

D NEW YORK IS SINGING! DIXIE!

The Svelte Southern Siren is back at The Carlyle filling the legendary salon with mirth and music.

Photo: Christopher Barr

by Robert W. Cabell

From singing opera on the radio at the age of three to playing the piano at age six to a series of beauty pageants, **Dixie Carter's** journey to fame and fortune began on stage at the Store Front Theatre.

"I transferred from the University of Tennessee after they told me if I wanted to keep my music major - I should transfer to piano since they thought my voice wasn't strong enough. That is when I met George Tuliattos, who started the Front Street Theatre. I was fresh from another beauty pageant, the 1st runner-up in the Miss Tennessee Contest. He got me up on stage and looked at me and watched me, then he called me back down to him and said 'If you're just going to be pretty, you can forget about acting right now'. Well, of course I was crushed because I was a good Southern girl and I did care about looking pretty. Then, he taught me how to work as a serious talent. He is such an incredible man. During that time he gave me records of Sinatra and Callas and said, 'If you're going to sing then listen to these people. They know what the words mean'. Those were some of my first heroes. Bob Dylan is also a hero of mine, and my husband Hal Holbrook is an inspiration and a hero. He has the most dead-on insight for what's good on stage. It would be perfect pitch if he was a singer. He'll say go for it or well that's a bit too much and then he'll say it's too long. Even six minutes too long can make you lose an audience."

For those of you who have been fortunate enough to catch Dixie's previous shows at *The Carlyle*, you will know that she never loses the audience. No longer just doing the intimate Cabaret scene, Dixie is singing in concert the first part of February at a 2,000-seat theatre in Lakewood, Florida, and right after *The Carlyle* she's back in concert at the Opera House in Lexington, Kentucky.

"We're working towards a theatre piece that is not just all music. I'm working with Michael Giliam, an incredibly talented lighting designer on these shows. The goofy, silly stuff I love to do in Cabaret will not have the right aesthetic weight for the big houses. Now that I'm doing a lot of the large houses, I want to create



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evenings that will satisfy them as a complete evening of theatre."

"I remember back in the 70s when the great Mabel Mercer was still singing. I worked with Madeline Kahn and Lily Tomlin at the *Upstairs and The Down Stairs* and Joan Rivers worked there with Barry Manilow playing piano for her. Talents like Robert Rovin and Richard Blair, Fanny Flag and Ruth Buzzi, but there is nothing like *The Carlyle*. *The Carlyle* is my home. I spent many a New Year's Eve there, listening to Bobby Short. The murals and the banquets were wonderful but it was Bobby Short and the way that he played in that room that fulfilled my expectations of New York. I can't tell you how thrilled I was, and still am, when they asked me to sing there. The first show I did there I sang 'Heaven, I'm in Heaven' and I didn't have to hide how I really felt to the audience. New Yorkers can still appreciate a little country girl. In New York there is still the life of the mind. I'm opening the show with my favorite song of all time 'Isn't it a pity?' - by George and Ira Gershwin. I've just switched one little lyrical phrase where I sing with a twist 'Me on the west coast you on the best coast.' The show has the emotional arc of innocence, and hopes and dreams. Then our loss and, hopefully, the return to - that belief. I start out with Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Gershwin and then go to more contemporary composers. I always do some John Wallowich, he's my pal and favorite composer. I'm also singing a Sondheim number, some Bob Dylan, a Bruce Springsteen song, and I always play the trumpet."

I asked Dixie what other things would she would like to do besides Cabaret and concerts after her success with *Master Class*.

"*Master Class* was truly the height of my career. It was the most thrilling experience of my life. I always wanted to be an opera singer, to be Callas. It was so wonderful being accepted by the New York theatrical community as a serious actress. I'm known for doing comedy and more and more for singing. But I'd like to divide my time and do more serious work as an actress." What play would Dixie like to do if she could have her pick? "My husband Hal and I want to do *Long Days Journey into Night*

together. Anywhere together. And we'd love to do *The Importance of Being Earnest* with my two daughters, Genna and Mary Dixie. Hal would be Reverend Canon Chasuble, I'd be Lady Braknell, Genna as Gwendolen, Mary Dixie as Cecily. I'm so proud of my daughters; they are both Harvard grads, so talented and beautiful. They're now living together in Los Angeles working on their acting careers. Genna and Mary Dixie Carter. I couldn't resist naming my second little girl after myself. I really am so proud of them. Their father is Arthur Carter, the publisher of the *New York Observer*. And my maiden name is also Carter. We met in New York, long ago, after I had just come back from a tour of *Carousel*, with George Hern. It was at this little romantic restaurant above the *Sign of the Dove*. I don't even know if it's still there. I was there and I sang and he saw me, asked me my name, we couldn't believe it when we found out we had the same last name. Well, he tracked me down, sent me a dozen roses, asked me out, and we got married. It really was very romantic. And as they say - we were happy for awhile. Now I've got Hal, my proper partner in life. And he has a lovely daughter Eve, the same age as my Mary Dixie, and she is also an actress. It's just one big happy show biz family."

Hal and Dixie met while filming a CBS docu-drama called "The Killing of Randy Webster", a true story about a young man

who was killed by a policeman in Dallas. Dixie remembers, "At first he thought I was phony because I have those good Southern manners. I used to call him 'Mr. Holbrook'. Some people tell me I'm too polite but it's just been so

ingrained in me." Beauty, grace and good manners are all a part of this remarkable woman. And those who are lucky enough to get a ticket to *The Carlyle* are in for a beautiful evening full of charm and delights.

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