

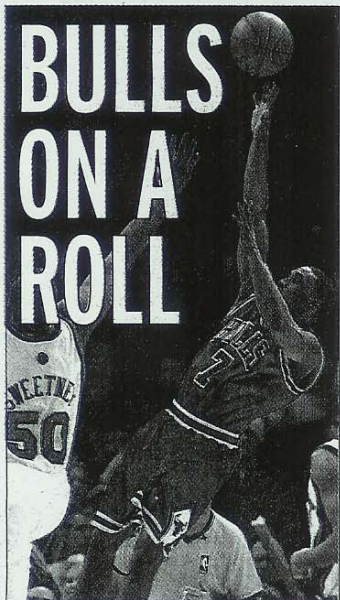
CHICAGO SUN-TIMES



SNEED IS BACK! PAGE 4

TUESDAY, JANUARY 18, 2005

24° / 23° "DEMORALIZING" Forecast: Pages 2, 60



BULLS ON A ROLL

SEVENTH WIN IN A ROW COMES IN LAST SECOND

Ben Gordon hits game-winner (above) in 88-86 victory over Knicks. **In Sports**

SHOWCASE

'SPAMALOT'S' UNLIKELY STAR

Sara Ramirez stealing show from her better-known cast mates. **Story by Hedy Weiss, Page 40**



NEWS

'OUTRAGE' AT CITY HALL OVER BILLY GOAT DEAL

Top city official says he wants to fire anyone taking advantage of minority set-aside program. **Story by Fran Spielman, Page 6**

BUSINESS

BUILDING A BETTER MOUSE HOUSE

Computer chips make life better for lab mice. **Story by Howard Wolinsky, Page 55**

ARCHBISHOP TAKEN HOSTAGE IN IRAQ

Syrian Catholic leader kidnapped in Mosul

The Vatican identified the kidnapped man as Archbishop Basile Georges Casmoussa, 66, of the Syrian Catholic Church, one of the branches of the Roman Catholic Church. **PAGE 3**

Iraqi voters flock to Chicago



-RICH HEIN/SUN-TIMES

Farakid Mahdi and her husband, Tahir Al-Kanani (holding their 2-month-old son, Ahmed), traveled from Lincoln, Neb., to Rosemont to register for the Iraqi elections. **STORY BY ABDON M. PALLASCH, PAGE 3**

HERE'S TO THE LADY



Sara Ramirez, who plays all the female leads in "Spamalot," had heard of Monty Python, but had never seen the movies. She rented them before her audition.

The versatile Sara Ramirez grabs her share of the spotlight in 'Spamalot'

BY HEDY WEISS
Theater Critic

In the months leading up to the opening of "Monty Python's Spamalot," it was the well-known triad of male stars — Tim Curry, Hank Azaria and David Hyde Pierce — who garnered most of the attention. But on opening night it was the show's girl power that emerged.

It came in the form of one person — Sara Ramirez, the tall, dark, voluptuous 29-year-old actress born in Mexico and educated at Juilliard — and proved she is capable of generating the galvanic comic energy of a young Liza Minnelli while using her powerhouse voice to careen from opera to jazz to pure Broadway belt.

Ramirez was initially hired to play only one of the show's major female

roles — the Lady of the Lake, that green-clad temptress who emerges from a swamp and leads the way into a full-blown Follies extravaganza modeled on a Lakers' half-time routine. But by the time rehearsals began, she was playing all the female leads, including the blonde Witch slated for burning and the blowsy platinum Cow, an over-the-hill glamor queen, part Marlene Dietrich and part Anita Ekberg, who arrives decked out in a bovine gown and ends up as dead meat.

Whether parodying Sarah Brightman in "Phantom of the Opera" or lamenting her lack of stage time in the show's second act, Ramirez is a big presence. "From the very first day, this production has been nothing but joyful and fun," said Ramirez. "Working with these three seasoned actors has just been like playing in the sandbox."

She admits to having to get up to speed on all things Monty Python, however. "I knew about the Pythons but I had never seen the movies, so before I auditioned I rented all the movies and did a lot of research," Ramirez said. "I think I missed a whole part of pop culture because I only arrived in the United States in 1983."

She was born in Mazatlan, the beautiful beach city on Mexico's Pacific coast. Her mother, an American

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LADY

Continued from Page 39

citizen, was from San Diego, and her father was Mexican, so she had dual citizenship. When her parents divorced, she and her mother moved to San Diego. But wherever she was, there was music in the house — Linda Ronstadt, Whitney Houston, Barbra Streisand, Bonnie Raitt, Joni Mitchell, Pat Benatar.

"My grandfather had a restaurant in La Jolla where he played the guitar, and my mother always sang, and so did I," Ramirez said. "In fact, I think my mother knew even before I did that I was supposed to be an actress."

From the fourth through 12th grades, Ramirez attended the San Diego School of Creative and Performing Arts. When it came time to apply to college, a teacher who had studied dance at Juilliard suggested she apply for the musical theater program. She auditioned in San Francisco with a song from her favorite musical, Stephen Sondheim's "Into the Woods," and was accepted.

"I had done lots of musicals in high school, and I just got it; I understood how they worked," said Ramirez. "But I knew I needed to study acting. I needed the Shakespeare and the other classics. I needed the tools."

It didn't take long before there was a buzz about Ramirez at Juilliard.

"I only started working with her in her second year at the school," said Deborah Lapidus, a singing instructor in Juilliard's Drama Division. "But I remember other students telling me that there was this student in the first year who was the best singer I will ever hear in my entire life. That was the vibe. And she was very exciting to hear."

It also was at Juilliard that Ramirez lost her accents. "When I moved to San Diego my Mexican accent quickly was replaced by a Valley Girl accent," she recalled, laughing. "Then I got to Juilliard and had to get rid of that one."

Before she had even graduated, Ramirez was cast in a Broadway show — Paul Simon's ill-fated 1998 musical, "The Capeman," in which she played Wahzinak, "the girl who sits in the desert and writes love letters to the jailed white murderer, Salvador Agron."

"Look, in this business you've got to be able to bounce back, and I think Sara understands all that," said Lapidus. "And she's lucky; she has the whole arsenal of talent that really sets her apart — the vocal gifts that are obvious, but also that radiant energy, the ability to act and do comedy. She was nervous at first about 'Spamalot,' not just because she was part of a pretty starchy crowd, but because she had some really hard singing to do in the midst of all the other demands. But she has learned how to pace herself, and her great ability to just play will serve her very well."

After "The Capeman" came the 1999 Broadway musical revue, "The Gershwins' Fascinating Rhythm," another doomed show. Two years later, director Lonny Price tapped Ramirez for the Broadway remount of "A Class Act," the well-received musical autobiography of songwriter Ed Kleban, the lyricist of "A Chorus Line."

"She came in to audition for me, but her reputation had preceded her," said Price, now at work on the Lincoln Center remount of the

staged concert of Sondheim's "Passion," which debuted at the Ravinia Festival two summers ago. "And it was that rare case when I listened to her, asked her to please wait outside for a few minutes and then immediately offered her the job [it took just two auditions for Mike Nichols to come to the same conclusion when casting "Spamalot"]. Sara is an extraordinary force of nature — a star from the minute I saw her. She has every talent that matters, and she's terrific to work with. She just lights up the stage whenever she appears."

Price also cast her as Petra, the lusty maid, in the Ravinia Festival's concert version of Sondheim's "A Little Night Music" in the summer of 2002, and she brought down the house with "The Miller's Son." She returned the next summer to Ravinia's Martin Theatre, where she shared the bill with Chicago actress Hollis Resnik and gave a cabaret performance that suggested her obvious raw talent was in desperate need of a director. Her work with Nichols demonstrates how well she thrives under the watchful eye of a pro.

"Mike is so respectful of the actors," said Ramirez. "He's very gentle, very courteous. And he doesn't keep a super-tight rein on you. He has a kind of fearless trust in his actors, only pushing us to

keep it truthful, tell the story and steer clear of mugging."

"Many things will change before this show gets to Broadway," said Ramirez, as post-opening rehearsals for "Spamalot" were already under way last week. "It won't be the same show when we open in New York. But one of the best lessons I learned doing 'The Capeman' was that nothing is guaranteed in this business. As an actor you're continually humbled by the realization that no job is forever and that you can't put all your eggs in one basket."



Christopher Sieber as Sir Dennis Galahad and Sara Ramirez as the Lady of the Lake in "Spamalot."

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