

**Yeardley Smith  
Dishes on Life, Lisa,  
and a Whole Lot More**

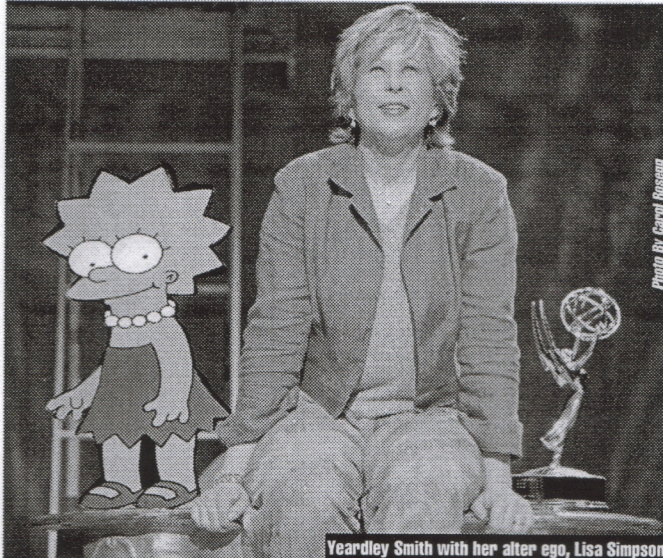
By Iris Wiener

She has the lovable heart and excitement of a sweet eight-year-old, but it is made clear through the most delightful addition to Off-Broadway in years, that she is definitely much *More* than her animated partner in crime. Yeardley Smith brings her voice and fortitude straight from Springfield to New York with the beautiful and comedic tale that is her journey through life, in the superbly crafted play, *More*.

Mostly known for her signature inflection as Lisa Simpson, Smith decided it was time for the world to hear her inner voice. "*More* came about because for about ten years the work really started to dwindle (the on-camera work, I still had the Simpsons thing going), I wasn't getting pilots really, and I wasn't getting movies, and I couldn't make sense of it. It was so frustrating and I really took it personally. So I complained for about a decade, and then I got tired of myself and I decided I needed to really put up or shut up," she proclaims. Audiences will be delighted that she decided to keep talking, as *More* features Smith's engaging gripes from the day she knew she wanted to be famous, to the day she sat herself down and started writing. "I was never the actor that wanted to create a job for myself. I was so happy doing what I did. So I started writing this piece because I thought, 'Well I got some funny stories about all the absurd things that happen in show business,' but I always hoped that I would never have to perform them, that I would actually GET that movie or that TV show in front of the camera that would divert me from this particular journey." But it wasn't always easy coming to terms with her fear of rejection. "When I started to get into it I felt some true ambivalence, as though 'it's just my story, who cares but me, and half the time I don't care so how is this going to go over?'"

As she frequently receives teary-eyed standing ovations, it seems that people not only care, but adore the drive of this talented woman. In her one-woman show, Smith bares all as she explores the factors that contributed to her real-life act as an over-achieving bulimic. "The best thing I hear from people when I get to see them again, is that they think about the show for days later. But what I really hope is that, even if you're not bulimic and you're not an actor and you never wanted to win an Academy award, I think that the story is universal enough that there's probably something in everybody's life; What is your coping mechanism? Did you do drugs, alcohol, are you a sex addict? Whatever you did, whether you built modern airplanes and you never saw the light of day, did you ever feel as though you are what you do? Or some sort of distortion like that, about what you're worth in the world."

Not everyone could put his or her strongest desires and innermost demons on a stage for the world to see, but Smith does it with an extreme cleverness that is rarely touched upon in any arena of entertainment. "One of the things that Judith Ivey [a Tony Award-winning actress, and director of *More*] has really drummed into me is that 'Yeardley, you have written this intimate story, you have to let your guard down. If you're not intimate with us, we're not gonna be sucked into it and we won't really care about you,' and that has been a true challenge for me. You know I always hid behind my characters, I never played myself. So there was a natural resistance to that I really grappled with. But I feel like I'm really getting there, there are moments where it really shines through and I let everybody in." In what is perhaps the most brilliant sequence of the play, Smith dis-



Yeardley Smith with her alter ego, Lisa Simpson

Photo By Carol Roseng

cusses bulimia in a sing-song voice to the backdrop of an infomercial tune. A poignant lesson complete with dry-erase board and marker begins, as the audience is taught in two quick and easy steps how to "Binge," and "Purge," concluding with a justification of these maneuvers through the fact that "winning is everything."

Amongst winning the fight against the eating disorder that claimed her body for a span of twenty years, Smith won a battle of a different kind- Emmy. In 1992 she claimed a golden statue for her voice work as Lisa Simpson, but still suffered a "minor" discontent over the fact that her acceptance was not televised. Today she stands proudly holding her Emmy on stage at the Union Square Theatre, pinpointing a moment that is still unbeknownst to her, a moment when most of the world began to recognize her as a "star." "I used to carry it [the Emmy award] on the subway everyday to and from rehearsal. I didn't have a place to lock it up. I'd have it in a Food Emporium bag. Nobody paid any attention. You've got that naked singing cowboy in Times Square, nobody is looking at my Emmy, trust me. They're all going 'big fuckin deal, what is that anyway?'"

Maybe Smith isn't the star she wants to be, but she has a face and a talent that no one can forget, despite the oddities and small run times of many of her roles. Audiences will recognize her as the screaming newlywed in *Maximum Overdrive* ("It's so bad! It's a total cult classic now! It totally tanked at the box office"), and as a comedic friend of Greg Kinnear's in *As Good as It Gets*. On the small screen she arguably induced more laughs than any of her costars on *Dharma and Greg* and *Herman's Head* and of course as everyone's favorite yellow, saxophone playing vegetarian. "Lisa Simpson is a lot like me. She's a great girl; I have an enormous affection for her. I think she's really thoughtful. The thing that's tedious (which is too strong of a word, but for lack of a better one), is when you have to play the same character over and over, but truly Marlene on *Dharma and Greg* is really one of the best secretaries I've ever played. It was only one scene, but I always had the best joke of the show, whenever I was on that show. I had great fun there. You know if the writing is good, I'll just show up anywhere. I'm not that particular." Smith has seen it all, and is enjoying her current journey through the fourth wall. "People always ask me, what's your favorite, is it film, or TV or stage. Stage is definitely my favorite because of that aspect of fly by the seat of my pants, but again, I'm not that particular."

Aside from exhibiting her unique form of acting, *More* gave Smith the opportunity to demonstrate her skills as a writer. "With this show in particular I really feel like I

accomplished what I set out to when I wrote it. I'm quite pleased and proud of the writing, I feel like it reflects my voice and it's funny and it's honest which was important to me, and the acting challenge is enormous and I think I've come a long way as an actor," she says. As an actor and a writer, surely she's close to living her life long dream of fame? "For me the ultimate for so long was winning the Academy Award, and I'm certainly not almost there, but then the question remains that if I didn't let's say things suddenly broke out and I won next year, would that be what I had imagined all my life? Chances are, NOT! Because you cannot fill up the inside from the outside - which is the moral of the story

to me. Things started to fall into place when I finally realized that my whole life had been predicated on that premise."

As she prepares for the opening role of a lifetime, Smith reflects on the change that she has been happy to see in herself. "I just really hope that the show is a hit and people come and they enjoy it. Somebody asked me the other day, 'So, do you want the show to be a movie for HBO or something?' I'm like, I just need to get through the day, which is new for me, because I have very much lived in the future all my life. I wasn't interested in the past; I wasn't particularly interested in the present. But now, I honestly hope that people come and they like it. Especially when it's your own story and it's autobiographical, you want people to enjoy it. In this regard it is sort of unique. But as I say, I certainly understand that some people won't get it, and they won't like it, and that's okay. There was an older man in the audience at one point, totally not in my demographic, and he was smiling the whole time. He smiled and laughed, and I thought, 'There you go!'"

Audiences of all adult ages will love Smith's depth and charm. She becomes a member of the audience, as she looks over her life as her newly happy self. People will leave the theatre feeling as though they've found a new role model and confidante in someone who found the courage to believe in herself. In doing so she helps others to find their own outlets for success and happiness, as well as for the inevitable tears and pain that come with striving for anything in life. Whether she knows it or not, Smith has made it. When the show ends after its eight week run, New York will be chanting for *More, More, More!*

(Union Square Theatre is located at 100 East 17th Street. Call 212-307-4100 for ticket information.) ■