By KYLE COUNTS

The Many Lives of the CATWOMAN™

No longer the Feline Felon, Julie Newmar recalls what else lurked beneath her villainous veneer.

"Is this not paradise?" sighs Julie Newmar, entering the backyard of her Brentwood, California home. "The birds singing, the cat lying there asleep in front of the *Alice in Wonderland* gate, the way the Sun comes in at this time of the day and creates such marvelous shadows. Everything grows here."

Indeed it does: The garden is bursting with roses, begonias and delphiniums (which grow to heights of six and seven feet), strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, kiwis, mangoes, pears, apples, tangerines, avocados and more, including a "secret garden" (a series of rocks hidden behind shrubbery and trees) where Newmar and her seven-year-old son, John, retreat to meditate together.

Life for the actress at 54 is all about nice thoughts, nice things and enjoying the beauty of existence on this earthly plane. She seems very much at peace during the conversation, frequently punctuating her words with "divine," "marvelous" and "fabulous"—three adjectives that are certain to make it into her memoirs, should she ever care to write them.

"I like where I am now," says the leggy brunette in her patented silky voice. "I own my own properties, I'm my own boss and I have a seven-year-old child [named after her brother] that I adore. And I'm still acting, though I turn down the crap now. I just did a movie called *Ghosts Can't Do It*, with Bo Derek and Anthony Quinn, written and directed by John Derek. I play an angel—it proved to be the most fascinating research I've ever done for a role."

Because Newmar has her sights so firmly fixed on the future, she admits that she gets bored talking about days gone by. As one of those whose career is profiled in Ronald Snipp's book *Sweethearts of the Sixties*, she is only too aware of how the past can come back to haunt a person. "The stuff he quoted from past newspaper articles makes me almost gag," she exclaims. "I can't *believe* I was that arrogant." One such quote has her saying (of her birth on August 16, 1935 at 11:35 p.m.) "Nothing else happened that night—I was enough." Her typically outspoken reaction to said comment: "Oh, that's *garbage*. I would never

Batman Photos: Copyright 1966, 1967 Greenway Productions/20th Century Fox

Photo: David C. Shaffer

"Wouldn't it be lovely to always be thought of as a sexpot?" wonders Julie Newmar.

say anything like that—even though it's true."

For the record, she was born Julia Charlene Newmeyer at Hollywood Hospital. Her mother was a former Ziegfeld Girl (in 1919), her father, the head of the physical education department (he coached football for 25 years) at Los Angeles City College, where he also taught engineering. As a young girl, did she know what she wanted to be when she grew up? "Of course not," Newmar replies. "I'm sure my mother made up my mind for me. She wanted me to be in theater and show business, and I can't say she was wrong at all. It certainly has made for a joyous life."

Newmar could read music before she could read words—she was playing the piano at age three. At seven, she made her nonprofessional acting debut in a school production of *Alice in Wonderland*. (Ironically, her first TV show was an S.J. Perelman effort with Keenan Wynn entitled "Malice in Wonderland," filmed for the long-running series *Omnibus*.) That's where Newmar's reference to the gate at the back of her garden comes from. "It looks like you can walk right through it, doesn't it?" she says. "And on stage, I did walk through it—only there it was a pane of cellophane. They had carved a little hole in it that I was supposed to put my hand through. Only I knocked the entire thing over—very unprofessional."

Sweet Roles

After years of dancing lessons—she was expert in Javanese, Oriental and flamenco styles—she debuted at age 15 with the Los Angeles Opera Company as a dancer soloist—"for no pay, prestige only. I used to take five different dance classes on Saturday alone," she recalls. "I had some marvelous training when I was a girl."

The long hours of practice paid off. Not only did Newmar win a number of dance contests—including Best Rhumba Dancer—and beauty titles ("I don't think that was at the top of the list as far as my mother's ambitions for me"), her dance training got her a job for a season as assistant choreographer at Universal Studios

"Friday's Child," pillow aside, made little impression on Newmar.

Star Trek Photo: Copyright 1978 Paramount Pictures TV

Newmar can give no explanation why *Batman*'s producers failed to call on her to reprise her Feline Felon in later shows.

As his *Living Doll*, Newmar and co-star Bob Cummings did not compute.

My Living Doll Photo: CBS

Batman Characters: Trademark & Copyright 1989 DC Comics Inc.

at a young age. At this point (she had attended UCLA for six weeks before dropping out), she was a "dance-in"—she would dance for other actresses in long-shot, with her face obscured—and had given no serious thought to being an actress. Thus, her first few films utilized her talents as a member of the chorus, though her memories of her screen debut, in the 1952 musical *Just For You*, have more to do with the time she spent with the film's star, Bing Crosby.

"He took me into his dressing room and interviewed me. I was very innocent at the time," she laughs. "I don't think I turned out to be his cup of tea—if you're getting the gist of the story. He was pretty subtle about his seduction. After all, he was married and Catholic and all that."

Next for Newmar was *Serpent of the Nile* (1953), directed by William Castle, wherein she played an Egyptian dancer whose entire body was painted gold—long before there was a movie titled *Goldfinger*. "In those days, you couldn't even expose your belly button, so they put Scotch tape over it, like they did on Barbara Eden when she did *I Dream of Jeannie*," Newmar says. "The whole thing was shot in one day and I made a fat $250."

Slaves of Babylon (1953) was pretty much a repeat performance for Newmar and director Castle. "That was the same kind of role. I was a slave who danced for the Queen of Egypt's paramour. I looked rather pudgy in that—a bit apple-cheeked."

When Newmar got her first big wide-screen break by being cast as one of the brides in the classic 1954 MGM musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* ("I'm the tall one with no waist," she quips), she was still being credited as Julie Newmeyer. Her mother changed her surname when she turned 19—"because numerologically, Newmar is a more powerful name than Newmeyer—and indeed she was right. Newmar is an 11, you see, and 11 is supposed to be world fame and a few other nice things."

After *Brides*, Newmar made her bow on the Broadway stage in the Cole Porter musical *Silk Stockings*. That led to a year run as Stupefyin' Jones in *Li'l Abner* which landed her her next Broadway role, in a comedy written by *Outer Limits* creator Leslie Stevens.

"There was a huge picture of me outside the St. James Theater—about 10 feet high—in this costume, nothing more than two layers of stockings with two or three patches on it," she grins. "An agent named Lester Shurr saw it. There was a play about to go into production called *The Marriage-Go-Round*, and he was looking for a tall, sexy Swedish girl to play the part of Katrin Sveg. So, I read for Charles Boyer—he had final casting approval—and I got the part." She went on to win the Best Supporting Actress Tony for her role, which she re-created for the 1960 film version of the play starring James Mason and Susan Hayward.

In 1959, Newmar was asked by Paramount to repeat her Broadway role as Stupefyin' Jones for the movie adaptation of *Li'l Abner*. That was followed by a "stock girl friend part" in *The Rookie*, a forgettable Army comedy that paired comic duo Tommy Noonan and "Pete" Marshall (later the host of TV's *Hollywood Squares*), then the filmization of *Marriage-Go-Round*, which she feels "lost its luster" in the translation. "I can watch it for about 10 minutes, but I think, 'God, that's enchanting. Weren't you good, your accent was so perfect.' People have often asked me if I'm really Swedish."

Actually, Newmar does hail from Swedish maternal lineage—with a mixture of English, German and French on her father's side. It's unclear as to whom she can credit with her imposing height.

It's a subject that seems to touch a nerve in Newmar. "It pisses me off," she shrugs. "I have never allowed anyone to measure me, and anyone who asks me in an elevator

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how tall I am gets a scowl from me. So, I will best-guess you and tell you I'm 5-foot-11." So, why does the subject raise hackles? "It annoys me that anyone should even *ask* how tall I am. It has a feeling of disapproval. It took me 20 years to discover that the question was just a form of envy. It pisses me off even today—I think it's very rude. I wouldn't ask you how much money you have in the bank or the size of your calf muscle."

Body Parts

Knowing how she feels about discussions regarding her height, the question is meekly posed if it ever bothered her to be consistently cast in "sexpot with a brain" (her IQ is 130) roles. Or might she have been irked whenever columnists focused on her physical attributes rather than her acting ability? (Quotes to wit: "The most lavish sex cargo ever to leave the U.S." And: "A great construction job.") Instead of hissing, Newmar fairly purrs.

"*Who cares* what they wrote? At least they noticed. As long as I played good comedy, I was happy. You have to be some kind of type, after all. In those days, everyone was competing with Marilyn Monroe, so it became a contest to see who they could squeeze into the tightest skirt. Even if the girls I played were simple, I believe that it takes intelligence to play dumb. Remember, in the '50s, this attitude about women was fashionable—we didn't know any better." Newmar pauses and smiles. "Wouldn't it be lovely to always be thought of as a sexpot? That would be divine! My God, at least they would know you had energy."

Indeed, for numerous boys going through the rites of manhood, Julie Newmar was just that—sexual energy incarnate. Many a young man's libido was jump-started by the sight of her curvaceous frame in *Li'l Abner* and, later, on *My Living Doll* and *Batman*. She admits that she has always loved the attention that her statuesque dimensions brought her.

"I adore it when young men come up to me and tell me I brought them through puberty," she beams. "But because I'm near-sighted [she wears glasses to drive], I almost never noticed people staring at me back in those days. I heard one guy ran into a telephone pole. I wasn't even aware of what happened; I was simply oblivious! Maybe I didn't want to notice."

While *Lion of Sparta* is listed in a few of Newmar's biographies, she has no memory of the 1962 20th Century Fox film, released as *The 300 Spartans*. Unfortunately, she recalls all too well her next film, *For Love or Money* (1962), re-released in 1963 under two different titles: *Three on a Match* and *The Three-Way Match*. "That's a very dated film with Kirk Douglas—beehive hairdos, stiff skirts a la Jackie Kennedy and stiff comedy," she deadpans. "It was nice to take home the paycheck, but I don't think they got scintillating results." Was it a sex comedy? "*Of course*," Newmar retorts. "What else would I be in?"

"Who wants to be goody-goody all the time?" purrs Newmar.

Selected Photos: Courtesy Julie Newmar

Between 1962 and 1969, the year she made *Mackenna's Gold* (publicized by an unauthorized nude pictorial in *Playboy*), Newmar did episodic television and off-Broadway musicals. (Among the latter: *There Once Was a Russian*, with Walter Matthau, which closed after one performance.) It was at this time that CBS was developing a sitcom entitled *My Living Doll*.

My Living Doll premiered as part of the network's 1963-1964 fall season, following *Ed Sullivan* in the 9 p.m. Sunday time slot, where the Cartwright boys were riding tall in the saddle in *Bonanza*. "The president of CBS, Jim Aubrey, saw me in a play in Broadway and immediately thought of me for Rhoda [AF709, a robot created for experimental purposes by aerospace engineers]," Newmar recalls. "When I got the role, I had my hair done in New York by the man who did Jackie Kennedy's hair, and I was flown out to California to do publicity. I auditioned the second leading man part, which was eventually filled by Jack Mullaney [playing Dr. Peter Robinson], who was divine. Poor man, he died about six years ago."

In the series, Rhoda—made of transistor solar batteries, polyethelene and a computer generator—is on loan to psychiatrist Bob Cummings, who keeps her in his apartment, which leads his friends and neighbors to make all sorts of unsavory assumptions. But while Rhoda (whose best-remembered line was "That does not compute") may have been created in a lab, the chemistry between the two performers never materialized. From day one, there was constant friction between them—the end result being that Cummings walked off the show after 21 episodes. (Newmar maintains that he was fired, a fact that CBS successfully kept hidden from the press, she says.)

"They [CBS] were looking for a series for Bob Cummings, but *Doll* wasn't the proper vehicle, as it turned out," Newmar comments. "It needed a different type of actor. They originally wanted Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. It was not a flip part—it needed a straight actor who could play opposite this bizarre creature so the comedy would come off. That quality was lost when they hired Bob. The show could have been wonderful. I think it would have run for many seasons had they hired Efrem because he had the right qualities."

After Cummings exited, Newmar realized that *Doll* was dead in the water. "They gave up on it," she says. It was explained that Cummings' character had been relocated to Pakistan. Mullaney took over as the lead, but the show never recovered from bad press and low ratings, and it was cancelled.

"I don't want to say any more about Bob; it would be improper to tell you what I really think because I understand he's not well these days. All I will say is that I'm a very lovable, kind, get-along-with-anyone kind of person, but I had my differences with him."

The fates were smiling when Newmar was approached to play what would turn out to

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Newmar

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be her best-known character: the Catwoman. "An agent called me up and offered me the part, and said that I had the weekend to get out to Hollywood and get in costume," Newmar explains. "Well, I had never heard of *Batman*, which was already a ratings success. My brother and six of his friends were visiting from Harvard. I said, 'John, this agent wants me to play in this *Batman* series.' He leapt up off the sofa and said, 'Do it! It's great! We stop all our studying to watch it.'

"So, I flew out and got into costume—and told them how to redesign it. I used to make costumes, so I knew how to create a fabulous look. There are secrets and subtleties in the way that you cut clothes to make them enhance a person's body. They had a material back then that was called Lurex—it stretched and it had a bluish silver thread in it and it had a wonderful effect on the screen. That's what they used for the final costume. I would get pictures from young girls in their homemade Catwoman costumes, telling me how they liked to dress up in them and act wicked."

For Newmar, Catwoman was an opportunity to revel in her character's sinister personality. "Catwoman was a rapscallion—she was into being no good. She wasn't like the heroes in that era, who tended to be either black or white and were very sappy—they represented to me the blokes in Washington who kept saying that Vietnam was good for us, that we should keep sending troops in. I felt that my character was beautifully rounded whereas Batman and Robin were only half-moons. Who wants to be goody-goody all the time?

"To give credit where it's due, the part was brilliantly written by Stanley Ralph Ross. All I had to do with his gorgeous, imaginative words was to choreograph my movements—I'm a writer too, but I write with my body."

Of Burt Ward and Adam West, she offers: "They were cards. They kidded around a lot, always had a good time. I was with them just the other day, in fact. We did a series of wraparounds for the show's syndication. They haven't changed, they're just the same.

"I, on the other hand, was always very serious. I'm thinking all the time—I'm never off making small talk with the hairdresser or the prop man. I didn't want to look at a piece of work years later and say, 'Gee, why didn't I do that in that scene?' So, when I was on the set—even one as comic as *Batman*—I was very professional. I didn't use any energy that would take away either from my character or from what was happening on the set.

"People always ask me, 'What was the funniest thing that ever happened to you when you were doing such-and-such a movie or TV show?' I draw a blank because I was always so dead into the character, as serious as can be. That's a responsibility that I give myself, especially for comedy. There are many things you have to think about in layers, not just one thing at a time."

Playing Catwoman was "great" for Newmar's career in that it brought her international fame. "It's the one character I played that everyone seems to remember. It made me famous around the world. I was in Argentina, and they seemed to know all about Catwoman. All through Europe, the Middle East—back then and even now I get recognized."

She didn't appear in the 1966 *Batman* movie (Lee Meriwether stepped in), she says, because she was "busy on another project at the time." As for why Eartha Kitt replaced her in subsequent episodes of the series, she explains, "I don't know, though I thought she did the most perfect 'purr-r-fect.' She was wonderful. That voice of hers was heaven." But why didn't Newmar reprise her role? "Who knows? They [the producers] were fools. It was bad form on their part. They have no loyalty in Hollywood—they treat actors like cattle, haven't you heard that?"

In 1969, Julie Newmar appeared in *The Maltese Bippy*, a slapdash horror movie spoof designed to cash in on the popularity of *Laugh-In* hosts Dan Rowan and Dick Martin. "I played a dog in that," she muses. "No, I turned *into* a dog. No...well, I guess you'll just have to see it yourself. I recall I was rather funny in it."

She has equally vague memories of her single *Star Trek* episode, "Friday's Child." "I really don't remember much about that," she admits. "That was 20 years ago, remember. I do recall that I was supposed to be pregnant, and I had to wear a funny-looking costume with a pillow in the tummy. As for Bill Shatner and Leonard Nimoy, I can tell you they were very nice, very business-like, and that's about it."

These days Newmar does an occasional movie or play (she played a transsexual in *Duke*, which she also directed, and recently did a revival of Clare Booth's *The Women*) and still takes night classes at UCLA: finance, real estate, gardening—"whatever appeals to me at the time." She also owns Eat a Pita, a Mediterranean-style fast-food restaurant in the heart of Los Angeles' Fairfax district. Her regrets are few.

"My mistake was not marrying a director or choreographer, or someone who could have helped me in my career," she observes. She was engaged at a young age to the late Western author Louis L'Amour, but it wasn't until 1977 that she married—and later divorced—"struggling lawyer" Jay Holt Smith. As for the future, she says: "I would like to get married again, and have a couple more kids. And I would like to do episodic television again, though I wouldn't want to have to carry an entire show. Something where I was part of an ensemble would be divine.

"I won't do any more low-budget stuff," says Julie Newmar. "I'm not doing anyone any favors, I'm not giving away my talent for free. I only do what's challenging to me."