

Arts & Entertainment

Critics beginning to adore Pia Zadora

By Scott Harrah
Senior Editor

Pia Zadora sits in her Tulsa, Okla., hotel room talking on the phone and sipping coffee. Her 2 1/2-year-old daughter, Kady, tries to sneak a sip. "No, no, honey, you're not old enough to drink coffee," she says, snatching the cup away.

Zadora played Sunday at Omaha's Orpheum Theater.

As she discusses her career, she takes brief stops and tends to the child. Although she's currently on a tour of the Midwest, performing the classic pop and jazz standards that finally gave her a respectable name, she doesn't ignore her family. Her husband, millionaire businessman Meshulam Riklis, Kady and her 8-month-old son, Kristopher, come first.

She says she paces her tours because she often brings the kids along and needs time for them.

"I don't like to tour for a long time because I'm a family person," she says. "Sometimes it's very hard for Kady."

Five years ago, marriage was Zadora's only stable thread of sanity. At the time, she was Hollywood's favorite pin cushion. Critics lived to ridicule her roles in classically bad films like "The Lonely Lady" and "Butterfly."

Although she'd had a mildly successful career on Broadway, critics and the entertainment industry dwelled on the fact that she'd been in a lot of celluloid garbage. At age 9, Zadora played an alien girl in "Santa Claus Conquers the Martians." She'd also made several bubble-gum songs in Europe, which turned her into what she calls a "teeny-bopper queen."

Some critics claimed her career was a vanity production, financed by her husband's corporate millions. His company owns Dubonnet Wines, and Zadora once starred in its ads. When

she won the Golden Globe Award for "Best Newcomer" for her role in "Butterfly," some Hollywood moguls claimed Riklis "bought" the award for her by wining and dining the press.

But insults like that are behind her now. Her two albums, "Pia and Phil" (with the London Philharmonic Orchestra) and "I Am What I Am," established Zadora as a legitimate, talented singer.

When she debuted at Carnegie Hall, she received an unexpected standing ovation. When she performed her first concert in Hollywood, the notoriously vicious Los Angeles Times jazz critic Leonard Feather wrote: "She has it all, the range, expert intonation, a sensitive feeling for the lyrics and enough dynamic variety to preclude the danger of overkill. Zadora is nothing to laugh at, and likely never will be again."

She says the California concert was the beginning of the new Pia Zadora — the one critics rave about. Since the show-business industry dominates Los Angeles, she knew she had to be great or she'd never be taken seriously.

"I knew with L.A. (the concert), it would be the beginning or end of my career," she says. "Today, I've got a legitimate career. Five years ago, it was a fraud."

Seven years ago, following the success of Linda Ronstadt's pop-classics LP "What's New," friend Frank Sinatra encouraged Zadora to make a similar album. Sinatra recognized her vocal ability when she opened for his nightclub act.

"As far as my approach to the albums, Linda Ronstadt was my role model," she says. "She took old songs, simplified them and made them her own."

When Zadora was attending parochial school in her native New York City, one of her teachers suggested that she try drama school to overcome

her shyness. While attending the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, Burgess Meredith asked her to audition for "Midgie Purvis," a drama starring the legendary Tallulah Bankhead. She got a part and Bankhead soon took the young Zadora under her wing.

"She was very fabulous and bigger than life," she says of Bankhead. "I loved her because she was a unique individual, very dramatic and very much her own person. When I first met her, she asked me, 'How long have you been in show business.' I glanced at the Mickey Mouse watch my mother made me wear and replied, 'Exactly 20 minutes.'"

Bankhead adored her from then on, she says.

Zadora continued to succeed in both on- and off-Broadway roles, performing in "Fiddler on the Roof," "Applause" and "We Take the Town" with Robert Preston.

When she was 17, she wed 49-year-old corporate tycoon Meshum Riklis, who her mother's friend said was "king of the Jews." During the early years of the marriage, Zadora was a jet-set society woman, but she soon became bored with it and went back to show biz.

Initially, she was a top-40 pop star in Europe with hits like "Let's Dance Tonight" and "I'm in Love Again," which was produced by the Village People's producer, Jeff Morlue.

In Europe, she was a star, but back in the States she was nobody.

"I knew I had a career, and mine was in Europe," she says. "Everyone has kind of a European cognizance of me because of my name and my look."

Then, in 1982, she starred in the Orson Welles film "Butterfly," about a father's incestuous affair with his alleged daughter. "Butterfly" became an instant camp classic, and Pia Zadora became the laughing stock of Hollywood.



Photo courtesy of Dick Zimmerman

Zadora

In 1983, she starred in "The Lonely Lady," an infamously trashy potboiler based on a Harold Robbins novel.

The film — a sensationalized hoot featuring rape with a garden hose, lesbian casting-couch scenes and dismal direction — swept the Golden Turkey Awards, and critics called it one of Hollywood's best bad movies.

"We made 'Lonely Lady' in Italy," she says. "They should've killed it there, too."

Although some considered her the

black sheep of Hollywood, she never felt she'd been misguided in her career.

"Life is too short to be a Monday-morning quarterback," she says. "Nobody offered me 'Kramer vs. Kramer,' so I did 'Lonely Lady.'"

When the "Pia and Phil" LP came out two years ago, those who once laughed at her were amazed she could sing.

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