

# A witty, yet very vulnerable, Charlotte

The first time Randy Graff was in a Stephen Sondheim show, she was 19 years old and played Joanne in a college production of *Company*. "I imitated Stritch," Graff said. Since then, she has found herself cast in similar roles—"tough on the outside, mush on the inside," she said.

Or, as one reviewer described it, the Eve Arden character. The dual role of Oolie/Donna in *City of Angels* and the photographer Liz Imbrie in *High Society* come to mind.

So it was probably natural that she was cast as Countess Charlotte Malcolm in the Kennedy Center's production of *A Little Night Music* for its Sondheim Celebration.

"I got a phone call from the casting director, and he thought I'd be just right for the part," she said. "I screamed and said, 'Yes!' It's very, very, very nice not to have to audition for a part. I wish it were done all the time.

"I'm usually cast as this type of woman, though I've never played a regal, aristocratic one before. But it's sort of like Oolie and Donna in *City of Angels*. I think they've got a very strong veneer, so that suggests a lot of sarcastic and witty comments. But they're covering up their vulnerability."

What does she think of Charlotte?

"I think she's passionately in love with her husband, but it's a love/hate relationship. The way she copes with her pain is with humor, and it's a very well-polished act that she has going. Things between the two of them weren't always that way, though. There was a time when her love was requited, when he was faithful. And she longs for that to come back."

Graff, who was interviewed before rehearsals began, said she did not plan to do a lot of preparation for the role until she could work with the director, Mark Brokaw.

"I'm more interested in a character's emotional and psychological makeup. I daydream a lot about a character, I write a bio of her—which I keep to myself."



Randy Graff

Graff said she watched Ingmar Bergman's film *Smiles of a Summer Night*, on which *Night Music* is based, "but that didn't help at all."

Besides that early *Company*, she did have another previous Sondheim connection, as part of the ensemble in three early readings for his Mizner musical, *Wise Guys* in 1997 and 1998 (the title has since been changed to *Gold!*). She was impressed with Sondheim's efforts with the cast.

"He's a very nice man," she said. "He gives great notes, all about the acting of the lyrics."

Before this, Graff had seen *A Little Night Music* only once, the 1990 production by the New York City Opera in

which her friend Maureen Moore plays Charlotte.

"I love this show. The music is absolutely beautiful, I love the story, and I especially love this character. I'm very excited."

Graff's Broadway debut was in 1997 in *Saravali*, a musical that died so quickly that Graff removed it from her bio. Eight years later, she had a role in a show that would last much longer. After Patti LuPone decided not to repeat her London role on Broadway, Graff was cast as Fantine in the New York production of *Les Misérables* and got to sing the poignant "I Dreamed a Dream."

Although she admits she's had stretches when she has not worked, Graff has had some notable appearances. She's been in the comedies *Moon Over Buffalo* and *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* and such musicals as *Falsettos*, *City of Angels*, *High Society* and *A Class Act*.

Her double role in *City of Angels* won her both Tony and Drama Desk Awards, and her fondness for Cy Coleman's score resulted in her debut CD, *Doing Something Right: Randy Graff Sings Cy Coleman*.

What are her favorite roles?

"I have very fond memories of *City of Angels*. And *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* working with that wonderful group of actors. And Carol Burnett and Phil Bos in *Moon Over Buffalo*. And, of course, my first big thing, *Les Miz*." ❁

## John Simon on Randy Graff

John Simon, the notoriously acerbic theater critic for *New York* magazine, rarely gets enthusiastic, but this is what he said about Randy Graff in an interview in the August 2002 issue of *Opera News*:

"Randy Graff. She has a nice, ordinary look. If she walked by you on the street, you wouldn't notice her, but when she gets on a stage, especially when she sings, she is breathtaking. It's not done with looks. It's done with everything else. She is unbelievable. I remember at the beginning, I once gave her an unappealing review because I wasn't struck by her. She was in the wrong play or the wrong part, and she didn't sing. Then suddenly, in *A Class Act*, she absolutely knocked my socks off. I saw her recently in a showcase where she sang just one mediocre song, and she moved me to tears. Afterward, I went up to her, and I couldn't speak. I was blubbering. Finally, she just hugged me, and I blubbered away. This is true greatness, when you can transcend the obvious things and be lifted up into another sphere."