



Staff photo by Juan Carlo

Lee Meriwether, playing Mrs. Howell in "Gilligan's Island: The Musical," takes one more look at herself before a photo shoot. She looked just Lovey.

'GILLIGAN'

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The latest incarnation of the sitcom isn't exactly new; it received its first production in 1992 in North Carolina and Schwartz is excited it's finally reaching the Los Angeles area.

The show is a true Schwartz family affair. Schwartz co-wrote the book with son/writing partner Lloyd J. Schwartz. Music and lyrics were done by Schwartz's daughter, Hope, and her husband, ex-Wings guitarist Laurence Juber.

Schwartz didn't want to divulge much about the plot of the musical, revealing only that the castaways — Gilligan, Skipper, The Professor, Mr. and Mrs. Howell, Ginger and Mary Ann — meet extraterrestrials on the island and end up saving the universe. While the plot's wacky enough to warrant discussion on Art Bell's late-night radio show, once again Schwartz is exploring deeper issues.

"Most aliens we hear about are evil ... they're coming to Earth to destroy us," said Schwartz, on the phone from his Beverly Hills home this week. "In a larger sense, the aliens in this show are a peace-keeping force and they come down so Earth doesn't destroy itself."

Weighty themes, yes. But don't expect Gilligan and company to get too serious. Schwartz promises just as many yuks, gags, pratfalls and coconut cream pies as the original series. And get this: There might even be a hint of romance worked into the plot.

Grant Rosen will play Gilligan, Matt Kimbrough will be the Skipper and Lee Meriwether will play the ultra-rich Mrs. Howell (her real-life husband, Marshall Borden, will play Mr. Howell).

Meriwether, of course, is the ex-Miss America who went on to star as Catwoman in the 1966 "Batman" motion picture and as Buddy Ebsen's secretary for eight years on "Barnaby Jones."

Schwartz, who's been supervising rehearsals, said Meriwether has had to work a little harder at the role than Natalie Schaefer, the original Mrs. Howell.

"Natalie was Mrs. Howell," he remembered. "She didn't have to act. But Lee is great"

Schwartz is continually amazed at the longevity of "Gilligan's Island" (not to mention "The Brady Bunch").

"It appealed to so many different audiences," he said. "Mr. and Mrs. Howell did very literate humor and the Skipper and Gilligan did lots of physical comedy. There was just something for everybody."