Interviews: ‘American Graffiti,’ ‘Laverne & Shirley’ at the Hollywood Celebrities Show

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CHICAGO – “Where were you in ‘62?” was the tagline for the popular 1973 film “American Graffiti.” The Hollywood Celebrities Show had most of the cast there – Cindy Williams, Charles Martin Smith, Paul LeMat and Candy Clark.

And in her capacity to represent two pop culture favorites, Cindy Williams also, of course, played Shirley Feeney from 1976-1983 in hit TV sitcom “Laverne & Shirley.” She even brought “The Big Ragu,” Eddie Mekka, along for the ride.

HollywoodChicago talked to all of them at the mid-October gathering in Rosemont, Illinois, and ace photog Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto made sure he lensed their images.

“American Graffiti” was one of the touchstone films of the 1970s that launched another wave of influential filmmakers and stars. Directed by George Lucas, Graffiti is basically a car cruising movie set in 1962, but with background implications of the impending revolution of the 1960s, including the rising tide of rock ‘n roll, the spectre of Vietnam and the innocence of pre-Kennedy assassination America.

Besides the interviewees listed above, the film solidified the careers of Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola (the producer of the film), Richard Dreyfus (Curt), Ron Howard (Steve), Harrison Ford (Bob), Mackenzie Phillips (Carol), Suzanne Somers (Blonde in T-Bird) and the great Wolfman Jack (Disc Jockey). Like Martin Scorsese’s “Mean Streets” and Coppola’s own “The Godfather,” Graffiti launched new sensibility and talent into the film industry.

Cindy Williams, Shirley Feeney in ‘Laverne & Shirley,’ Laurie in ‘American Graffiti’

It’s easy to forget, now that the show has been off the air for over 25 years, that Laverne & Shirley was one of the most popular sitcoms of its era. In fact, it was the number one, top rated show in 1977 and ‘78, in a time of “All in the Family,” “M*A*S*H,” “Mary Tyler Moore” and its cousin “Happy Days.”

It was the chemistry of its stars, Penny Marshall and Cindy Williams, that provided the spark for that popularity. By the time Williams played Shirley, she was a veteran film character actress, and besides Graffiti with Lucas she had appeared in films directed by Jack Nicholson, Francis Ford Coppola and the renown Roger Corman within a three year span.

Hassenpfeffer, Inc: Cindy Williams at the Hollywood Celebrities Show, Oct. 17th, 2009
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Within a space of three years, you performed in films directed by George Lucas, Roger Corman, Jack Nicholson and Francis Ford Coppola. What kind of connections got you to each one of them?

Cindy Williams: It was sort of a domino effect. Once you worked for Roger Corman the rest just fell into place and were a piece of cake.

HC: You were a semi-regular on the TV sitcom ‘Room 222.’ What do you think set that show apart in the era it was on?

CW: I actually did three of them, and I always played the same character, Rhoda Zagor. Room 222 was a coming-of-age television show that was done in a very light-hearted yet dramatic way. It was multi-layered and had something for everyone. It played to teenagers, but was also an adult drama and comedy at the same time. It was very well written.

HC: Laverne & Shirley had a slightly surreal quality in its last years. Were you disappointed that the show abandoned its working class roots?

CW: Penny and I fought against them moving the show from Milwaukee to Hollywood [starting in 1980], but there were certain producers who felt that it was the best thing to do. And we wanted to keep it rooted in the working class mentality and that struggle. Even though the move opened up the show and we could do other things, which were a lot of fun, both Penny and I were disappointed.

HC: What was it like appearing on Broadway in ‘The Drowsy Chaperone,’ after so many years of doing TV and film?

CW: A dream come true. It was so much fun. The first day I got on that stage and I was by myself, I knelt down and kissed center stage (laughs). Unfortunately after I did only 10 performances, the show closed.

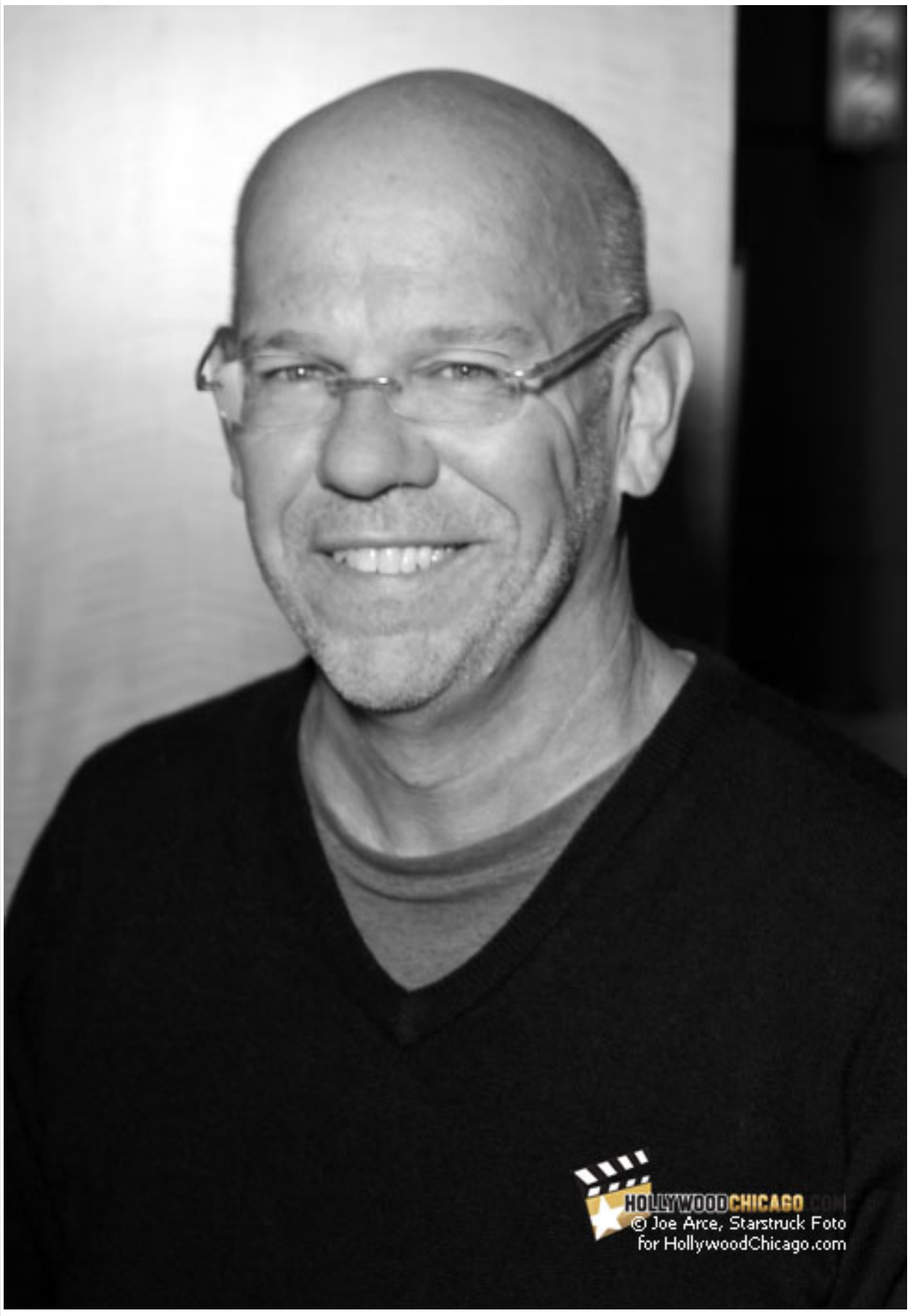
HC: Finally, in looking back at all the roles you’ve done, which one best defines you?

CW: Shirley. It’s a one-word answer.

Charles Martin Smith, Toad in ‘American Graffiti,’ star of ‘Never Cry Wolf’

Charles Martin Smith – distinguished film actor, writer and director – is probably best remembered for his role in Graffiti as Toad, but went on to forge memorable turns in “The Buddy Holly Story,” “Starman” and especially in the challenging and haunting Never Cry Wolf.

The director side of him has been busy for years, most recently with Disney’s “Air Bud” and an independent feature entitled “Stone of Destiny.”



Never Cry Toad: Charles Martin Smith, October 17th, 2009
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: How did you come upon ‘Stone of Destiny’ as a project, that you eventually wrote and directed?

Charles Martin Smith: A friend of mine had read the book that Ian Hamilton wrote, and Ian was the ringleader of the bunch. I was at a screening of ‘Titus,’ starring Anthony Hopkins, and after the screening my friend told me the whole story, and on the spot I said I wanted to write and direct that movie. It was just a great story, and I couldn’t believe that no one had made a film of it before.

So we optioned the book, I got to know Ian, and I wrote and directed the film.

HC: After playing Terry in ‘American Graffiti,’ did you feel a bit typecast as the nerd character afterward?

CMS: I think people do see you that way, when you play a particular type of role or genre. Producers feel safer having you repeat what you’ve done before. I made an effort to try and not to do that. But Terry is a pretty cool guy, you can call him sort of a nerd character but he actually is much more interesting than that.

HC: You were recently a semi-regular on the TV series ‘Drive’ and ‘Da Vinci’s City Hall.’ Were there any classic TV shows when you were first starting out that you had a shot of being a regular on?

CMS: No, there never really were. I stuck to feature films for auditions when I was young and starting out. It’s a good question, but I never did.

HC: After portraying Dr. Harold Jaffe in the seminal HBO film ‘And the Band Played On,’ do you still think the American government treats gay Americans as second class citizens?

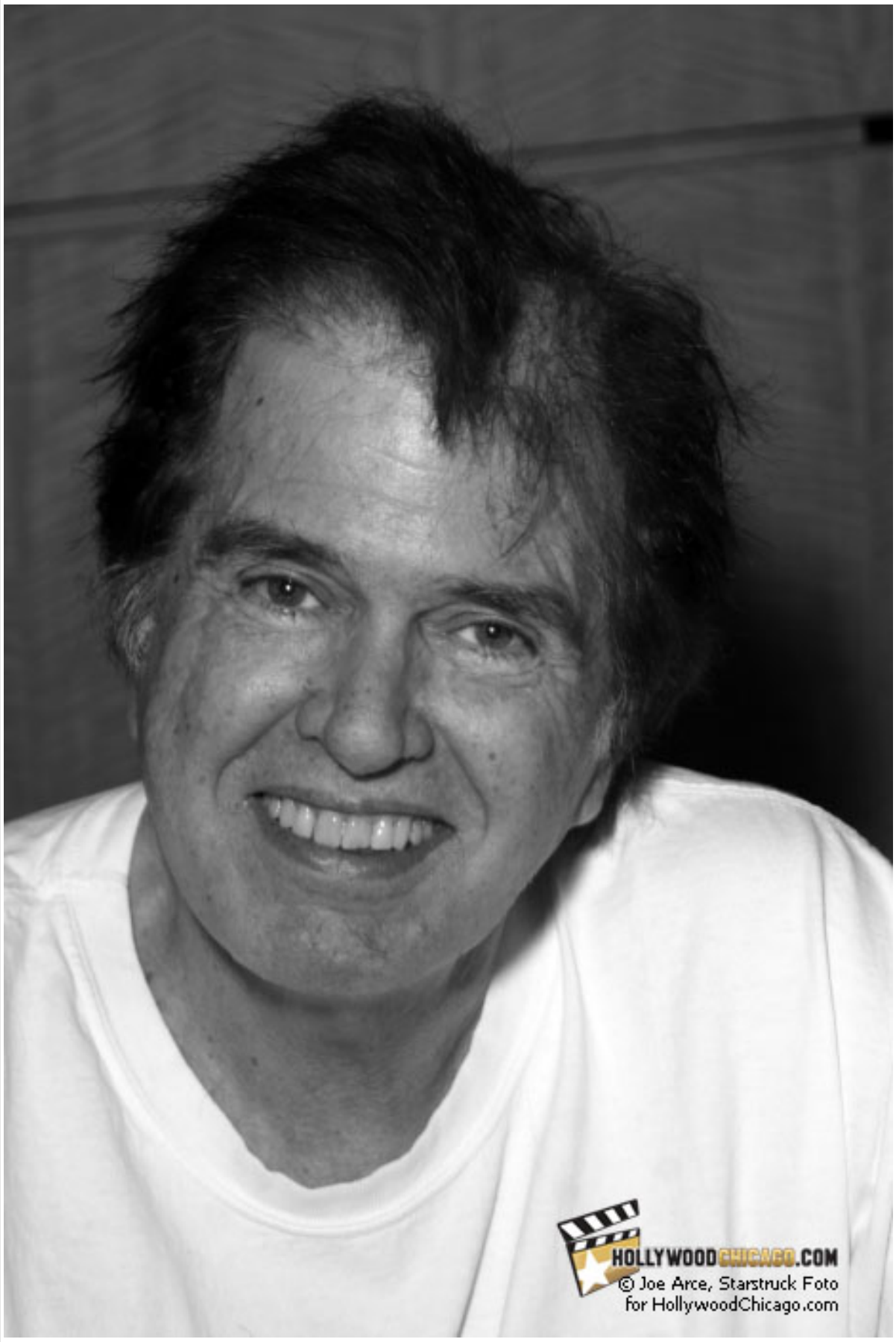
CMS: Well, hopefully the Obama administration will do much better.

HC: You’re the prime motivator in the classic film, ‘Never Cry Wolf.’ How did that isolation change you as an actor?

CMS: The thing that changed me most as an actor in that film was really working with the Inuit [indigenous tribes in Alaska]. Those people forced me as an actor, when you’re working with them, to be as real and honest as they are. It was a challenge, and a great one. And director Carroll Ballard was brilliant.

Paul Le Mat, John in ‘American Graffiti’ and Melvin in ‘Melvin and Howard’

Paul Le Mat, a Golden Globe Award Winner (for Graffiti and “The Burning Bed”) blazed a fairly distinctive career in the 1970s, winning acclaim for his doofus title role as Melvin Dummar in Jonathan Demme’s “Melvin and Howard,” opposite Jason Robards as Howard Hughes. In 1998, he did a character role in “American History X,” starring Edward Norton.



Handle With Care: Paul Le Mat, October 17, 2009
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: ‘American Graffiti’ was a very fast shoot. Did you feel there was something special about it while you were going through it?

Paul Le Mat: Not really, but I enjoyed playing the part a lot, because I could put some depth into the character. I felt like that was the way I wanted to act. But I didn’t feel at the time that it was anything special, and I had no idea of the magnitude and phenomenon that the film eventually became.

HC: You teamed with Jonathan Demme for a couple of cult classics, ‘Handle with Care’ and ‘Melvin and Howard.’ How did he pick you to play Melvin?

PLM: An acting colleague and friend of mine from New York named Paul had gone to Hollywood. After I got there, his waitress girlfriend hooked me back up with him. One day I was complaining to him that there wasn’t any good film roles at the time, because most movies had a lot of violence in them, which I opposed.

So he said his friend Jonathan Demme has this nice little movie about C.B. radios [Handle with Care] with no violence. And he asked me if I wanted to see the script. And I said, hell yeah. So Paul calls Jonathan, gets on his motorcycle and brought the script back to me. Agents would pull their hair out if they heard about this happening.

I read the script and Paul indicated to Jonathan that I was interested. I did the audition and got the part. That’s how I hooked up with Demme. And he liked me in Handle With Care and that’s why he offered me Melvin and Howard.

HC: As a Vietnam veteran, did you advise on any of the scenes in ‘More American Graffiti?’

PLM: No, I wasn’t involved in that. I just did patrol planes in Vietnam. When we saw the enemy we called the Marines, and then got the hell out of there (laughs).

Candy Clark, Deb in ‘American Graffiti’

Candy Clark, whose character of Debbie Dunham so famously wooed The Toad in Graffiti, also raised her cult status opposite David Bowie in “The Man Who Fell to Earth,” “Blue Thunder” and the film version of “Buffy, the Vampire Slayer.”

The Informant: Candy Clark, October 17th, 2009
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: What was the experience like on the surreal sci-fi epic ‘The Man Who Fell to Earth’?

Candy Clark: The experience was very good, David Bowie was perfect for the part. You couldn’t find a better man to play someone from another planet (laughs). What I liked about Bowie is that he liked to rehearse. Being a musician he was used to rehearsing.

I had a lot of dialogue. And I could only learn dialogue through repetition. With Bowie, I had a partner who didn’t mind repetition. I thought we were a good mix. I really enjoyed working with him.

HC: What was it like working with Matt Damon and Steven Soderbergh on this year’s film, ‘The Informant’?

CC: Actually it didn’t feel like work at all. It took longer to put the make-up, the costume and the wig on than it took to actually shoot it. They were using the ‘Red’ camera, which are really tiny digital movie cameras. They were using natural lighting, so there were no sets to light. It really didn’t seem like acting, it was more like, ‘wow, that’s it?’ I was in and out in about 30 minutes. It was strange, really.

HC: How do think ‘American Graffiti’ influenced 1970s filmmaking and American pop culture?

CC: It was one of the first films that used already recorded music as a soundtrack from beginning to end. The oldies were very inexpensive in those days. They got 45 songs for $1000 apiece. You can’t get them that cheap now. At that time in the early ‘70s it was totally different for oldies. But the music played such a huge part in the film, that it was like another character.

Also the multiple story arc, four to five stories intercutting and coming together, is still in use today. They still do that. George was a real trendsetter.

Eddie Mekka, The Big Ragu in ‘Laverne & Shirley’

Everyone’s favorite friendly pal, Carmine “The Big Ragu” Ragusa, was embodied by Eddie Mekka. Mekka was actually preparing to spin off the Big Ragu character after L&S ended its run in 1983, but the proposed pilot never materialized.

Now and Forever: ‘The Big Ragu’ Eddie Mekka, October 17th, 2009
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: Were you disappointed that Laverne & Shirley lost it’s working class roots toward the end of the run?

Eddie Mekka: Of course. The move to California took the nostalgia out of it. But that wasn’t our call or doing.

HC: You’ve been doing more stage work of late. What do you love about the theater that you can’t get from film or TV?

EM: The artistic gratification, certainly not the money (laughs). You get less for doing more, but every night you do a different show because it’s a different audience. And when you’re finished, you feel like you’ve done something. I know it’s a cliché, but when you take your bow and people stand up at the end it makes you feel good.

HC: Tell me something about Cindy Williams that nobody knows.

EM: She’s sitting right next to me. (laughs)

TOMORROW: The Christmas stars burn bright as Mickey Rooney, Tippi Hedren, Larry Hagman and Oscar winner Ernest Borgnine chime in from the Hollywood Celebrities Show.

’The next Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show is March 13th-14th, 2010. Click here for more information. *[17] Click* Part One *[18] for the*

first article on the show and Part Two. *[19] for the second.*

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