

All that stands between me and Alice Ripley backstage at the Imperial Theatre is a bicycle. It takes up about half of the actress' tiny dressing room, but she's not complaining. "I bike everywhere," she explains, wiggling a high-heeled sandal in the air. "Even in these — I swear! You should see me in midtown traffic. I'm dangerous."

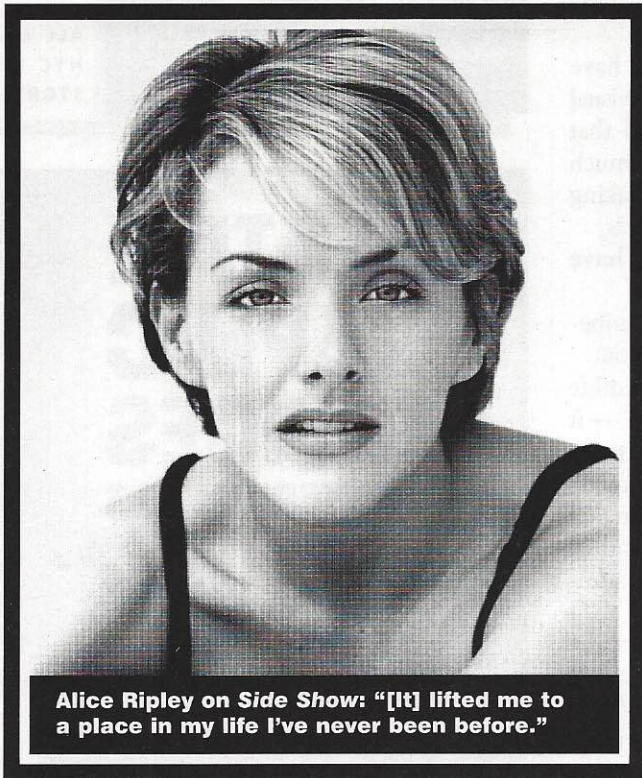
Alice Ripley, road warrior? You betcha. Behind the delicate features and pixie haircut is — to quote the actress herself — "one tough broad."

"People thought all I could play were sweet, innocent girls like Betty Schaefer," she says, referring to her role in *Sunset Boulevard*. "Then came *Side Show*, and I think something inside me shifted. Maybe I did some serious soul searching; maybe I decided I was finally ready to be true to myself. All I know is, I walked away a different person. A braver person."

The new mindset comes in handy for her current role: the suffering Fantine in *Les Misérables*, "one of the noblest women I've ever played," as Ripley puts it. "Fantine is self-

challenge." Reflecting on the past year, especially *Side Show*'s untimely demise, she is passionate and proud — and definitely nobody's pushover.

It's almost a year since *Side Show* began previews. How do you feel about that experience now?



Alice Ripley on *Side Show*: "[It] lifted me to a place in my life I've never been before."

Violet, you're really seeing a lot of me. You're seeing a lot of what I believe about people and about relationships, and my insecurities and my doubts. At the end, when she goes through this self-discovery — well, that happened for me as well. So it was really scary, because I wasn't hiding at all.

Why do you think the show closed?

A lot of things contributed to it: We were one of the first shows of the new season, and people didn't find us until it was too late. I think the people involved with making the decisions of how to produce and market the show were so in love with it that maybe they were too cautious, too protective. That's my personal opinion. But a lot of good things came out of it. We have the show CD, and that's a little of our legacy, and Emily Skinner and I have recorded an album of duets [for Varèse Sarabande], which will be out in November.

I think people either loved *Side Show* or hated it.

I agree. There was no in-between. There was a fasci-

Alice Ripley

...Believe It or Not

The star of *Side Show* and now *Les Misérables* is no wide-eyed ingenue anymore.

By Sheryl Berk

less in her devotion to her daughter, and she does whatever she has to — regardless of the consequences. She doesn't care how people judge her; she knows the truth and what's in her heart."

Which seems to be exactly the way Ripley feels these days: "I've made myself a promise: I won't compromise who I am and I won't shrink from a

Mixed. Sadder but also wiser. It changed my life.

In what way? It had such a brief run — only about two and half months.

The show lifted me to a place in my life I've never been before. I see Violet, surprisingly, as the perfect role to express who I am. When you're seeing

nating article in the *Times* the week after we closed proposing reasons why we closed. It said that the theater-going audience will not tolerate this kind of subject matter in a musical. In a play, yes; *The Elephant Man* was obviously a big success. And that gets me angry.

Why?

Because [musical theater is] my

medium, and I don't want to be bound by somebody's idea of what they want me to do. Whatever those rules are, I don't always want to be the sweet, joyful ingenue. I've spent most of my career playing the girl next door.

You originated the role of Betty Schaefer on Broadway in *Sunset Boulevard* — the ultimate ingenue.

Yes, but I learned something there, too. Glenn Close was incredible. She's somebody who gets what she wants, but in a very loving way. She is so sweet, almost shy — a real country girl. Yet she commands respect. That's what I aspire to. To get what you want without being called a bitch. That's what she taught me.

Yet, you couldn't get your way with *Side Show*. I know you fought hard to save it.

I did. I would get up every night on stage and beg the audience to spread the word about us. I just refused to let us go down without a fight and I really thought — or I was led to believe — we had a chance of surviving. I was shocked when we closed. We got some of the best reviews for the whole season. I read them all. [Ben] Brantley and [Vincent] Canby both raved. It sounds somewhat snotty or pompous for me to say, "It was ahead of its time," but I believe that. There was so much there that was real, that it made people uncomfortable.

What was it that touched a nerve with audiences?

Cold reality. I could feel that the audience was mixed [in its reaction] as early as previews. Some were weeping with joy and revelation, and others were disgusted. You have to be ready to look inside yourself — even if you're not happy with what you see. I've come to a point in my life where I have stopped lying to myself. I think that's what *Side Show* is about: that point.

How do you top that kind of role?

That's the million-dollar question! I have a few ideas. *Side Show* left me a

little dumbfounded. I wonder what I could do next that would be as personally satisfying. I might just have to write my own show!

Do you write music?

I do — and I have some ideas for a musical. I also want to record and do some film. That's why doing *Les Miz* for the next six months is so great for me. It's relaxing, it's inspiring, and I can wait and see what comes my way.

She dreamed a dream: As Fantine in *Les Misérables*.



JOAN MARCUS

Rare songbirds: Skinner and Ripley in *Side Show*.



JOAN MARCUS

You played Fantine on the road before.

Yes, with Fred Inkley, who has just stepped into the role of Jean Valjean. So it's like old home week for us; we're thrilled to be doing it together. And I love this role. Fantine is an archetype. She's probably the easiest

role I've ever had to play in terms of not having to fill in the holes in the character. She's so well-defined and it's so easy to empathize with her, to walk in her shoes. It's also a glam-o role. You get to come out, stop the show, then relax for about two hours until you come out again. They pay me to do this?

Does it involve any special preparation?

After working my butt off technically in *Side Show*, this feels like a breeze. But yes, you do your homework. I read the book again, especially the parts that aren't in the musical; that's where you find some of the most fascinating insights into the character. There are passages in the book that make me weep. Fantine sells her teeth for her daughter! You realize the lengths this woman will go to.

What lengths will you go to?

For my art? I hope I'm courageous enough not to let anything stand in my way. Maybe I'm naïve, but I have this notion that we can change the way people see theater. I believe that *Side Show* was the start of something. Yes, audiences want their dancing girls, but there is a large group of people — getting larger every day — that wants more. They want to be challenged. We can work toward change in small increments, it's just not going to happen overnight.

Will *Side Show* ever be revived on Broadway?

Oh, I think one day it will. Look at *Chicago*. Audiences never appreciated it until years later, and now it's a huge hit. I think *Side Show* may have the same fate. I'm just proud I was a part of it, and that it was a part

of me. My favorite moment in the show is "I Will Never Leave You." For me, that says it all. ■

SHERYL BERK, *Les Miz* fan extraordinaire, recently interviewed Colm Wilkinson for *InTheater*.