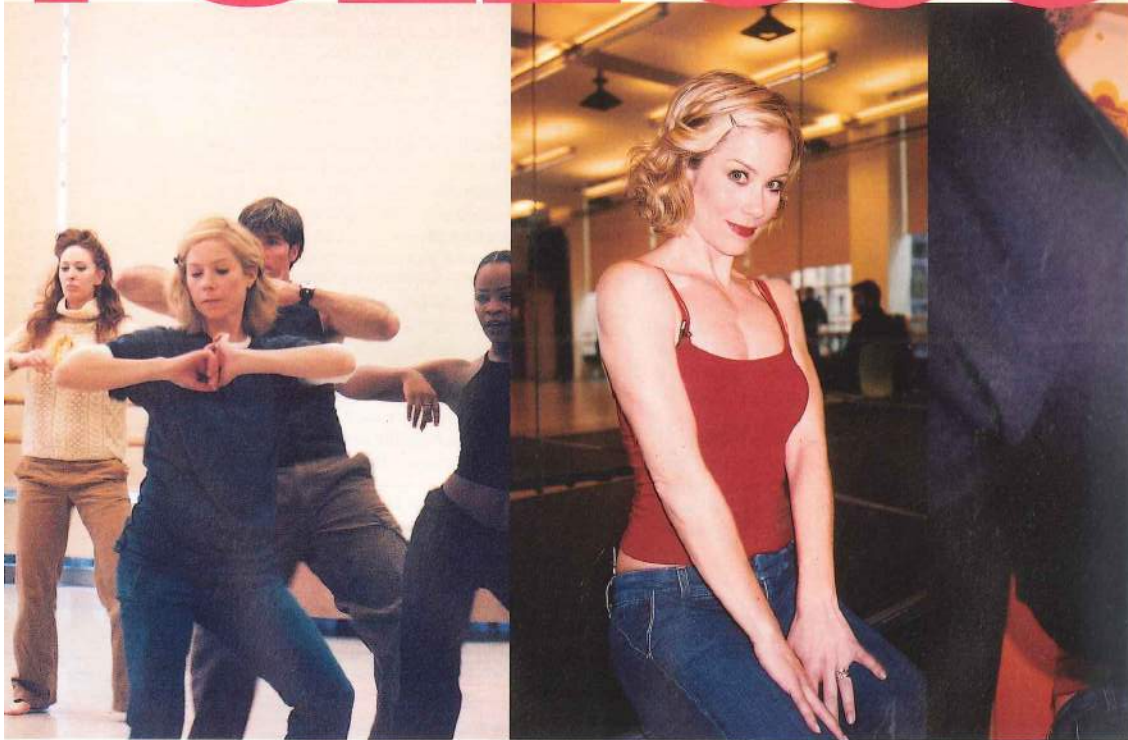


# FULL COU



## 28 journalists, 14 photographers and 9 camera crews: How *Sweet Charity*'s Broadway novice

At 4:30 A.M., Christina Applegate's eyes flew open in the darkness of the apartment she's been renting in Manhattan. It was Media Day—the day that the actress would perform the legendary title role in *Sweet Charity* under the appraising, not always generous, eye of the New York press. In fact, it would be a double performance: first, a few numbers from the show; then, the arguably more harrowing ritual of facing the media in dozens of back-to-back

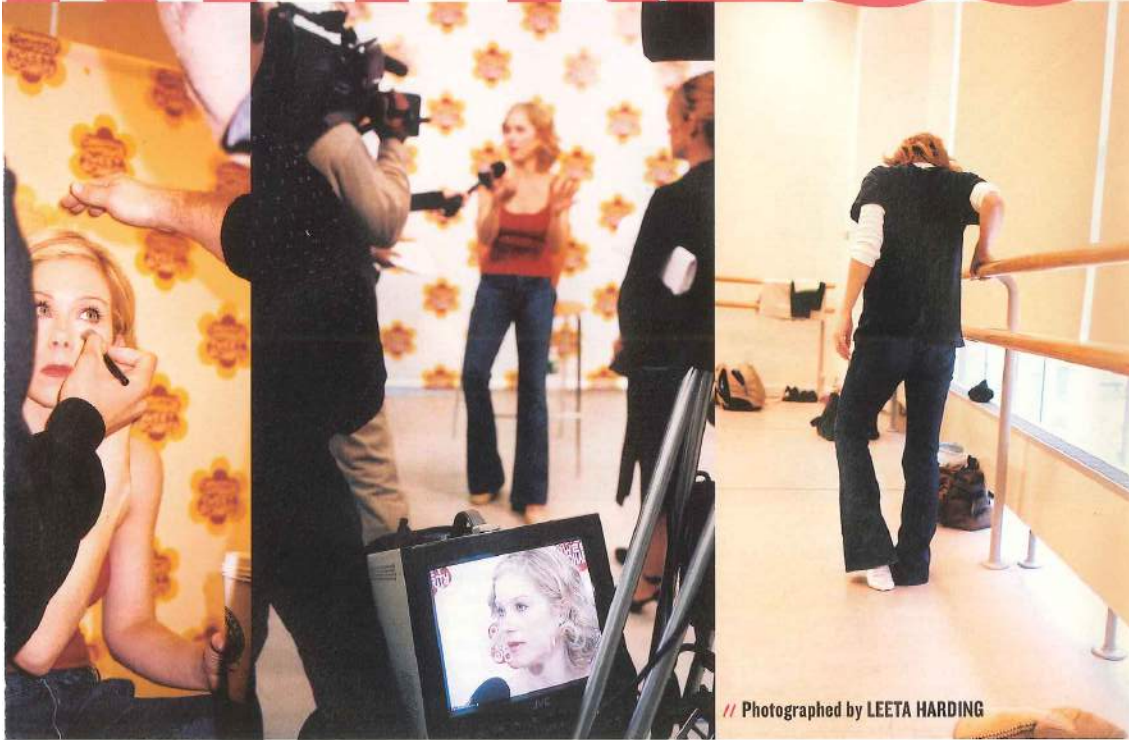
interviews. Outside, the temperature was in the single digits and the wind was howling. Applegate was a long way from home in Los Angeles. There was no way she was getting back to sleep.

Now, six long hours later, the hallway outside the 42nd Street rehearsal studio where the preview is about to take place is buzzing with activity. The ladies and gentlemen of the press shuffle in, unwrapping scarves and pulling off layers of clothing. Dancers bustle in

and out of the studio; each time the door swings open, you can hear strains of a last-minute rehearsal: The chorus shouts "Hey, big spender!" Producers Barry and Fran Weissler move through the crowd, shaking hands. Applegate's costar, Tony winner Denis O'Hare (*Take Me Out, Assassins*), arrives with coffee for thankful castmates.

Meanwhile, Applegate, 33, is secluded in a small dressing room, getting final touches of makeup applied

# RT PRESS



// Photographed by LEETA HARDING

## Christina Applegate survived a day with the media wolves—including our own Brett Martin.

and, in her own words, "flipping myself out." But, given the circumstances, who can blame her for a little flipping? It's not everybody who makes her Broadway debut (which, incidentally, happens to also be her musical-theater debut) in one of the theater's most cherished roles. Though once an avid dancer, Applegate hadn't taken a dance class in a decade when she auditioned a year ago to headline the revival. (Previous talks with Jane

Krakowski and Marisa Tomei reportedly fell through.) The performance about to start is the culmination of a half-year of intense preparation, all aimed at turning the TV and film comedienne still best known for playing a ditsy, busty teenager on *Married...With Children* into the kind of triple threat embodied by previous Charities like Shirley MacLaine and Gwen Verdon.

Nor does it help that Applegate is

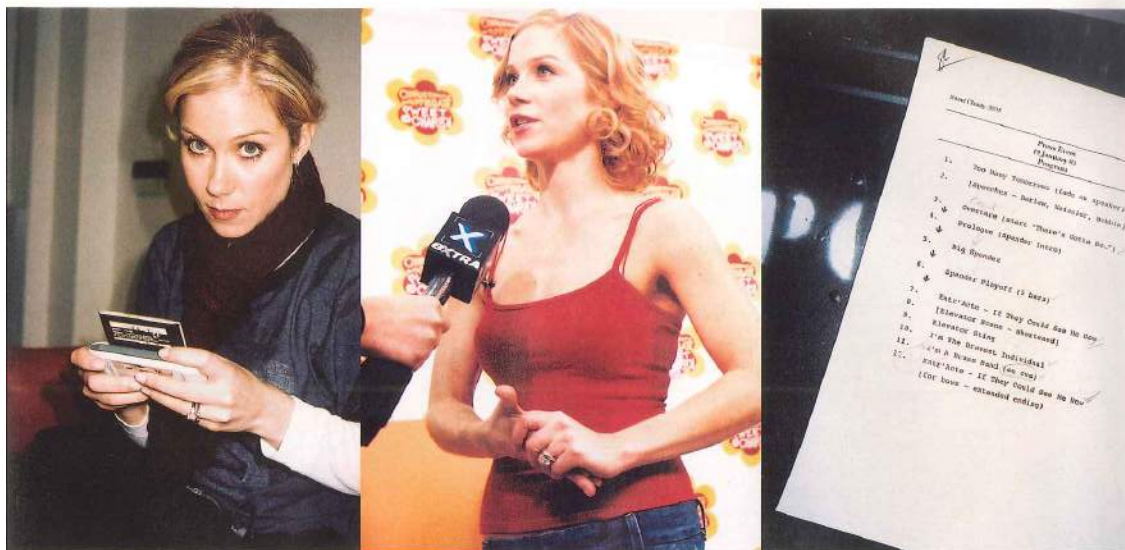
struggling with a groin injury sustained during rehearsal. Or that her hairdresser was an hour late this morning. "Not the best thing to do on the day you're going to have to perform for the press, but we love him for it," Applegate says, looking like she doesn't love him for it very much at all.

So, yes, a case of the nerves is certainly forgivable.

At 11 A.M., the doors to the studio open and the press chatters its way in.



**R**ight before I left L.A., I started really flipping out," says Applegate.



Five TV cameramen—for *Extra*, *Access Hollywood*, *MSNBC* and a couple of local news channels—take their places on a riser. The seats are crammed with critics and reporters. Dennis Crowley, one of the publicists assigned to usher Applegate into the spotlight, estimates that the crowd is about twice what it would be for a normal, non-celebrity-helmed Broadway show.

Back in the hall, O'Hare gets fitted with a headset mic. Director Walter Bobbie (*Chicago*) stands, rubbing his hands, in front of Applegate's dressing room. Someone asks if they should make an announcement about the star's injury. Bobbie says no. "We don't want everybody to be looking at her groin," he says. He pauses. "At least not more than they would anyway."

Inside, the performance gets underway with "Big Spender." Then a wooden frame meant to suggest an elevator is wheeled out and Applegate—in tight red pants, matching halter-top

and, despite the odds, perfect blond locks—makes her first appearance for "I'm the Bravest Individual." The scene, in which O'Hare, playing a claustrophobe, climbs the walls and Applegate tries to reassure him, goes flawlessly.

The next and final song is the barn-burning "I'm a Brass Band." Applegate gamely sprints across the floor, singing "Somebody loves me," but the moment she reaches the imaginary wings, she stands stock-still, gripping her stomach and breathing hard. More nerves? Actually, it turns out to be part of her ongoing transformation to Broadway baby. "Singers breathe down here," she says later, indicating her stomach. "And dancers breathe from up top. The problem is when you try to do both together." These moments during "Brass Band" are some of the few she spends offstage during the entire production and a good chance to get her breath ready for singing again.

As soon as the performance is over,

the real entertainment begins. The press rushes to another studio next door, where a backdrop covered in *Sweet Charity* logos has been erected. Then they wait hungrily. What is about to ensue is the media feeding frenzy elegantly known as the "gang bang." "Why don't we call it something else?" Applegate asks. She thinks for a moment. "Oh, what the hell. It's a gang bang."

The simple fact is that, compared to singing and dancing, such media assaults are old hat for an actress whose first role was in a Playtex commercial at five months, who survived an improbable 11 seasons of *Married... With Children* and who has appeared in some two dozen movies since the series ended. For her recent costarring role in *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, she estimates she sat for a hundred back-to-back interviews over two days.

"It's incredible. You sit there and answer the same questions over and

**"I thought, There's no way I can do this."**



over and over and over again. And everybody thinks they have a question that nobody's asked before," she says. "Today it will be: 'Did you always want to do Broadway? Isn't it hard to move here from L.A.? Don't you feel intimidated following in the footsteps of Shirley MacLaine and Gwen Verdon? Aren't you afraid? Aren't you afraid? Aren't you afraid?'"

After 33 years in the business, she has developed some coping techniques. "I pretend I have a 'reset' button in my head that I keep pushing every time a new interview starts. And I drink a lot of coffee and surround myself with people who make me laugh. At some point, though, I'll just lose it and start saying anything."

The photographers are first up, a heaving mass of flash bulbs and shouts—"Christina, over here! Over here!"—as Applegate poses alone and with her castmates. The shooting goes on for twenty minutes straight. Then

the TV crews move in as Applegate positions herself on a stool. "Did you always want to do Broadway?" a reporter from *Extra* asks. Applegate smiles and talks about seeing *Annie* as a kid, taking dance lessons for years and always assuming she'd perform on stage. "Shirley MacLaine. Gwen Verdon. What's it like to have your name added to that list?" Applegate smiles again and points out that every Charity has interpreted the role differently and that she's honored to have her chance now. As that cameraman departs, she hits the reset button and *Access Hollywood* moves in: "Have you always wanted to do Broadway?"

An hour later, the TV interviews are done and Applegate has a moment to pop back into the other studio, where the rest of the cast is taking a rehearsal break. "You guys f—ing rocked today," Applegate says and starts to chat before a publicist gently reminds her that it's time to return to one-on-one

print interviews. Applegate lets out a barely perceptible sigh and heads back to the other room.

By five o'clock, as predicted, she's hit her slap-happy stage. "I don't even know what I'm saying anymore," she says, sipping a cup of steaming miso soup. "I just start sentences and lose track of where they're going."

There was a time, she says, when she couldn't imagine even getting to Media Day. "Right before I left L.A., I started really flipping out. I thought, 'There's no way I can do this.' But it's in my body now," she says. "Now we can get back to actually working instead of answering questions. In a couple of weeks we open in Minneapolis and then we come back here and do this Broadway show I agreed to do." She covers her face with her hands in mock panic. Then she smiles.

*Sweet Charity begins April 4 at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre (212-239-6200).*