

# Wicked Little Town

Variety shines a little light on the life of talent in Los Angeles. Written by Rob Kendt.



## Hands Down, Career Up

Nashville native Jenny Rainwater tried out the L.A. acting market a few years back and didn't get very far: a few community theatre productions she didn't even want to invite friends to.

Her subsequent move back to the Nashville area might have seemed like a retreat, but in fact it turned into another route back into the business. She was doing commercial and voiceover work in the Nashville market when she had "the most unstressful audition in the world": a [hand model](#) gig for a commercial for the U.S. military.

"I was so ho-hum about the whole deal," Jenny recalled. "I got to the set and saw that they had wardrobe and hair/makeup people. I thought, Hmmm, something's up."

Up indeed: A production manager came with her Taft-Hartley form to upgrade Jenny to an on-camera principal. (The Taft-Hartley waiver is just about the only [legitimate way for non-union performers to work on a SAG project](#); they must join the guild on their next union job.) One job later, Jenny was a card-carrying guild member -- just before her return move to L.A.

It's almost as if this would-be hand model didn't have to lift a finger to get her break -- just move [2005.9 miles away](#).

Dec 5, 2003 at 10:43 AM by Rob Kendt in [Actors](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

## Casting Out Loud

That which doesn't kill you gives you a great anecdote. In her early days as an actor, [Barbara Bragg](#) starved in the New York trenches with a young director named [Richard LaGravanese](#), who went on to [conspicuous success in the movies](#). Bragg didn't try to cash in her friends' success -- and the one time he apparently tried to help her, things went sour.

It was an audition for the film "[Living Out Loud](#)." The casting director was [Margery Simkin](#). Recalled Bragg: "So her assistant calls me in the afternoon and tells me that the director wants me to come in, and how excited they all are to meet his friend, blah blah blah."

The part was a nightclub singer, so Bragg dressed "to the nines: fishnets, heels, lots of red lipstick. And I walked in and the casting director screamed, 'We're not looking for *that!*' " Worse, Simkin's assistant didn't remember placing the call to Bragg. Mortified, Bragg said she "ended up weeping in a broom closet." But she mustered the courage to walk back in tell Simkin she was an old friend of the director. "She looked like she had eaten several lemons," said Bragg of Simkin's reaction. Still, she did let Bragg put the audition on tape and leave with a shred of her dignity intact.

"It was the worst day of my life," Bragg said, with typical drama-queen hyperbole. "I did not get the part, but I did succeed at getting out of the broom closet and marching back into the room and finishing off the audition. After all, it took me four years to get into [Yale](#) -- and what could be harder than that?"

Maybe Yale should teach a course on auditioning. Bragg could do a

### DECEMBER 2003

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

### RECENT POSTS

- [Hands Down, Career Up](#)
- [Casting Out Loud](#)
- [Walla Be Good](#)
- [Actors' Ovations, Quotable Lily](#)
- [Bobby Hill, World's Greatest Mom](#)
- [Untimely Exit for Stage Fave](#)
- [Mapa the World, Ma](#)
- [Understudy Up for 'Shaggs'](#)
- [Rising Arizono](#)
- [Money Shots Net Dividends](#)

### VARIETY'S WEBLOGS

- [The Porning Report](#)
- [Bags and Boards](#)
- [Wicked Little Town](#)
- [Outside the Box](#)
- [FAQ: About Variety's Weblogs](#)

### RECENT COMMENTS

- [Carol Ann Susi on Bobby Hill, World's Greatest Mom](#)
- [Irene Ross on Bobby Hill, World's Greatest Mom](#)
- [Irene Ross on Bobby Hill, World's Greatest Mom](#)
- [Angus Oblong on Bobby Hill, World's Greatest Mom](#)
- [Brian on Bobby Hill, World's Greatest Mom](#)
- [Sarah on Scribe 'Standing' by Blank](#)
- [Bernard White on Bernard White, Reloaded](#)

### CATEGORIES

- [Actors](#)
- [Casting](#)

master class.

Dec 4, 2003 at 10:36 AM by Rob Kendt in [Casting](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

---

## Walla Be Good

"I'm in a loop group," actress [Jessica Pennington](#) told me, with the ebullient satisfaction of someone who'd just been accepted into a very exclusive club -- and that's not too far off the mark. "It's one of the hardest gigs to get," Pennington said, "because people hire their friends."

What's a loop group, you ask? No, it's not a term for a carpool in [Chicago](#). Essentially a loop group does voiceover extra work: Pennington and around five other actors stand in a recording booth watching scenes with crowds or groups of passersby (on-camera extras are usually either silent or at least not recorded on a film set) and improvising appropriate conversations that match the setting. Pennington's group, headed by industry veteran Erin Donovan, works a trio of one-hour dramas, giving "ER" its [medical chatter](#), "West Wing" its aura of [backroom buzz](#), "Third Watch" a [streetwise ambience](#). The industry term for this background talk is "walla." (No word on the term's origin -- [Bollywood](#), [perchance](#)?)

Perhaps because it involves performing on mike, it garners the [full SAG day rate](#) rather than the relatively paltry [extra day rate](#). And when I joked that Jessica and co. make a good living standing around murmuring and mumbling, she pointed out that a loop group's improvised dialogue is in fact performed and recorded at full conversational volume. It's the sound mixer's job to create the proper balance.

It makes me wish I could hear a walla-heavy mix of scenes from "ER" -- although, come to think of it, it would probably be as full of "stat" and "cc's" as the show's main dialogue.

Dec 3, 2003 at 10:30 AM by Rob Kendt in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

---

## Actors' Ovations, Quotable Lily

L.A.'s theatre scene is primarily actor-driven -- which is to say the town's glut of talent seeking work is the main reason there's [so much theatre here](#). Because of this, most folks assume that it's all showcase crap. But in any talent pool there are those that rise to the surface, and among L.A.'s stage-hopping actors and designers are some exceptional performers. Many [local aficianados](#) will tell you the best theatre here is as good as the best anywhere.

Last week's Ovation awards -- the 10th annual peer-judged awards given by Theatre LA (oops, their new name is [LA Stage Alliance](#)) -- gave out its aqua-green lucite statues to a deserving batch of thespians at the Orpheum Theatre. Apart from directing and writing, acting is the only Ovation category in which actors in small 99-seat theatres compete with those appearing at the Taper or the Geffen. It may have seemed provincial of Ovation voters that this year they seemed to favor actors in small-theatre productions. But only someone who hadn't seen, say, [John O'Keefe's timely new work](#) or [Del Shores' latest tragicomic Southern-fried soap](#) would make that assumption -- a misconception roughly equivalent to assuming that Broadway is the only district in New York to see real theatre.

Host [Lily Tomlin](#) opened with a few choice zingers about the world's

[Interview](#)

[Legit](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Television](#)

[Syndicate this site \(XML\)](#)

---

## ARCHIVES

[December 2003](#)

[November 2003](#)

[October 2003](#)

[September 2003](#)

second oldest profession. In the voice of [laconic Midwesterner Judith Beasley](#), a character *not* from her [popular multi-character show](#), Tomlin said: "I am not a professional actress. Unlike many of you, I am a real person." She riffed on [Edwin Booth's](#) famous analogy: "He said an actor is sculptor who carves in snow. So in L.A., we have an especially hard job." She repeated an exchange with her partner in writing and in life, [Jane Wagner](#): "She says playwrights have a hard job -- they hang their guts out onstage. And I say, actors have the harder job: We have to suck in our guts." She quoted character actress [Eileen Heckart](#), who said, "The longest run I ever had was on the unemployment line."

Most characteristically terse and sharp was Tomlin's report that [California now spends the least dollars per capita on the arts](#) of any state in the union. "But now that there's a [fellow actor in Sacramento](#)," she deadpanned, "I am confident [things will change](#). Watch out, [Idaho!](#)"

Dec 2, 2003 at 03:23 PM by Rob Kendt in [Legit](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

---

## Bobby Hill, World's Greatest Mom

[Pamela S. Adlon](#) won an Emmy last year, but not enough people seem to know it. Even some folks at the Television Academy appear to be in the dark about it.

"They never sent me my nameplate," said Adlon recently as her three young daughters rustled in the background. A friend offered to make her a [1970s hand-punch label](#) for the nameless trophy that sits in her house and might as well say "World's Best Mom." (For the folks at home: Awardees at the major shows take home a blank statuette.)

But then Adlon (formerly Pamela Segall) is used to not being recognized for her work: She's in animation voiceover, and she's called in mostly "whenever they want somebody who can be a really natural boy." Adlon's Emmy came for her performance as one of the most natural, if loveably peculiar, boys on TV: scratchy-voiced dreamer [Bobby Hill](#) on the unassuming Fox mainstay "[King of the Hill](#)."

"When I got into voiceover 14 years ago, it hadn't exploded at that point -- it was the bastard stepchild of acting," she recalled. "It was assumed that if you did voiceover your face was too fucked up to be on camera." Now, she joked, "We are the gods -- we have achieved [the quan](#)," but there's still a divide between on-camera and voiceover talent. "When 'Will & Grace' did a 100th episode, [they all got Porsches](#). When we did a 100th episode, we got AstroTurf coasters."

The second-class treatment also surfaces when producers of a successful animated show face contract talks with the talent -- as when [cast members on Fox's other animated hit asked for more](#) and the producers started holding auditions for replacements.

"When they renegotiated 'The Simpsons,' I told my agent, 'Don't even call me,' " said Adlon of this hardball tactic, which was [also used with the cast of "The Powerpuff Girls"](#) and the lead voice on "Babe 2." "I would never, ever undermine another actor who's established and created a character. That's like crossing the [picket] line at the supermarket. It's just not OK."

A character Adlon created onstage will get a new lease with next month's New York backer's audition reading of "[Heartbreak Help](#)," a play by L.A. scribe Justin Tanner that she starred in back in 1996. She'll fly on her own dime to join co-stars [Laurel Green](#), [Ellen](#)

[Ratner](#), and [Carol Ann Susi](#) because she believes Tanner "deserves his due in New York. I love the show. We had the best time. It's a fun show. It's just giddy."

She'll fit the play reading into a hiatus on "Hill" tapings, which start up again in January for the show's 9th season next fall. For Adlon, the show's glow hasn't worn off.

"I'm stunned by the [level of the scripts](#)," she said. "They let all these natural moments happen -- there's actual silence on a TV show. It feels like classic television, like we're working on something that will last."

Don't tell the Academy, but that just might be worth even more than an Emmy.

Nov 26, 2003 at 01:33 PM by [Rob Kendt](#) in [Television](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(5\)](#)