

# Busy, Busy Bernadette

By Michael Giltz

If Bernadette Peters has an electronic datebook, it must be on overload this fall. She stars in three TV movies airing before the end of the year; recreates her leading role as the Witch in a 10th anniversary benefit concert of Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* (on Nov. 9); plays a lady-in-waiting in Fox's animated feature film *Anastasia*; and makes a cameo appearance in a home video sequel to another animated film, *Beauty and the Beast*. Perhaps the most lavish project of all is the TV movie *Cinderella*, a new version of the Rodgers & Hammerstein classic with pop singer Brandy in the title role, Peters as her Wicked Stepmother, Whitney Houston as the Fairy Godmother, and Jason Alexander as Lionel the Steward. It airs on *The Wonderful World of Disney* Nov. 2.

"The whole score is wonderful," says Peters, calling in from the Dallas set of her upcoming TV movie *Holiday in Your Heart*. "I didn't remember that, though it is Rodgers & Hammerstein." Peters and stepsisters Veanne Cox and Natalie Desselle get a new number, "Falling in Love With Love," from Rodgers and Hart's *The Boys From Syracuse*. "Maybe this will begin a trend toward more musicals on television," she says, fingers crossed. "Playing the stepmother was great fun." A lot of the fun comes from having the chance to add a touch of cynicism to the tale, with Peters singing lines like "Learning to trust is just for children in school."

If *Cinderella* shows signs of becoming a holiday perennial, that's definitely the plan for *Holiday in Your Heart*, based on teen country sensation

LeAnn Rimes' new Christmas-themed album. "I play a famous country-and-western singer," explains Peters between costume fittings. "LeAnn runs into my character at the Grand Ole Opry and I show her around Nashville and tell her what's important

Rimes on the Patsy Cline classic "Crazy." Also like Rimes, Peters enjoyed a brief pop success as a youngster with "Johnny Wait for Me," a regional hit sung to the tune of "Pomp and Circumstance." And while Rimes' parents oversee every facet of her career, Peters enjoyed the ministrations of her mother — a kinder, gentler Mama Rose, who encouraged her work in theater but never became pushy or burdensome.

Peters becomes animated when the *Into the Woods* reunion concert comes up. When a similar concert was mounted for *Sunday in the Park With George* three years ago, Mandy Patinkin remarked that he was surprised at how differently he felt about himself and the role — it was almost like playing a new part. For Peters, returning to *Sunday* was more like reacquainting herself with an old friend; she expects to feel the same way about *Into the Woods*.

"What's great about returning to something is that you know it so well," she says. "You can take leeway with it because you have the freedom that comes with knowledge. You

can know where to go and where to take beats; where to change it and where not."

Another sort of freedom came with *Anastasia*: the freedom of giving a character life before the animation had been done. "They told me she was going to have a big butt!" Peters says in a mock pout about her character, a



Stepmother Peters enjoys being Wicked in *Cinderella*.

in life." Anyone who wonders which casting director said, "A country singer? Get me Bernadette Peters!" might be surprised at how much she and Rimes have in common.

"I love country music," enthuses Peters, who sings two songs in the movie, the traditional hymn "I Need Thee Every Hour" and a duet with

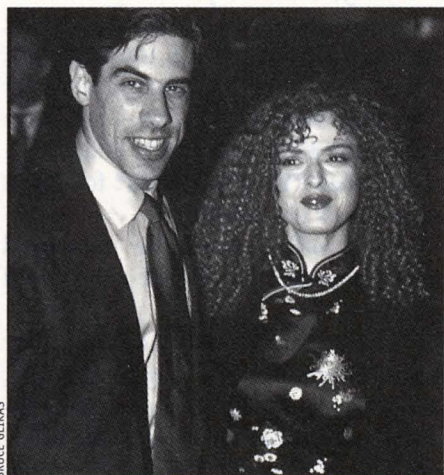
lady-in-waiting named Sophie. (Perhaps the animators took inspiration from an early review of Peters in *The New York Post* which said, "She has a rear end like a Bartlett pear.") Peters still hasn't seen the finished film, but she's an old hand at animation; she's been the voice of Rita on the cartoon series *Animaniacs* for several years, attracting a new generations of fans.

Of course, seeing Peters in person is one of the delights of the musical theater — witness her career-defining performances in such shows as *Mack and Mabel* and *Song & Dance*, along with the fact that Sondheim has enjoyed his most popular successes when Peters was treading the boards for him. That makes the long gaps in her Broadway

appearances all the more distressing: 10 years between *Mack and Mabel* and *Sunday in the Park With George*; six years between *Into the Woods* and *The Goodbye Girl*, her most recent.

But Peters is convincing when she says that the lack of interesting new musicals hasn't bothered her, if only

**With husband Michael Wittenberg.**



BRUCE GLIKAS

because she's been so active in other areas. "I'm too busy to be frustrated," she laughs. (One upcoming possibility is Kander and Ebb's *The Skin of Our Teeth*.)

It's also easy for theatergoers to forget what an impressive body of work she's done for TV, including *David, Falling From Grace* with Kevin Spacey and *The Last Best Year* with

Mary Tyler Moore, who has become one of her best friends. In fact, Peters was married to investment adviser Michael Wittenberg in Moore's home last year.

"Her husband and my husband were cut from the same cloth," Peters says fondly. "Now they've become pals, too."

And fans know they don't need a Broad-

way show for a chance to see Peters in her element. "I love doing concerts," she says. "I can choose what I want to sing, and I'd rather do that than a musical that isn't interesting to me." Her love for live performance is the reason why *Sondheim, Etc.* (Angel), last year's CD taped at Carnegie Hall, is easily the highlight of her recording career. Certainly it outshines *I'll Be Your Baby Tonight*, a crossover album that earned her a Grammy nomination, but didn't break through on the pop charts. Future plans include more live recordings ("I think it's a great way for me to record; you just know when you're connecting with the material") and some intimate combo work — when her crowded schedule permits.

"I like doing the project where the work is the best," Peters says simply. "It can be on film, it can be on stage, it can be on television. When you are able to pick and choose, you don't get bored." ■