively distances herself from those who do.

Recently, "Designing Women" has been the breeding ground of more gossip off than on the TV screen. Following a highly public feud with the producers of "Designing Women," Delta Burke has left the show. The rift was related to charges that Burke, who played the role of the rich and spoiled Suzanne Sugarbaker, had become a fat and spoiled actress.

Of the squabbling, Carter will only say, "I tried not to take any of that in. I don't intend to think or talk about it. Far too much has been said about something that was not true and is inconsequential--not substantial, or perhaps ridiculous.

"We are entering a very exciting new season," she adds. "Julia Duffy and Jan Hooks (the comedy's new cast members) are fresh shots of energy and will add interest to the show."

Though Carter is best known in Hollywood for her work on "Designing Women," her career is firmly rooted in the stage. She was reared in rural Tennessee in a town called McLemoresville, population 200, and received a bachelor's degree in English from Memphis State University. From there it was on to New York for a career as an opera singer.

"Then came the rude awakening," she recalls. "My voice simply wasn't big enough for opera."

At the suggestion of a friend, she auditioned and was cast in Joseph Papp's Shakespeare in the Park. Following an eight-year break from acting and singing to be at home with her two young daughters, she returned to the stage.

Over the years, she has played leading roles in classics such as "Oklahoma!" "Kiss Me Kate" and "Carousel," and has won awards in off-Broadway productions of "Fathers and Sons" and "Jesse and the Bandit Queen." She was a regular on the daytime soap "The Edge of Night," and has appeared in several TV movies and films.

Yet, had it not been for her husband, Hal Holbrook, she says she's certain she wouldn't be doing what she's doing today.

"He is the reason I have a singing career and a career in television," she says. "He encourages me. He puts me forward. Those are experiences I heretofore have not had."

The marriage, the third for both, is "the perfect pairing," she adds. "Who knows why? Maybe it's because we try harder. We are very well matched. He likes me."

Until she and Holbrook were married in 1984 and her career and checkbook began to skyrocket, she spent years as a single parent. For much of that time, her parents lived with her and helped her raise her girls. Though her mother died 10 years ago, her father still lives with her and Holbrook in L.A.

She is not eager to talk about Hollywood scandals. And she says she's a little superstitious talking about "Pal Joey." But on the subject of family, she is on comfortable ground.

With the ink barely dry on her diploma from Harvard, her oldest daughter, Mary Dixie, just got the lead role in a production of "A Streetcar Named Desire" in Massachusetts. Her younger daughter, Ginna Carter, also a student at Harvard, is a songwriter.

"I try to do nothing when they are around," she says. "I can't stand being away from them.

"What I want for them is that they continue to bloom," she adds. "I want them to be happy within themselves and kind to the world around them, and I think both things are true of my girls."

When she isn't rehearsing for "Designing Women," Carter sings in supper clubs across the country and is well known for her show at the Carlyle Hotel in New York.

"They think I'm mad"

"I love to perform live," she says. "The attraction is that it's risky and thrilling. On the downside, it's frightening. When people hear I finish filming and then rush to the Carlyle to do 10 shows a week, they think I'm mad.

"That's what nourishes me throughout the TV year. I love my character and the show and I'm very proud of it. But performing on camera is different. You're in the hands of producers and editors. When it's live, the final performance is in the hands of the performer, and the other participant is the audience. So far, my experiences on stage have been joyous.

"I know it sounds hackneyed," she adds. "But you have to keep on trying to improve. Some of us were just brought up to feel that way. You never give the performance of your dreams. It's always ahead of you." In "Pal Joey," Carter will play the role of Vera. Also starring is Elaine Stritch as Melba and Peter Reardon as Joey. Carter says she'll not only be performing with "the greats," she has the highest respect for director David Steinberg.

She hesitates before continuing. "But I'm so afraid to say anything that sounds in any way puffed up," she notes. "It frightens me. I'm superstitious about it. As a performer, I'm leery of making predictions.

"We'll just give it our best shot."