ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

THE SHOCK OF THE GOOD

Broadway's sweetheart sneaks spirituality into a sitcom.

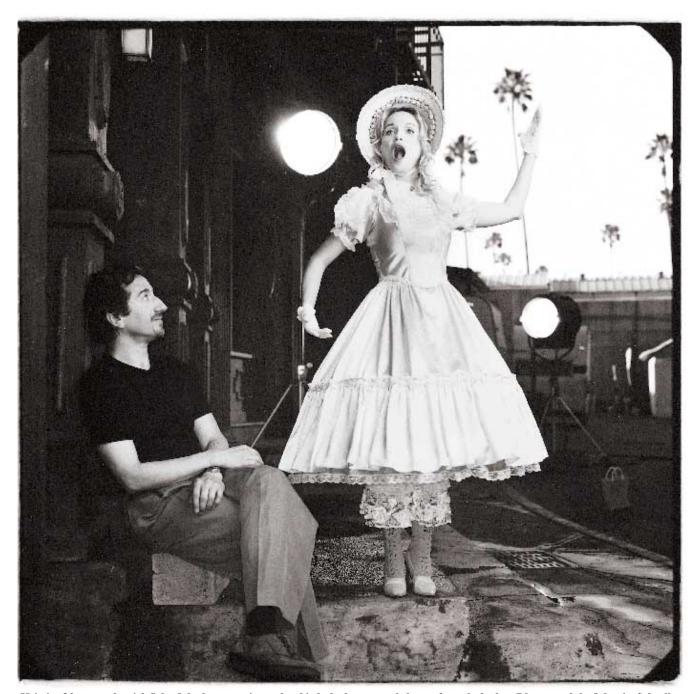
BY JOHN LAHR

n a late blustery January afternoon last year, with the wind whipping snow flurries into their bowed faces, a cluster of some thirty theatricals hurried into Sardi's to witness the unveiling of the latest celebrity caricatures to be hung on the restaurant's cluttered red walls. Of all the totems of Broadway success—billing above the title, percentage of the gross, dressing room on the first floor—a place on the wall at Sardi's is perhaps the most emotive and the most symbolic, linking the initiate to a nearly century-long chain of great entertainers and to the glorious annals of show-biz joy. In recent years, owing to a steady decline in the number of quality shows and sensational entertainers, Sardi's has taken to adding the faces of producers to its tableau of prowess—a real blip in the vital signs of Broadway talent. On this occasion, however, the president of Sardi's, Max Klimavicius, was passing a Richard Baratz caricature into the hands of a star, the then thirty-one-year-old actress Kristin Chenoweth.

The drawing captured the diminutive Chenoweth's apple-pie exteriorthe sweep of her shoulder-length blond hair, her wide forehead, almond-shaped cerulean-blue eyes, high cheekbones, and strong chin-but it showed little of her high-voltage interior, the warmth of which has won her a battalion of New York theatregoing admirers. In an earlier time, when Broadway was a leader in popular culture and not a follower, Chenoweth's singing voice, her high-pitched speech (which sounds as if she had just inhaled helium), her comic timing, and her aura of downright decency would have made her one of America's sweethearts. Instead, she's a local thrill, unknown to the hinterland. Chenoweth calls herself a "throwback," and, in a sense, she's right. She's a God-fearing Baptist whose buoyancy is underpinned by the Bible's good news. Both her optimism and her talent are indicative of a

more innocent era of entertainment. She is Nellie Forbush in "South Pacific"-"as corny as Kansas in August" (though she's from Oklahoma) and as "bromidic and bright as a moon-happy night." But Rodgers and Hammerstein created that character in 1949, when America still clung to the fantasy of its own purity. Chenoweth has come of age in the era of the corporate musical, and her persona has proved a problem. Though she has a two-and-a-half-octave range and can sing an E above high C—the vocal equivalent of a five-hundred-yard golf drive—she is too outspoken for the likes of Disney's fun machines. "If they want the plain vanilla ingénue, it ain't me," she says. At the same time, she's too wholesome for the desiccated souls that Stephen Sondheim's boulevard nihilism has made the musical vogue. Each of her major Broadway shows has helped her career: she won a Theatre World Award in 1997 for her part in "Steel Pier," although it was drastically cut; she won a Tony in 1999 for her performance as Sally Brown in "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" a part written specifically to shoehorn her into an otherwise mediocre show; and later that year she got raves for her starring role in "Epic Proportions," a woefully amateur send-up of a Hollywood Biblical epic. But none of these roles managed to bring her effectively from the periphery to the center of the story. In other words, Chenoweth on Broadway is a star with no place to glow.

Chenoweth attended Broken Arrow High School, in a comfortable middle-class suburb of Tulsa. Her family's house had a wooden fence and a swimming pool, and she drove—badly—a yellow Ford Mustang. In a section of her 1986 yearbook in which the class members imagined their futures—perhaps a doctor, perhaps a millionaire—Chenoweth is portrayed as "the famous singer she hopes to be." "I always said, I want to do Broadway," she says. "I didn't even know



Kristin Chenoweth with John Markus, a writer who thinks he has created the perfect role for her. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

what Broadway was, but I knew I'd be there." After completing a master's degree in opera performance at Oklahoma City University in 1993, and earning the title of "most promising newcomer" at a Metropolitan Opera audition that same year, Chenoweth won a scholarship to continue her studies at the Academy of Vocal Arts, in Philadelphia. On her way there, she stopped in New York and decided to audition for "Animal Crackers," a Marx Brothers musical—"just to see how I would do." "I sang. I read a scene. I learned a dance," she says. "They said they wanted to offer me the part. I told

them I was there for fun. They said, 'Who's your agent?' I said, 'My dad, I guess. I mean, I don't have one." Chenoweth adds, "I decided to go for it. The Academy of Vocal Arts really let me have it: 'Don't ever try to get back here again. You're making the biggest mistake of your life."

Five and a half years later, in a fitted brown pony-hair suit and a pale-blue blouse showing plenty of décolletage, Chenoweth scrutinized her likeness at Sardi's, then beamed at Klimavicius and the zealous admirers around her. "It's wonderful! Thank you," she said. "You captured it so perfectly—my personality! Especially my hair"—a laugh bubbled up—"and my roots!" But, as she held the caricature up to her face like a mask and posed for the cameras, she couldn't help thinking that, despite her Tony, she was being elevated to Broadway's wall of fame without ever having had a hit show.

eaning against the bar across the ∡room was John Markus, a goateed forty-four-year-old TV writer, who was about two weeks away from completing the pilot script for a sitcom starring Chenoweth, and who was wondering, as he watched her bask in the affection of her fans, whether he was doing the right thing. The news of Chenoweth's defection to the West Coast had already filtered out into the theatre world, and Broadway folk were eying Markus as if he were a carpetbagger and warning him to "take care of our girl." Markus knew the subtext of those warnings. He was about to drop Chenoweth into the middle of the Hollywood sump, and his mood was distinctly bittersweet: "I was taking her from the world that was celebrating her. I was telling myself I'd be doing her some good. She could come back after the series to better parts and bigger audiences."

That was the gamble—and it was a big one. Many current theatrical talents—Nathan Lane and Faith Prince among them—have tried and failed to make the transition from Broadway to TV. Too often, the material had nothing to do with the actor. The majority of recent successful sitcoms have been built around the well-developed and easily identifiable personalities of standup comedians such as Roseanne, Tim Allen, Ray Romano, and Jerry Seinfeld. But Markus was bullish about Chenoweth, and he believed he could provide her with a role that would make sense for

her, one that encompassed both her strong morals and her extravagant sense of humor—a role in which she could travel. "I made you a Cadillac," he announced when he handed her the first draft of the script.

Markus had begun his career in comedy as a teen-ager, in the early seventies, by sending jokes about life in a small town in Ohio to the syndicated New York columnist Earl Wilson; at nineteen, he flew to New York and waited eight hours for Bob Hope to walk through a hotel lobby so that he could hand him a few pages of his jokeswhich Hope bought for five hundred dollars. By the time he was thirty, Markus had worked himself up to the position of head writer on "The Cosby Show." He wrote or co-wrote sixtyseven of the show's episodes, and by the time he left, six years later, his gift for writing successful character comedy had earned him both a reputation as a wunderkind and a percentage of "The Cosby Show"'s syndication. Markus then put in a season as a writer and consulting producer for "The Larry Sanders Show," and, with Al Franken, created and wrote "Lateline," a smart stab at media satire whose network life was blighted and

short. But he couldn't come up with anything on the scale of his early success. Having worked so hard to define the comic identity of Bill Cosby, Markus was now unable to define himself. "I had no reference points for the day," he says. "I was faced with me. I'm just not as much fun as a hit TV show." He spent five days a week in psychoanalysiswhat he calls "the sport of kings." He took tutorials in the American novel. He studied guitar with the jazz master Bucky Pizzarelli. He spent more time with his wife, the painter Ardith Truhan, whom he'd married in 1997, after a sixteen-year courtship. He also began to buy property—using his "Cosby" proceeds to acquire eight hundred and fifty acres in upstate New York, a kingdom larger than Central Park, on which he built a computerized house where everything from the window blinds to the mattresses is adjustable at the touch of a button. Markus believes in property as an investment, and he has a knack for developing it. From his seat at the bar at Sardi's, he watched Chenoweth with the eye of an architect who has just discovered a magnificent new landscape on which to build.

wo years—almost to the day—be-■ fore the Sardi's ceremony, Markus had been watching a videotape of performances by six actresses, in order to cast a pilot he'd written for NBC. Chenoweth was third on the tape, and he didn't bother with the last three. "There was a conviction in her performance," he told me. "That's what it was—a sense of commitment and truthfulness and this kind of powerful energy." He had her flown out to Burbank to test in front of the network executives. In the end, Chenoweth lost the part but gained an ally. "We just clicked," Markus says.

In Chenoweth, Markus recognized something of his own upbringing. Both were part of that huge, undramatized demographic that TV executives refer to as "the fly-over people." Markus's parents were Holocaust survivors, who, in 1953, had settled in London, Ohio (current population 8,771). Markus remembers going into the local café—the State Restaurant—and walking right into the kitchen, where the management let him cook his own meals. "Everything was



"Maybe the compassionate part will kick in during the second half of the Administration."

available—there was this great openness," he told me. Chenoweth's own openness, her lack of cynicism, and her vulnerability tapped a deep reservoir of nostalgia in him. In addition to an obsession with junk food (Markus has a life-size Bob's Big Boy sculpture hidden in the woods of his estate) and a weakness for certain low styles of popular entertainment (Gogi Grant, the Lettermen), Markus and Chenoweth share a passion for flat landscapes "where you can see forever." And Markus, who felt "maybe I'd lost my own way," was moved by Chenoweth's integrity and spiritual direction. Without knowing quite where it would lead him, he began to study her.

During the subsequent months, he trailed Chenoweth to a Baptist church in New York and to a Methodist church in Los Angeles. He visited her at home on the Upper West Side, and joined her for her first spa experience, in a de-luxe Berkshire enclave. A man who always knows where you can buy it for more, Markus found himself on excursions to Target, where Chenoweth likes to shop for clothes, ending each spree with a cherry slushie. He also attended her performances and was at the first screening of Disney's "Annie," in which she played the vamp Lily St. Regis.

In 1999, Chenoweth suddenly began getting calls from Hollywood executives. She had a half-dozen interviews, and, solely on the basis of having seen her sing and win at the Tony Awards, several network and studio panjandrums offered her a "holding deal"—a lucrative arrangement whereby the studio pays a performer not to take other work while it develops a show around her. At this point, Markus told me, he suddenly realized that "for the rest of my career I was probably never going to encounter a performer like this to write for, and, unless I came up with a vehicle to land her, I could eventually lose her."

Until then, he had had "just a vague notion of the feel of a show" that would feature "a good woman in a world that was immoral." Now he elaborated: in the show, as he imagined it, Chenoweth would play an aspiring actress named Kristin, who is forced to take temporary work with a charming but predatory real-estate mogul, and who must then struggle to remain true to both her

Christian faith and her talent. "This is a character who, day by day, lives by the following rules: she will not lie, she will not cheat, she will not break the law, she believes that marriage is a sacred vow, and she lives the way God asks her to live," Markus explained. "In the obstacles to that goodness lies the humor." Markus envisioned the sitcom as a radical departure from the caricature and sensationalism of the past few years of television—the jamboree of dysfunction ("Malcolm in the Middle," "The Simpsons") and the Machiavellian manipulation of reality-based shows like "Survivor."

Like most stars, Chenoweth has a canny sense of what she's selling, and she saw in Markus someone who both understood her talent and could advance her career. He himself was almost messianic on the subject. "John just never stopped," the Paramount executive Dan Fauci says. "'You gotta see Kristin. You gotta see Kristin.' And he was right." Markus sold Paramount on the idea, and then NBC. The show was about optimism, he told the NBC supremos. It was about innocence. It was about strength. Chenoweth, he explained, was a person with whom other fly-over people would identify. They got the idea so quickly that Markus stopped his pitch five minutes early, saying, "My work here is done." But it was only just beginning. NBC ordered thirteen shows—at a total cost to the studio and the network of nearly fifteen million dollars-starring an actress whom most of the executives, and most of the nation, had never even seen perform.

Markus filled the first script with incidents from Chenoweth's life. ("It's eighty-seven per cent me," she says.) Sometimes it's a scene taken from her past, like the time she was unwittingly hired to deliver a malicious singing telegram—and performed "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" for a man who'd just had a vasectomy and who broke down and wept on hearing it. Sometimes it's dialogue, like her comeback to a married man who tried to kiss her: "There's a wedding ring on your finger, Mister. Somewhere you have a wife who's counting on me not to kiss back." Markus recalls, "I was once sitting with her in a situation where she had to tell a white lie. She was on the phone. She screwed up her courage and told the lie, but before she did it she crossed her fingers. 'Why are you looking at me?' she asked when she hung up. I said, 'I saw something I'm putting in the show.'"

caught up with Markus and Chen-■ oweth in April of last year, on a crystalline Los Angeles afternoon, at their production office on the Paramount lot. With the Venetian blinds partly closed against the sun's glare, they were readying the first script to "go to table" (a readthrough for the network). They made an amusing study in contrasts. Issuing an endless series of orders to his assistants next door, inspecting props for the set being built across the way, taking calls from agents and actors, Markus was the commander-in-chief, in a khaki shirt, shorts, and sandals. Chenoweth, in opentoed shoes and black pedal pushers, moved around the room like some playful promise of good times. She flopped onto a sofa and draped herself over the armrest to cue up a demo for the show's theme song. Since the song, "Hold On," was the work of Jeanine Tesori and Dick Scanlan, the erstwhile writers of the stage adaptation of "Thoroughly Modern Millie" (which Chenoweth had abandoned in order to make the series), and since it was Chenoweth's voice on the demo, it seemed like a done deal-as, indeed, it proved to be. "Hold on / Hold on / Hold on to who you are," Chenoweth sang.

Another TV-comedy pro, Earl Pomerantz, whom Markus had enlisted to help him punch up the script, wandered in to listen. "I like the lyrics," he said. "I like the idea of it. But I don't know if Jews will listen if they put that on." "Do Jews have Nielsen boxes?" Markus asked. "I dunno," Pomerantz said with a shrug. The talk turned to the show's title. "There's a hundred-dollar reward for whoever comes up with the right name," Chenoweth said. She was pushing for "The Real Deal." Paramount had hired a company to suggest titles, and it had produced "The Perfect Pair," "Heaven Sent," and "Naughty and Nice," among others. But the title that most confounded Markus was "Cross to Bear." "Why would you want to summon up the image of Jesus at his lowest moment in selling your show?" he said. Then there were the joke titles that were constantly being submitted, like "No Sex and the City" and "Touched by a

THINGS SHOULDN'T BE SO HARD

A life should leave deep tracks: ruts where she went out and back to get the mail or move the hose around the yard; where she used to stand before the sink, a worn-out place; beneath her hand, the china knobs rubbed down to white pastilles; the switch she used to feel for

in the dark
almost erased.
Her things should
keep her marks.
The passage
of a life should show;
it should abrade.
And when life stops,
a certain space
—however small—
should be left scarred
by the grand and
damaging parade.
Things shouldn't
be so hard.

—Kay Ryan

Short Person"—an allusion to "Touched by an Angel," the hour-long sentimental spiritual drama to which Markus imagines his show will be an antidote. "I felt that the star of our show might find it a little difficult, week to week," he said of this last title. "Just a hair," the star responded.

Thenoweth is four feet eleven, and "the size thing," as she calls it, is not always a joke for her. At her first anxious meeting with Paramount executives, she was offered a seat on a large leather couch. "Her feet didn't touch the ground; she kept sliding off and, trying to maintain her poise, hoisting herself back up," Markus recalls. "You will see that exact moment in the show." Size has been a defining issue in Chenoweth's life, and, to some extent, it accounts for the particular intensity of her talent. Her size cost her a career as a ballet dancer after fifteen years of training, and it got her pushed around in the halls of Broken Arrow High School. People seem to have an overwhelming urge to lift Chenoweth up, and, throughout her childhood, shopping malls during holiday season were an emotional minefield. "The Easter Bunny or Santa Claus one of those people—had a tendency to yell at me, 'Come over here, little girl!'" she says. "They'd follow me in the mall. And I'm like, 'Go away. I'm sixteen.' "She adds, "Now when I see them it brings back that horrible, horrifying time. And my mom loved to tease me. She'd go, 'There's Santa! There's Santa!" ("To this day, if she sees a clown coming she'll turn and walk away for fear he might give her a balloon," Junie Chenoweth says of her daughter.)

Onstage, the combination of small body and big personality only adds to Chenoweth's allure. But offstage, when she is patronized because of her size, a certain militancy shows through her geniality. During a recent Christmasshopping expedition to H. Stern to buy pearls for her mother, Chenoweth, whose head was barely higher than the display cases, found herself first being overlooked, then treated rudely by a saleswoman named Cynthia. Chenoweth recalls, "I said, You're unhappy, aren't you? You're an unhappy person because you're working at Stern's. You know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna pray for you right now. I'm really gonna pray." Chenoweth bowed her head. "Dear Lord, help Cynthia," she said. "She is so unhappy here at Stern's. And I mean it, because I am trying, Lord, to have a patient heart with her, and it is not working. She is so nasty." Chenoweth could hear the women around her laughing. She continued, "God help me right now to be patient. I know, we all know, that I need help with this situation. Amen."

Part of Chenoweth's cheer springs from her ability to turn aggression back onto its perpetrator. Not long ago at an audition, a Broadway star came up to her and gushed about her performance in "Charlie Brown." Afterward, while Chenoweth was in a stall in the ladies' room, she overheard the star talking to another woman. "I mean, she can sing—I'll give her that," the star said. "But funny? How hard is it to play a cartoon. I don't get all the hoopla!" Chenoweth realized that they were talking about her. "I just sat in the stall and I was, like, God, help me to handle this with class." Chenoweth walked out of the stall and up to the sink. The actress's face drained of color. Chenoweth washed her hands, and as she left she turned back to the actress. "I don't get the hoopla, either," she said.

Chenoweth's one "diva moment" the only time she actually raised what people call her "Kewpie-doll voice"—is what got her to Paramount. At the 1999 Tony Awards, she was scheduled to sing "My New Philosophy" dressed as Sally Brown, right before the prize for which she had been nominated would be announced. She asked for a change in the schedule so that, if she won, she would have time to put on her regular clothes before collecting the award. "I'd like the world to see me win as myself, not looking like a ten-year-old," she told the show's producers. "They fought me and fought me on it," Chenoweth says. Then, two days before the awards, she was a guest on "The Rosie O'Donnell Show" and mentioned her distress to O'Donnell, who happened to be a former m.c. of the Tony Awards. "Rosie made the call," Chenoweth says. On the night of the Awards, five dressers were waiting for Chenoweth when she came offstage; they had just seconds to get her out of her costume and into her gown. A zipper got stuck, and the dressers literally had to rip the costume off her. Nonetheless, nine million viewers saw a focussed, adult-looking Chenoweth stride from the wings to receive her award.

As they tweak scenes for the pilot, Markus and Chenoweth sometimes act them out. In one, Kristin's boss, the full-time tycoon and part-time Casanova Tommy Ballantine, interviews Kristin for the job as his personal assistant. He dictates a list of chores: "First, call my veterinarian. Tell him the flea dip didn't take. My cat is still infested, only now he smells like dry cleaning. I want my cat picked up, re-dipped, de-Martinized, and returned at his expense." Chenoweth's

forehead wrinkles in concentration as she mimes writing on a notepad. "Fix cat," she says. "Oops! I mean, fix cat *problem*. Whoa. Better add that last word! Like the difference between lightning and lightning bug!" Chenoweth puts a little down-home Oklahoma spin on the word "bug" that makes Markus light up.

All games are best when they are tense, and Markus has set up a shrewdly comic battle of wills between the righteous Kristin and the sensationally pagan Tommy ("If you're a woman and you're breathing, you're in Tommyworld"). Markus's innovation is not so much in the sitcom form as in its content. By making Kristin the heroine of the show, he brings to center stage the kind of character—a moral, conservative person—who has traditionally been relegated to a stock secondary role, such as the uptight neighbor. "I'm having the same feelings that I had on "The Cosby Show," "Markus says. "We're taking a character American television viewers don't normally see as accessible and turning her into an Everyperson."

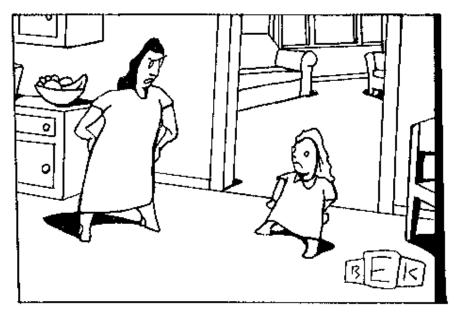
In the show, Markus dramatizes the very contemporary struggle between selfishness and selflessness, a struggle that is also, in a sense, personal to Chenoweth, who has difficulty finding a balance between the self-interest required to promote her talent and the self-sacrifice that relationships with others often demand. In a telling scene that has since been cut from the pilot, Chenoweth is shown in a church, sitting in front of a black woman, who soon draws her into conversation: "What's your problem? You're white." "All I'm asking is that God give me the chance to show off the talents he gave me," Kristin explains. The woman says, "Hey, I'm prayin' for a kidney." "Oh," Kristin says, casting her eyes heavenward. "Do hers first." Last year, Chenoweth broke off a three-year engagement, and she admits that she's "never really been good at picking men." She prays over the problem; she has also ventured into psychotherapy



to address it. "She's always saying, 'Am I that difficult? Am I asking too much?' "her friend Denny Downs told me. "She's always dated someone who's either Jewish or in another denomination that's clashed with her own. Those are the men she's drawn to. I think that puzzles her."

Markus believes that he has helped Chenoweth to take the same kinds of risks in life that she takes onstage. For his part, he has been inspired by the depth of her beliefs. He finds that he's more tolerant than he used to be. "I don't categorize people as zealots so easily," he says. Sometimes he, like Tommy Ballantine, feels like a spiritual work-in-progress, a kind of "trifecta of sin"—to borrow a line from the show—and he often teases Chenoweth about her secret hope that he'll convert to Christianity one day. "I have a family that went through the Holocaust," Markus says. "It gives me a certain, shall we say, skepticism about the existence of goodness, of God." But, he adds, "During the course of working with Kristin, I went from being an agnostic to being really open to her faith." Often, Markus will get her to talk about the Rapture. "I go, 'Now, what's gonna happen when the Rapture comes?' She says, 'We'll be sitting here, and then suddenly I'll be gone. All that will be left is my jewelry.' Then I say, 'Kristin, let me tell you something. If the time comes when I'm sitting here, eating meat loaf with you, and you disappear and all that's left is your jewelry, I guarantee you that I will accept Jesus as my personal Savior."

To pass the desultory hours of one ▲ late afternoon, while Markus sifted through scripts Chenoweth turned her focus to two albums that she planned to record for Sony Classical, which had signed her up after she sang in the Encores! production of "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever." On the first album, "Let Yourself Go," Chenoweth was going to sing mostly standards from the American songbook, but the company had sent her a skimpy list of possible numbers, and we found ourselves cruising the aisles of Tower Records on Sunset Boulevard at twilight, looking for fresher material, like Lena Horne's rendition of "A New-Fangled Tango" and versions of a song that Chenoweth had never heard of-Rodgers and Hart's "Mountain Greenery." Chenoweth is no



"What did I tell you about destroying Mommy's inner balance?"

stranger to this kind of professional blind spot, and she tells a story about the interview portion of a Miss Oklahoma beauty pageant she once entered. After being briefed about current events and politics, she nervously took a seat in front of her interrogator. The question she was asked was "What do you think of '60 Minutes' as a TV show?" "Well, you know, I think sixty minutes is long enough," she said. "That's a reasonable amount of time." She paused. "That's not what you wanted to know, is it?"

As we picked through the CDs looking for "Right as the Rain," by Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg, Chenoweth came upon Karen Carpenter's recordings. "One of my favorite singers," she said. "There's some deep pain in her voice that you can hear in everything she does. To me, it's more than just good technique. The one thing I don't want to do is sing a song because it's pretty. I want it to tell a story. I want people to be transformed by the song." Like all genuine stage stars, Chenoweth has an uncanny connection to the audience. "Kristin can take the pulse of an audience in the way that Judy Garland could," the director Michael Mayer told me. Chenoweth first recognized this chemistry at the age of twelve: "I can remember singing for ten thousand Baptists at a convention and thinking, I have these people; they're with me." The Chenoweths have a large

extended family, and, according to Junie Chenoweth, adults were always cajoling Kristin to "sing for us, or dance for us." She was always "a different person when the audience responded to her." Chenoweth's older brother Mark, who is an engineer in Colorado, adds, "It was easy for her to be the center of attention anywhere. She made it a point to make other people know that she recognized them."

espite Chenoweth's love of attention, she was somewhat taken aback to discover, a few days before shooting the pilot in late April of last year, that the show was officially to be known as "Kristin." Markus says, "She turned to me, pointed to her shoulders, and said, 'Why don't you just put fifteen million dollars right up here?" Finding an actor with the right combination of charm and chutzpah to play opposite Chenoweth was a difficult task, and the long, frustrating search had finally come to an end in the last week of March, when Markus chose Jon Tenney, a TV regular with a Broadway pedigree in light comedy ("Biloxi Blues," "Brighton Beach Memoirs"). On the day the network accepted Tenney, he, Chenoweth, Markus, and the casting director were driving off the NBC lot when Markus found himself at the wrong exit gate. The barrier arm wouldn't go up. As they sat momentarily stymied, Chenoweth said, "I'd really like to take a moment here." With head bowed, she said a prayer of thanks for getting to work with Tenney and Markus. When she'd finished, Markus turned to her. "Could you ask God to open the gate?" he said.

Over the next few weeks, Markus called me occasionally with progress reports. The first episodes of the show had tested in the "good" to "very good" range. "But what I've learned is that testing rewards the familiar," Markus said. "'Seinfeld' did not test well. 'All in the Family' did not test well. 'Mary Tyler Moore' did not test well." Still, the tests showed that the viewers united in their enthusiasm only at the moment, five minutes into the show, when Kristin showed up for work at Tommy's office. Accordingly, Markus restructured and reshot the opening. The network had announced that the show would première in September, and as it got tighter and better Markus's obsession with it grew. Late one night, he called me from the editing room. He sounded exhausted. He went into a monologue about the industrial designer Raymond Loewy. Loewy, it seems, had been hired to design a car that would reinvigorate sales of the Studebaker. "He brought a group of men to his compound and denied them women," Markus said. "Women. Phones. Alcohol. Contact with the outside world. All their energy was sublimated into this new car and giving it some kind of excitement that they weren't being allowed to have in life." He added, "They created a classic."

n May 15th, Markus, Chenoweth, and Tenney rolled up to Lincoln Center, where a banner across the front of the Metropolitan Opera announced "NBC Primetime 2000/2001." The network was preparing for its seasonal ratings war, and the "Kristin" team members were part of its shock troops—there to participate in a promotional extravaganza for three thousand pumped-up advertisers and reporters. But they were feeling a little as if they had just pulled K.P. A week earlier, the show's début had been bumped from the fall lineup. Chenoweth was upset, but as they milled among the other talent for the new season-Michael Richards, David Alan Grier, Martin Sheen, Allison Janney, Oliver Platt—the reason became clear. "They can't put us into that pack," Markus said. "We have people who re-

ally aren't known at all to television viewers. It would be a higher risk to do that." When Chenoweth and Tenney were summoned for the show's grand finale— "The Parade of Stars"—Markus stayed behind, watching his stars on the monitor as they trooped out, as far from center stage as they could be while still being part of the parade, waving and applauding the audience, which applauded them, too. When Chenoweth reëmerged from her walk-on, a journalist approached her and asked how it felt to have her show cut from the fall schedule. "You know, I've always had really good luck sneaking in the back door," she said.

But NBC's door proved hard to pry open. In December, the president of the network's entertainment division, Garth Ancier, gave Markus a première date of March 12, 2001. Soon afterward, Ancier was deposed, the première date disappeared with him, and "Kristin" found itself in programming purdah. Last January, Markus, Chenoweth, and the creative team presented some episodes of the show at the biannual Television Critics Association Press Tour, in Pasadena. "We did great, especially when I had Kristin sing 'I'm Only Four Eleven, but I'm Going to Heaven, and That Makes Me Feel Ten Feet Tall," Markus says. "But what we didn't have for the critics was an air date." The networks are currently under pressure to air their own product, and NBC is no exception. The entertainment division's new president, Jeff Zucker, chose to try out three NBCowned sitcoms ("Three Sisters," "The Fighting Fitzgeralds," and "The Weber Show") before giving the nod to the Paramount-owned "Kristin," which will première on Tuesday, June 5th, at 8:30 P.M. between reruns of "Frasier." The placement "is a way to protect an unusual show that may need nurturing, and ours does," Markus explains, citing "Seinfeld" and "Northern Exposure" as successful past examples of this summer strategy.

In the long, tense, and enervating waiting period before NBC announced the show's start date, Markus went back to his country estate; he tapped maple trees for syrup, busied himself with a screenplay, and worked the telephones trying to chivy the network. Chenoweth grew petulant; in order to get the network's attention and prove that she was a desirable property, she auditioned and

ultimately signed on in second position (which meant that she could take the part only if her own show failed) for a supporting role in "Seven Roses," another Paramount-developed sitcom, starring Brenda Blethyn. Although Chenoweth takes credit for lighting a fire under NBC—"All I know is that soon after I got the part we got an air date," she says—she didn't do herself or "Kristin" any favors on the publicity front. The press misinterpreted her signing with "Seven Roses" (the filming of which has now been postponed owing to casting problems) as a sign of defection; to them, she was abandoning the good ship "Kristin" before it had even left port. "When a show is on the shelf, delays foster rumors," Markus says. "Why is it not on? Is it not good? Does the new president not like it?" The delay tested not only the show but also the Markus-Chenoweth friendship—and the notion of goodness that "Kristin" was designed to showcase. For a time, the two didn't speak. While Chenoweth claims to love TV, and "the challenge of a new script every week," in the same breath she admits to having second thoughts: "I do miss the theatre a lot. I miss the people, I miss the flat-out thrill of being onstage. I'm very conflicted inside."

Now that "Kristin"'s air date has been confirmed, most of those conflicts have been resolved, and Markus and Chenoweth have rekindled the friendship and lightheartedness that I witnessed last October when their show was well into production and its star had been ensconced in a personalized pink-and-pine dressing room. By then, Markus had found nine writers, five of them women, who were working on enough plot lines to put Kristin's goodness and Tommy's sexual prowess to the test for a season or so. Best of all, Chenoweth was feeling funny. "She had some shimmering moments," Markus told me. "Somebody came over to me the other day and whispered, 'Just like Lucy.' " Markus chuckled to himself at the memory of the scene; in it, a bitchy Latina realestate agent called Santa (played by Ana Ortiz), who works and sometimes sleeps with Tommy, arranges for Kristin "to get a massage with a happy ending." "No nudity, but she had to fake an orgasm," Markus said. "She gave it to us four different ways." ♦