

Daily Planet Cub Reporter's World Is a Stage

By STEVEN K. WAGNER
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Jimmy Olsen is writing again. But these days he's not after scoops.

Jack Larson, who portrayed the overeager Daily Planet cub reporter in the "Adventures of Superman" series of the 1950s, now spends his time in Brentwood spinning out plays and working behind the scenes on films.

At 61, and out of television and film for decades, he has been a successful poet, playwright and film producer since shortly after leaving the show, which went off the air in 1959 after George Reeves, who portrayed Superman, committed suicide.

Although Olsen's familiar tweed coat, sweater-vest and bow tie are long gone, Larson's close-cropped hair hints of the character that brought him fame and still appears in syndicated reruns.

These days, Larson focuses on his stage pieces, which include the recent "Colors for Anna." The musical about an old woman who lives her life mourning the death many years ago of her husband opened last week in Boston, and Larson hopes it eventually will come to Los Angeles.

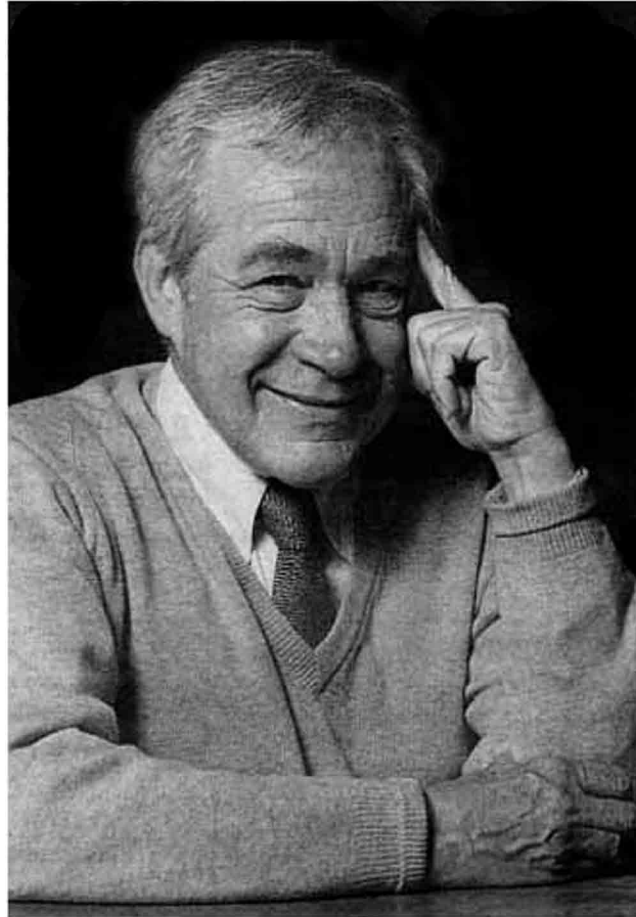
He is also writing "The Astronaut's Tale," an hour-long musical play about a young boy who wants to become the first man on Mars. And he is co-producing "Desert Rose," a film about a 40-year-old Las Vegas showgirl facing the end of her career.

Last year, one of Larson's favorite achievements, the opera "Lord Byron," was recorded by conductor James Bolle and the Monadnock Festival Orchestra. Favorably reviewed in the New York Times, "Lord Byron" is selling briskly.

But Larson has not forgotten his Jimmy Olsen days, and he is resigned to the idea that his association with the character known for the signature exclamation "jeepers!" is unshakable.

Both Reeves and Larson were typecast by their "Superman" roles, making it difficult for them to land other parts. Larson appeared in a "Gomer Pyle" episode in 1974, then retired from acting and turned to serious writing—an aspiration that stems from his boyhood days:

"I was editor of the school paper at Eastmont Junior High School in Montebello," said Larson, who was born not far from Los Angeles City Hall (which



ALAN J. DUGNAN / Los Angeles Times

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JACK LARSON

served as the Daily Planet building in the "Superman" series). "I thought I might want to be a newspaperman."

But Larson didn't stay in school. Instead he began hanging out at bowling alleys and dropped out of school for a short time before entering a program at Pasadena Junior College to work toward a high school diploma. It was there that he was discovered by talent scouts from Warner Brothers and quickly landed a role in the 1948 film "Fighter Squadron." And the world lost a budding journalist.

That is, until 1951, when, at 18,

Larson was offered the role of the exuberant Jimmy Olsen.

"It instantly became a big hit, and I became Jimmy Olsen," he said, adding that the part "typed me and absolutely ruined my acting career—though it didn't ruin me as a celebrity."

To play Olsen, he said, "was very fortunate." But he added: "At first I was driven nuts by it, because everybody thinks you're Jimmy. It was a nightmare originally, and I saw that I was being typed."

In an attempt to reverse that typing so that he could pursue other interests, Larson stopped

giving interviews until the early 1970s.

He focused on his writing career, getting his big break in 1966 when the Los Angeles County Museum of Art asked Larson to write a play opening at the new Bing Center Theater. The result was "The Candied House," a critical success that retold the Hansel and Gretel story in verse.

Other successes followed, including "Chuck," the story of a magazine salesman's encounter with a television-fixated woman, in 1967, and the gay domestic drama "Cherry, Larry, Sandy, Doris, Joan, Paul," the following year.

Meanwhile, composer Virgil Thomson was looking for someone to write a libretto for his opera, "Lord Byron." He chose Larson to develop what would become the writer's proudest work—and one that was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera. Directed by Oscar-winning actor John Houseman, "Lord Byron" premiered in 1972.

Later, Larson teamed with longtime friend James Bridges to co-produce "Mike's Murder," starring Debra Winger, in 1984; "Perfect," with John Travolta, in 1985, and "Bright Lights, Big City," starring Michael J. Fox, in 1988. He also helped develop the script for "The China Syndrome" in 1979.

In recent years, Larson has overcome the fear that the Jimmy Olsen association would hinder his other interests, going so far as to host a number of "Superman" marathons for a New York television station.

And he hasn't ruled out an appearance in "Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman," which airs Sunday evenings on ABC.

"It's a good show, well cast, but very different than ours and you can't compare them," Larson said. "Their show is a romance and ours was an action show."

But writing, he vowed, will dominate his life.

"I know that, though I go on writing, and if I should win the Pulitzer Prize, and indeed the Nobel Prize, when they write my obituary it will say, 'Jack Larson, best remembered as Jimmy Olsen on the popular 1950s Superman series.' I'm pleased with it, I'm proud of it, and I would certainly do it again in hindsight. It's nice not to be forgotten."