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QUEENS FOR A NIGHT
HUNTING HOMOS IN
JACKSON HEIGHTS

**THE NEXT GREAT
GAY SITCOM?**
BEHIND THE SCENES OF
ABC'S *IT'S ALL RELATIVE*

DELTA DAWNS

FROM DESIGNING WOMAN TO DRAGON LADY—
DELTA BURKE VAMPS IT UP FOR *THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLIE!*

It's a particularly humid September Saturday in the third-floor Hell's Kitchen studio where Delta Burke has just finished another day of rehearsal. As she prepares for her Broadway debut on September 30th as villainous Mrs. Meers in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, the sight of Delta is at first startling—no big hair, no big

THOROUGHLY

shoulder pads, and no, if you can call it this, big makeup.

Instead, she wears pigtails and an old T-shirt bragging about having survived a 1994 taping of *Women of the House*, the short-lived series in which she briefly reprised her star-making *Designing Women* role of Suzanne Sugarbaker. And of course, beautiful even with no makeup, there are those blue eyes and that famous Miss Florida face.

Having tackled the depression that weighed heavily on her in her Sugarbaker days—she's now a spokeswoman for the depression activism group "GOAL! Go On and Live"—the famously Southern Delta is living for the first time in New York, juggling TV projects and working to rescue chi-huahuas, save Florida landmarks like Cypress Gardens and the mermaids at Weeki Wachee—and, oh yeah, conquer Broadway. All that's missing are the flaming batons!

It's such a pleasure to meet you. You must hear that from gay men all the time.

[laughs] Thank you. But you know, one never tires of it.

What kind of fans approach you?

I get everything. Young girls now because of the reruns, and *always* gay men. Lots of black people love me—which is kind of surprising since Suzanne gave them such grief. And lots of women relate because of the weight and everything.

What about doing *Millie* appealed to you?

I just loved everything about it because there was so much energy, and it's the classic Hollywood story of "going out there a nobody, kid, but you're coming back a star." And the cast is so good; they're so young and talented. I've been wanting to do theater for a few years, but I didn't know how to go about it. And this was just perfect. I haven't done theater in so long,

and it's the only time you really feel like an actress.

Do you see similarities between Suzanne Sugarbaker and Mrs. Meers?

Mrs. Meers is more calculating. Suzanne just didn't think. Things would just come out of her mouth that were mean but she didn't mean them to be mean—it was just

DISHY

her world. However I do find that on certain turns or takes, I'll want to smack Bun Foo just like I would hit Meshach [Taylor].

You had mentioned that you had wanted to get back to the stage—is this your first time on Broadway?

First time on Broadway. The theater I had done was civic theater in Orlando, Florida, or theater at my drama school, Lambda. And dinner theater in Florida—that's it. And when I came back, the plan was, as far as mother was concerned, that I was to go to New York City and be a great dramatic actress on the stage.

That's rare. Most mothers are concerned that their daughters go and learn to be a secretary.

Well, once Mommy knew that this is what I wanted to do, then that was the plan. 'Cause I would always pick dramatic things to do, mainly because I was in pageants, and they didn't take you seriously. So I would do *Streetcar*, or *Lady Macbeth*—I would choose something dramatic to prove to them that I could do it.

And Suzanne Sugarbaker threw a flaming baton—why didn't

Suzanne do Shakespeare?

My natural instinct is comedy, because I used to watch Carol Burnett, Mary Tyler Moore, Dick Van Dyke, Jackie Gleason, Red Skelton—and I loved the silent clown, and that physicality.

DELTA

The headstrong Southern belle you know and love as Suzanne Sugarbaker takes on another formidable dragon lady role for her Broadway debut.

BY JIM COLUCCI

How did you find out you were funny?

I did *Harvey*, and I was getting laughs, but I didn't really know what I was doing. In London, I was the maid in *The Provoked Wife*, and I got a lot of laughs with mugging, and using the eyebrows [making a Red Skelton like face]. Then when I was Miss Florida and touring around, I found that if I put on the accent heavier, I got laughs. In LA all I did was period dramas, and the first comedy was *Filthy Rich*, which was with Linda [Bloodworth-

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD MITCHELL

Thomason] writing, and my first time working with Dixie. I remember them saying, "Delta Burke? She can't do comedy." But I knew I had a raw ability, and I was able to train it because I'm with such talented people. So I learned about timing, and rhythm, and inflection; that's where I learned comedy. I was learning all that from Dixie—because I wanted to grow up to be Dixie...

Who doesn't?

I followed Dixie around like a puppy dog—she didn't know what to make of me. She finally figured I was not an *All About Eve* kind of person, and took me in. And I just spent all my time with her. And once that show came on, I got a lot of work, because they saw me doing comedy, and there wasn't anyone in their 20s who looked like me who did that kind of comedy.

There still isn't.

So with each job I would learn more. You do a *Love Boat* and learn more—with each one, you learn something new and your timing would get better. And you know, with *Designing Women*, you were so much better when you went into it, but not as good as when you left it. At first they wouldn't even let me have the Southern accent in the pilot.

I never knew that the Southern accent could be so funny, from more drawling to more clipped—it was brilliant.

Well, what was

great about *Designing Women* was each person really had her own distinct voice, which made it like a band, and it made pretty music because they were all different.

Your accent and Dixie's are real, but are Annie and Jean southern?

Annie's from Kentucky, and Jean's just a damned good actress.

The chemistry the four of you shared was irreplaceable.

I've never had something click so quickly—the chemistry was there

immediately as though we'd been together for years. And you just knew that this was the best gig you were gonna have as far as chemistry, and the quality of the talent. We were so lucky. And Meshach coming in, the first year—he just clicked so well. And you just got better as you went along. Because I was like really insecure, and I never saw myself as Suzanne saw herself. And then, when I started to put on weight, it was like "how the hell am I going to walk out there and say these lines?"

As a viewer, I always said that as you got heavier in the later seasons, Suzanne just got funnier and funnier. She became such a strange creature, with the pig, and everybody in the 80s dressed like drag queens anyway, so she was this big drag queen who loved herself.

I wish I looked like I did in the beginning, but was as talented as I was at the end. Because it got to a point where you're just huge, and you can't hide behind a clever A-line skirt, and so you've just got to change. And everything changed about her. Her walk changed, her tone changed, her attitude—everything changed. While still thinking she's fabulous.

But it led to such an interesting place, like that episode, "They Shoot Fat Women, Don't They," which was brilliant.

Well, I went to Linda, who hadn't said anything, and I said, "I think we're going to have to deal with the weight." And she said, "I didn't know what to do, if you were going to lose the weight or were going to stay this weight." And I said, "Well, I'd like to lose it, but I kind

of think I'm going to stay this way," because it wasn't coming off like it does in your 20s. So I realized I'm going to have to find a way to accept this in my life and in this show and make it work. So overnight she wrote that script. At the cold reading, the girls didn't know that I knew about the script. And they were nervous, because I was saying all these lines, like "if the streets of Atlanta can stand the weight of both me *and* my Mercedes..." And they're looking at me like "ooh, what is she going to do?!" And I was loving it! It was so much fun, because the one thing I asked Linda, was just let *me* have the jokes. Don't make me the butt of the jokes.

It gave Suzanne her dignity back.

It gave Suzanne *and* Delta their dignity and power over the situation. When I was a lot thinner on *Filthy Rich*, people would still say I was too big. And I look back, and I was a *fucking goddess* and I had no clue.

The *Designing Women* reunion was better than most reunion specials—how was it seeing everyone again?

It was great. I've been able to get together with maybe Dixie and Annie. It was very hard to get together with Jean—she was traveling a lot. It was mainly Dixie and Annie and me, drinkin'.

***Designing Women* is on every—what—two minutes on Lifetime?**

[Complaining] Not any more! There's that Nanny, and that, that Helen Hunt... We were on like six times a day!

I know—I watched it six times a day.

I would get up to watch it, and I just don't get up early, you know! But what's funny is I know the show, and



yet they'll still make me laugh out loud. We gloried in each other's talent. We reveled in it. The moment we could hear Dixie rewinding up for one of her bits, we'd just start getting excited — "Do it! Do it!" There was a lot of cheer-leading for each other.

Lifetime, it seems, is really the network for women and gay men.
It's keeping me alive, God bless 'em!

Do you have a big gay following from it?

I just have a gay following. I don't know if it's just from *Designing Women*. I think because we like so many of the same things. We love big hair, and big crowns, and flashy costumes. You're seeing me here with no makeup and my straight, straight white trash hair. And it does take two hours to create "Delta Burke." And by the time I'm in those support hose—which make you just want to bite somebody's head off, and whatever kind of contraption they've got to hold my waist in and hike up my bosoms, high heels, the tight clothing—you get the hair really big, and I have my kabuki makeup on—you stand taller and you feel like someone else. I feel like a transvestite as much as if I were one.

On the *Designing Women* reunion you all mentioned an Atlanta gay bar where they do drag of you...

I don't know all the details, but there was a place in Atlanta that really had non-stop *Designing Women*. There's one place that's pretty much non-stop Dixie's character, which I'm highly insulted at. But I thought wow, we have to go!

Atlanta's only a 14-hour drive from New York—road trip?

But you'd have to have at least one other of us. Dixie I know would do it. If Dixie and I could get done up and go in, I think it would be great fun—except we would then get depressed because there'd be better Dixies and

Deltas than we are. And the thing I found when I lived in New Orleans was if you get depressed, all you have to do is walk down the street, and the gay boys will love you and make you feel good again. It's crazy, because you need that.

I hope they do that for you here too.
They're always visiting me on my book tour—guys will show up with pictures of their acts as me. Or they'll bring their crowns. I'm a drag queen.

Well, welcome to New York with all the other drag queens.

Some of them are just so impressive—it's mind-boggling. It's an art. And God knows I can't keep up with them. Right now my roots are growing out, I need a perm, I haven't had a facial, my nails are atrocious.

Well, we have all that here.

They've been running me ragged—I haven't had a day off. I gotta find people and get it done.

Is your husband here with you?

Mac's coming in on the 29th. He just sold a show where he gets to travel to exotic locations and hunt animals, and they pay him money.

And how does a Southern girl like you like New York? Have you lived here before?

I've never lived here. And I've been wanting to move here. You can't be an actor and not have lived some of your life in New York doing theater. Now, that I'm getting over being afraid, and can just "Go ahead—sing out Louise!" and just do it, I hope I can stay. I hope I can continue to do something when this run is up. I do want to find a way to live here and experience this life. **N**

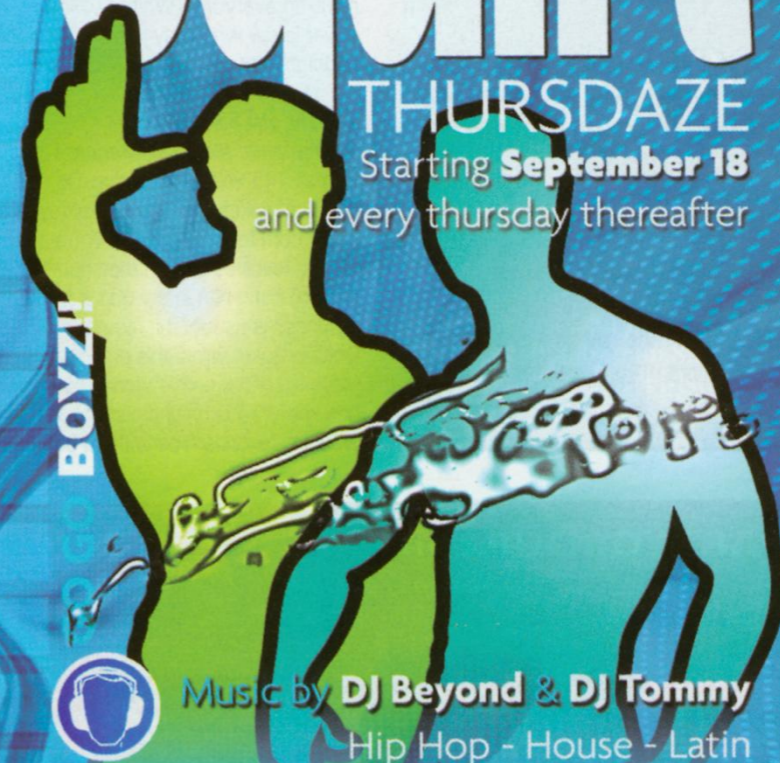
Delta Burke begins performances in Thoroughly Modern Millie at the Marquis Theatre on September 30th. For tickets, call 212-307-4100 or visit www.ticketmaster.com.

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