CHICAGO – For every nice girl on the prairie, there needed to be an evil opposite who wasn’t so nice. Nellie Oleson was that nasty girl on the NBC-TV legend “Little House on the Prairie, and Alison Arngrim portrayed her. She has parlayed that long ago child actor part into a stand-up routine and new memoir about her experiences.

From 1974-1981, Alison Arngrim was the girl TV audiences loved to hate. After years of shunning her former nasty image, Arngrim’s new book is called “Confessions of a Prairie Bitch: How I Survived Nellie Oleson and Learned to Love Being Hated.” The memoir is a mix of light hearted humor about her former TV persona and personal tragedy about desperate real-life family secrets.
HollywoodChicago.com, your Little House on the Prairie Headquarters, is following up an interview with Melissa Sue Anderson – who played kindly Mary Ingalls in the series – with Alison Arngrim, representing the dark side of that family favorite as Nellie Oleson. She spoke of the series, her co-stars, her show business family and her critically praised memoir.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did your role as Nellie Oleson on Little House evolve to your current relationship with the character in your comedy act, and led you to write the book?

Alison Arngrim: Having been on the show for so long, and with the show in reruns really taking on a life of its own – it’s now in 140 countries – I was constantly being asked all sorts of bizarre questions about Nellie. And I really felt an obligation to those fans to answer them. So that is how the act evolved. I went from regular stand up to telling stories from my life, in an effort to answer those questions, including a Q&A session after the act. Then it became obvious there had to be a book.

HC: You actually auditioned for all the parts offered on Little House, correct?

AA: Yes, the search for Laura Ingalls was like the search for Scarlett O’Hara, except for eight year olds. I think everyone in that town auditioned for Laura, and then I auditioned for Mary. I wondered why they kept calling me back, until finally they offered me the part of Nellie Oleson.

HC: In retrospect, did you have more fun and notoriety playing Nellie than potentially you think you would have if you were one of the Ingalls?

AA: No question, I would have hated being one of the Ingalls, [laughs] not to mention the impact it has had on my life. It wouldn’t have been as much fun to be Laura or Mary, Nellie was way more fun. In the long haul, it would also had been difficult to maintain that goody two-shoes image. Nellie gave me more freedom, and as I talk about in my book, with what I went through in my life, my character work gave me the opportunity to vent all my hostilities and rage. That’s the best damn thing that could have happened to me.

HC: In the seventies, it seemed like every show had to have a character that made the heroes in the series even more heroic – I’m thinking you in Little House and Frank Burns in M*A*S*H. Do you think they made you a bitch just for a bitches sake to make the Ingalls’ family that much more angelic? Or did they just like writing you as such and having someone better than goody two-shoes image?

AA: It was a little of both. Nellie was a real person in the Laura Ingall’s books, although she did take the character from two girls that she knew and blended them into Nellie Oleson. A lot of people said that Laura the writer made Nellie worse in reality, too, to make herself look good. [laughs] There is definitely that in the books so the girl Laura has something to overcome.
When we did the show, and I really took to the character, and also Michael Landon and the production crew took to me, Nellie did evolve to become much meaner, more scheming, more campy and outrageous.

HC: Melissa Sue Anderson told me in an interview that looking back she felt much more separate and serious on set than Melissa Gilbert and rest of the kids in the cast. Did you feel that and did that cause some discomfort in those days?

AA: I really got the sense that perhaps her mother had told her that Melissa Gilbert and I were juvenile delinquents. [laughs] I will concede that she was shy, I was shy as well, perhaps we were both shy and this contributed to our gross misunderstanding. However, she wants to talk about her professional business and professional relationships and my response is, ‘you were 10 years old!’ What the hell are you talking about? [laughs]

HC: Even though you grew up in a showbiz family, were you prepared for the rigors of series television once you landed the role?

AA: I thought so. I had some warning about it, I certainly knew enough people on television, but nobody had done a series for that long. My brother did a show, but it was all in studio. No one I knew had been on a series that did so much location work, and they didn’t realize how physically grueling that would be. I’d have to tell my parents how hard I was working. [laughs]

HC: You were 19 years old when the series ended, did it get on your nerves when you became an adolescent?

AA: Yeah, you go through the phase where you want to be the ‘pretty girl’ and want people to love you, and that’s not what I was doing on the show. And people used to say to me in the 1970s, ‘why can’t you be on a cool show, like Happy Days?’

HC: Did you feel frustration in the years after Little House ended that you weren’t able to get the roles that could have transitioned you beyond the kid actor stage?

AA: Sometimes. You remember in the 1980s when there were a lot of those teen exploitation films, they asked me to be a cheerleader, naked or dead, or all three. I admittedly turned down a couple things. I was hoping, well, we’re done with Little House now, so hire me for something else. I was amazed on how many times I was called not only for the bitch roles, but for period 1800-era roles.

HC: Was there any notable auditions that you had that you didn’t land that could have made things different?

AA: I’m trying to remember. There were a number of weird auditions I had during the show, when I was fairly young I auditioned for that whole ‘Audrey Rose’ thing. And I told Melissa Gilbert that I just had gone on the weirdest audition. She said, ‘oh yeah, Audrey Rose, I did that last week.’

HC: Do you think that Michael Landon was lionized out of proportion because of his untimely and public death, as in the Hollywood bad boy side of him was buried and only all his good was celebrated? In your working with him, was that adulation appropriate?

AA: I say in my book at some point that we make saints out of people who die, when the whole reason we loved them in the first place is that they weren’t saints. If you would ask Michael, when he was alive, if he were the perfect saintly family man, he would have laughed in your face.

He was a genius though, and his accomplishments were many, so the adulation was certainly due.
HC: What was the origin of you desiring to get into show business? Was it your veteran parents pushing you in that direction or you just wanting to get into it?

AA: I wanted to get a job. When I was six years old, everyone I knew was employed. [laughs] And I wanted to make enough money to leave home.

HC: And what were the circumstances of your first big break?

AA: I had a national Hunt’s Ketchup commercial at six years old. I was also on a panel show called ‘Juvenile Jury,’ which was very strange. I was the third grade Kitty Carlisle. But Little House was the biggest break.

HC: What do you think you saw or experienced as a child growing up in show business that you don’t think the average child saw or experienced, and do you have a specific example?

AA: Well, I saw and experienced so much just at my house. It’s in my book. It did prepare me for show business, especially the interview thing. Because my family was already ‘famous,’ before I ever sat down with TV Guide or the National Enquirer, I already knew that fan magazines made things up. I developed a bizarre cynicism by the time I was 12 years old.

HC: I read you recently made an independent film called ‘Make the Yuletide Gay.’ What were the circumstances of landing in that project?

AA: A comedian I knew told me that these guys were trying to find me. When I called them, the director told me that they talked about getting someone like Nellie Oleson, and then they said why don’t we just go get her. I was thrilled, I read it and thought it was so funny. I provided my own wardrobe, the leopard print outfits. I thought it would be three days of fun, but it’s actually become a cult hit. I’m really happy about that.

HC: Finally, what do you think set your generation of child actors apart from what you observe about today’s child stars?

AA: Panties.

HC: What?

AA: Panties, we wore them. Seriously, there seems to be a lack of underwear thing going on. I mean, we talk about Michael Landon wearing tight pants with no underwear in the 1970s, but where did everyone’s underpants go in the last 10 years? [laughs]

“Confessions of a Prairie Bitch: How I Survived Nellie Oleson and Learned to Love Being Hated” by Alison Arngrim is available at Borders.
Books and wherever books are sold. The complete series and single seasons of "Little House on the Prairie" are available on DVD through Lions Gate Entertainment.

By PATRICK McDONALD [14]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [13]

© 2010 Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com

Source URL (retrieved on Oct 11 2017 - 3:15am):

Links:
[13] mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com