

## Sally Struthers finds 'deeper, more touching' Dolly in touring production



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All Dolly Levis are not created equal.

Just ask Sally Struthers who has played the role six times over a dozen years.

“With more maturity comes more wisdom,” the Emmy-winning actress says during one of her stops on the current “Hello, Dolly!” tour. “I think I’ve become less clowny and more thoughtful. I know how to be funny – it’ll say on my gravestone, ‘Here lies a clown’ -- but this time

out, I’m much much more tender.”

Credit director Jeffrey Moss who told her, “We know you can be funny. Now play the moment sincerely.”

The 66-year-old Struthers pulled away from go-to bits and found a richer character.

“I’m approaching the role as an actress and a comedian,” she says. “I pride myself in my ability to not only get an audience to laugh but also to move them to tears.”

Folks who have seen the show tell her they don’t know how she can get audiences to cry one minute and laugh the next. “I’m a veteran,” she responds. “I’m working.”

The “Dolly” tour, which stops in Sioux City Jan 26, runs through April, giving Struthers ample time to renew acquaintances at theaters she has visited over the years.

“I thought it was going to be tough,” she says of the series of single-night shows, “but it’s livable. You’re not at home with your child, your dog, your friends. But you get to actually see the country and have some fun.”

On the bus (yup, Dolly travels on the cast bus), the “All in the Family” star busies herself with crossword puzzles and, now, a new iPhone. “I never had anything fancy like that but the kids (in the show) are going to teach me. It may take the next three months but I’m going to learn.”

Traveling on a bus, she says, “forces you to rest. And we have quiet times on the bus so you can sleep if you want to.”

Then, when the cast hits the stage, she’s ready. Audiences do react differently in different parts of the country.

“In the Bible Belt – and I mean no disrespect when I say that – they’re a politer, quieter audience. I used to think that was because they weren’t enjoying the show. But when they leap to their feet at the end of the show you realize they enjoyed it.

“Then you get to other parts of the country where they’re ready to have a good time when the curtain opens. I often want to hold up a sign to some of the senior citizens: ‘We can’t hear you when you’re smiling.’”

Although there’s talk of reviving the show on Broadway (to note its 50th anniversary), Struthers doubts she’ll be considered for the role there.

“The scuttlebutt is they want Kristin Chenoweth, who’s darling and got a great voice, but I personally don’t think she’s right for it. Between the two of us, the American ticket-buying public knows my name better than hers, but that’s OK. I’m sure my name isn’t even on their list.”

And that’s just fine. Struthers has her post-“Dolly” year already planned. Included in that time? The marriage of her daughter. Over Christmas she went with her to find a bridal gown. “She got a dress that was so gorgeous you could wear it to the Oscars.”

And mom’s dress? “I called the designers for ‘Dolly’ because I had never worn such beautiful costumes before and asked if they would help me. I told them I’d bring them my favorite jacket and my favorite dress and see if they could make me something.”

The answer: “Vincent loves you.” Stay tuned.

Meanwhile, Struthers isn’t above spending some of the precious off-stage time playing real-life matchmaker. She introduced her dresser to a sound designer while they were on a production of “Nunsense.” “I kept saying, ‘He’s wonderful’ and ‘Isn’t Becky nice?’” Sure enough, the nudging worked. The two became a couple and, no, she hasn’t lost her dresser. “They stayed with me over Christmas because he’s on tour with ‘Peter and the Starcatcher.’”

With three months to go, there's plenty of time for Struthers to work more magic.

## Details

What: "Hello, Dolly!"

When: 7 p.m. Sunday Jan. 26

Where: Orpheum Theatre

Tickets: At All Ticketmaster locations

Details: To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Tony-winning musical, Sally Struthers is touring the country in the title role.

## Joining the ‘Family’

Sally Struthers won two Emmys for playing Archie Bunker's daughter on "All in the Family." But the role just as easily could have gone to "Laverne and Shirley" star Penny Marshall.

"She was living with Rob Reiner at the time and we both had to go into the final auditions with all of the suits and the writers and do improv with him," Struthers remembers.

"Because I knew he was intentionally going to do better with Penny, that took away my nerves. I didn't act defeated" even though several people remarked that Marshall looked a lot like Jean Stapleton – who was cast as Gloria's mother.

Struthers, however, got the job; Marshall got the man – she and Reiner later married.

"Several weeks later, after I had gotten the show, I went on a fishing expedition and asked (producer) Norman Lear why I got the part. He told me, 'If the show is a hit, we had to decide if we wanted Gloria to be mommy's little girl or daddy's little girl. And we decided she'd be daddy's girl. You got the part because you had a fat face and blue eyes just like Carroll (O'Connor, who played Archie Bunker).'

"That day I learned never to go on a fishing expedition if you don't like what you're going to catch," Struther says.

The series went on to become one of the landmark comedies in television history. It prompted a Struthers spin-off – "Gloria" – and continues to be a source of pride for that chubby-cheeked actress.

"Thanks to 'All in the Family,' I don't have to go on auditions," Struthers says. "I get offered jobs all the time."