

## Annie Sings a Spell

by Rich Regent

Jazz vocalist **Annie Dension** can be heard singing at Caroline's Jazz Club with her musical group **Annie and the Jazz Orphans** in which her husband, **Bob Budny**, plays drums. Her dad, **Ben Denison**, has been playing Dixieland trumpet in bands since before she was born. Annie cringes as she recalls some of the memories of her early singing career. "At age ten my father made me sing with his band. I played a little ukulele while singing *Five Foot Two* and even the adult-rated lyrics to *I Ain't Gonna Give Nobody None of My Jelly Roll*" to the astonishment and joy of the audience.

After a 15 year hiatus from acting, this past summer Annie began learning her lines and practicing singing as the leading actress for the **Bay Players** musical production of ***Into the Woods***. In this hilarious three-hour musical, she plays a mean ugly Witch who casts spells, eats bugs and creates havoc for the other fantasy characters. The Witch has gray hair, crooked nose, protruding chin and long fingers and wears scary makeup, is now unrecognizable as Annie. She glides across the stage (on a scooter hidden under her robe), tries to climb Rapunzel's hair and snaps her broom handle into two pieces across a knee. She sings powerful, charming or complicated songs, particularly *Stay With Me*, *Lament*, *Last Midnight* and *Children Will Listen*. Annie even mysteriously appears briefly in the audience chanting evil curses to the characters on the stage. Later in the show she loses her spell powers to become a beautiful blond in a sparkly sequined dress, saying "This is who I truly am."

Although Annie and I usually arrive at least an hour early, we only have time to say hello before we emerge into our fantasy theatrical worlds. While Annie is performing on stage I busily play clarinet in the pit with the 12-piece orchestra. My 111-page part has challenging music in just about every key, tempos of 132, and frequent changes between A and Bb clarinets. One of many solos, for example, is in 12/8 time with 6 flats. Even with several rehearsals and five productions I see little of the show in the pit while playing music from the slow sad *Agony* to happy fast *Bows & Exit*.

After one performance the actors and musicians have a party in a restaurant. Annie, now not playing her Witch character, wears black framed glasses, is friendly, personable, funny, sophisticated and still energetic. With an excited voice she tells many captivating stories and jokes.

The shows, which ran from late September to early October, were rewarding and a success. The involvement of the performances drains energy from everyone. One night, before the audience had entered, Annie came over to the edge of the stage by the pit. She quietly explained that she just saved a neighborhood 4-month puppy, which she named *Ollie*, from going to the dog pound. She was exhausted from taking care of her new pet friend during the previous night. Despite being tired, Annie's performance was perfect and, well, we played our hearts out for that show.