

'Web' star serious about animals rights

PAM KRAGEN
STAFF WRITER

It's probably no surprise that actress Pamelyn Ferdin — who portrayed the voice of Fern, the girl who saves Wilbur the pig from the farmer's ax in the animated film "Charlotte's Web" — does not eat pork.

But it may surprise some that Ferdin didn't drop pork or other meat products from her diet until about seven years ago — 20 years after the film was made. A bad experience in a New York-area animal shelter in 1993 put her on the path toward animal rights activism, which she said has changed her life for the better.

On Sunday, the 41-year-old Los Angeles native will appear at the Cox Communications Film Festival's screening of "Charlotte's Web," where she hopes to share her thoughts on animal welfare as well as answer questions about the making of the popular 1973 family film.

■ "CHARLOTTE'S WEB" SCREENING, Q&A

When: 6:30 p.m. Q&A/guest appearance; 8 p.m. screening

Where: Rancho del Oro Park, College Boulevard at Avenida Empresa, Oceanside

Admission: Free
Info: (888) 541-3456

Ferdin was just 14 years old when film producers Joseph Barbera and William Hanna called her in for an audition for the part of Fern for an animated musical film of the classic children's book "Charlotte's Web," by E.B. White.

At the time, Ferdin was an established child actor with thousands of hours of television credits under her belt, and the Hanna-Barbera team employed her regularly. Among her most famous TV roles in the late 1960s and early 1970s were playing Felix Unger's daughter on "The Odd Couple," Buffy's girlfriend in "Family Affair," a young nemesis for Capt. Kirk on "Star Trek," the girl whose party Jan attends in an Afro wig on "The Brady Bunch" and a two-year stint as one of the children on "Lassie." Ferdin was also active as a voice actor, playing the grouchy voice of Lucy in "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown," and the voice of the mystified Sally in Dr. Seuss' "The Cat in the Hat."

Ferdin remembers the "Charlotte's Web" audiotapings as especially enjoyable because of the terrific cast assembled for the production, including Debbie Reynolds as Charlotte the spider, Henry Gibson as Wilbur the pig, Paul Lynde as Templeton the rat and Agnes Moorehead as the mother goose.

In the story, first Fern and then Charlotte help save Wilbur from the slaughterhouse. Charlotte spins phrases such as "Some Pig" into her webs, which draw visitors from miles around and eventually convince Wilbur's owners to spare his life.

Animated film audiotapings are done differently today, with voice actors working alone with a script in a sound room and singers adding voice tracks to prerecorded music at a later date. But back in 1973, the entire cast for "Charlotte's



Pamelyn Ferdin with William Shatner as Captain Kirk in an episode of 'Star Trek.'

Web" worked together in the same room for several weeks. When vocals were needed, the singers performed with a live symphony orchestra, Ferdin said.

"It was a wonderful experience and a great ensemble," Ferdin said. "Those were the good old days when you knew the animators and you worked together closely."

Ferdin said the film's co-producer, Barbera, talked to her at length before she performed her most dramatic scene in the film — where Fern learns that her farmer father is going to chop off Wilbur's head because the pig is undersized.



Pamelyn Ferdin

"I remember Joe and I talked about what it would've meant to Fern to lose this little pig that she'd hand-raised from birth. She has to go running to her father and say to him, 'Would you kill me too if I was the runt?' I was required to cry for that scene, and it wasn't very hard summoning tears after I thought about it awhile. I was very emotional," she said.

Ferdin said she met the more than 50 animators who worked on the film in the Hanna-Barbera studios, and the artists who created her character drew Fern to look just like her, with her freckled face, slightly upturned nose and copper-colored pigtails.

Although Ferdin described herself as the "busiest child actor in the 1970s," she escaped a fate that imperiled many of her peers.

"I had very strict parents and I never got into the Hollywood scene. There were no drugs, no wild parties, and I was never a spoiled brat. I was the most normal of the kids that I worked with," she said.

But the experience as a child actor was very isolating.

She was constantly in and out of school because of her filming schedule, and, she said, she had few friends. Many children shunned her out of jealousy, and she found her closest companion in a Dalmation/shepherd mix that she rescued from an animal shelter.

When Ferdin finished high school, she decided to leave acting and find a more secure career. She went to college and became a registered nurse, an occupation that she said she felt called to. "I was always into helping others, both human and nonhuman. It started when I worked on 'Lassie' and I saw the conditions the farm workers lived in when we filmed on these huge ranches in the Northwest. Nursing seemed natural to me."

After working as a nurse and dabbling in business for many years, Ferdin got a job in the early 1990s as the media relations officer for an animal shelter in New York City. One day she arrived early at work and witnessed the shelter workers euthanizing unwanted animals — an experience she describes as life-changing.

"I was there at 5 a.m. and saw about 100 dogs in this room chained to the wall crying. One by one they would slap the dogs on the table, kill them and throw them on the cement floor to be picked up later as garbage. I was so appalled and depressed that a paradigm shift occurred in me. I had spent my life helping humans, but humans have the ability to help themselves. Animals have no one to protect them from harm," she said.

Because of that experience, Ferdin became a vegetarian and a fervent animal rights activist. She moved back to Los Angeles and became an active member of the Animal Defense League, for whom she now speaks and makes public appearances all over the state once or twice a week.

"I speak out on all kinds of abuse toward animals, just like Fern did in 'Charlotte's Web.' Fern is my symbol for animal rights," she said.

Oddly enough, Ferdin said she never realized how pro-animal rights the "Charlotte's Web" story is until she saw it while sitting in a classroom last year with a group of schoolchildren.

"I hadn't really noticed it until then, and suddenly it hit me like a brick," she said. "It's really a great film because it shows how loving children can be. In the years I've been speaking to groups about animals, it's always the children who respond to me the most. They're the ones with the biggest hearts."