Then and Now

Once the symbol of wickedness and wile on the screen, Nita Naldi teaches 'vamping' to a new generation.

By GAY J. TALESE

N order that Carol Channing be flawlessly vampish, beguiling and pleasingly unwholesome as the star of the musical on the silent movie era which comes to Broadway Nov. 10 and called, not unexpectedly, Vamp," she has had as a kind of adviser, aide de camp, critic and coach, that exotic former siren named Nita Naldi. When it comes to vamping roles, no one is a more qualified instructor than Miss Naldi. In her heyday, in the Twenties, Nita Naldi was the symbol of everything passionate and evil on the silent screen. Acting with Rudolph Valentino in such smol-

dering sagas as "Blood and Sand" and "Cobra," Miss Naldi made a fearfully alluring figure in front of the camera with her fifteenth-century type of beauty, her insidious gestures and the elegant garb she wore. The course of her cawas shaped platoons of overanxious press agents who gave her such a buildup that she soon be-came a half-mythical, half-Morgan le Fav creature-and a boxoffice headliner.

John Latouche, who

put more than a year into the writing of "The Vamp," said he got the idea for the show after listening to many of Miss Naldi's fantastic tales of the silent movie age and, he added, during the writing of it she has been the "research team--a kind of-newspaper 'morgue' to us."

In the show, Miss Channing, wears at times a black wig, slinky cape and sports a long cigarette holder, appears every bit as vampish as Nita did in the old days. No one, of course, will take Carol's role as a siren very seriously, but in the Twenties Nita was taken too seriously by movie-"The fans just assumed that I goers. was in real life as I appeared on the screen. Women loathed me, I was warned not to appear on the public beaches, and everywhere I went people used to look upon me as something unreal—like griffins and unicorns."

VISS NALDI'S rise was meteoric. When John Barrymore, preparing for "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," was cast-ing for someone to do Spanish dancing, he noticed Nita, who was then a chorus girl working for the lavish salary of \$15 a week. Nita got the and from there went on to better things in "Glimpses of the Moon,"
"You Can't Fool Your Wife," "Lawful
Larceny" and "The Ten Commandments."

Nita's becoming one of the silent screen's top seductresses was no accident. From the time she was old enough to imitate her idol, Theda Bara, she knew she wanted to star in vamping roles. Growing up in a convent in Fort Lee, N. J., where her great-aunt was Mother Superior, Nita ultimately obtained a job as a model in New York, but before long had New York, but before long had switched to the Winter Garden chorus. Five years later she was playing opposite Valentino. In Hollywood, through the alchemy of press agentry, the Latin-looking Nita was touted as a patrician grande dame, a daughter of a famed Italian diplomat, and a distant relation of Dante's Beatrice. Few knew that she was not born in Flor-ence, but in New York City, of Irish parentage, and that her real name was Donna Dooley.

She retired from the screen briefly-to marry millionaire J. Searle Barclay-but she was back on Broadway in 1933 in "The Firebird," and "Queer People" before she was "achieve comparato tive obscurity and watch what they once called my 'Oriental Ap-peal' get to look like something from Ang-kor Vat—and I don't mean Vat 69!" Nearly twenty years elapsed before she appeared on

> 1952 she played in Uta Hagen's supporting cast in the comedy, "In Any Language." The long lay-off, it seemed, made her no less a Vampire.

> "In this show I played a middle-aged woman with gigolos," she said. "And in all the television shows since, I have portrayed, in one way or another, a vile woman. I was even a nasty, vitriolic woman opposite, of all nice people, Bert Lahr, on 'Omnibus' in 1953. Only once was I allowed to step out of my vicious character.

"Now I don't expect to play Little Bo Peep," she went on, "but I keep telling the television people, 'I want to be a character actress.' And they tell me, 'You don't look like a char-acter actress.'"

N her fifties, still very dark and buxom, Miss Naldi is recognized surprisingly often as she travels about. 'Women don't seem to hate me anymore," she says with satisfaction. She is often stopped on the street and asked, "What was it really like kissing Valentino?" Young people will remark, "Oh, Miss Naldi, my father has told me so-o-o much about you!" to which the actress manages to respond graciously. Not too long ago a man approached her on the corner of Fortysixth Street and Broadway and exclaimed in wonder, "You're Nita Naldi, the Vampire!" It was as if he had turned the clock back, restoring Miss Naldi to the world she had inhabited thirty years ago. Eager to live in the present, the actress replied in a tone that mixed resentment and resignation, "Yes, do you mind?"



Naldi in the Twenties—She claimed Dante's Beatrice as an ancestor, the stage again: