

Interview

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Liza's non-stop cabaret of life

The bloom of *Cabaret* may have faded for Liza Minnelli and health problems might have easily sent her under. Yet despite her 62 years, alcoholism and encephalitis, an upbeat Minnelli tells **Lynn Barber** about her belief in rising above reality and her upcoming tour

YEARS ago, a colleague suffered the worst of journalistic embarrassments: he interviewed Meryl Streep for the London *Sunday Times* and failed to notice that she was not Meryl Streep. He'd been told she was Meryl Streep, so he believed it: how was he to know he was the victim of a practical joke?

Since then, I've always worried that I could find myself in the same position and now, confronted with this small lollipop woman in a hotel suite in Knightsbridge, central London, I panic: how do I know this is Liza Minnelli? She looks like no picture of Minnelli I've ever seen — neither Minnelli in her gorgeous young *Cabaret* bloom, nor the bloated Minnelli of recent years, nor anything in between.

She looks slim and well-preserved for 62, but the great dark eyes that used to be her trademark have vanished into the surrounding orange mask. She could be almost any woman who has had extensive plastic surgery. I suppose it would be rude to ask to see her passport. It doesn't help that there is an audience in the room — her publicist, a woman she introduces as a friend, and a television crew waiting to film her for a British culture TV show — who make me feel like the maid coming in to do turndown and taking too long about it.

The other problem is that, although Minnelli has been famous for ever — born into Hollywood royalty and a star in her own right from her teens — I seem to have missed her career entirely. I saw her in *Cabaret* and that's about it. She is a year younger than me, but always seemed to belong to an older generation; she was singing with Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. while we were listening to the Beatles. And she was always, even in her 20s, a "gay icon", just like her mother.

When I asked why she thought that was, she said it was because "gays have good taste!", but maybe it has more to do with the fact that she shared her mother's predilection for marrying gay men — her first husband, Peter Allen, is supposed to have been the lover of Judy Garland's fourth husband, Mark Herron.

Anyway, she has a huge and devoted fan base, which has already snapped up most of the tickets for her forthcoming UK tour, due to start

at the London Coliseum on May 25. It is billed as her first British tour for 25 years, though, actually, she did a tour here in 1986, and has been back for concerts in London many times. The first half of the show is, she says, "just songs that I like and a couple that people ask me to sing. Because, I'm not a record act. The only hit record I ever had was with the wonderful Pet Shop Boys here [*Losing My Mind*, 1988]. I never had one in America. But it's all right, I sell out anyway!"

The second half of the show is a departure, a 45-minute piece called *The Godmother and the Goddaughter* about her relationship with her real-life godmother, Kay Thompson. Thompson is probably known now, if at all, as the author of *Eloise at the Plaza* but, according to Minnelli, "She's an underground hero in showbusiness. She was the first one ever to understand a certain kind of harmony in a song." She did all MGM's vocal arrangements in its golden years and had a hugely influential radio show. Later, she did a nightclub act that Minnelli remembers seeing when she was three: "It was amazing. I was sitting on my mom's lap across from my father to see Kay Thompson at Ciro's. And I always remember this energy force, this woman flying around the room and singing these harmonies, so everyone went, 'Wow!'"

"So I thought, 'That's what I want to do.' People who don't even know about Kay, I want to show them what I saw — that incredible drive, that sense of humour, that wit. She was so funny." Thompson was originally a friend of Judy Garland's but took over as a sort of surrogate mother to Minnelli after Garland's death in 1969 and was staying at Minnelli's house when she died 10 years ago. So this is

Minnelli's musical tribute to her godmother and she

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plans to record it as a TV special when her tour is finished.

Minnelli says she's been rehearsing and "building" the show for nine months. "It's like being an athlete; you get into a certain shape where you really have the right wind, because it's all to do with breath. Because singing and dancing at the same time is not easy! The whole second half is all dance routines."

I thought she had a hip replacement? "Two. And a wired-up knee. I've got two crushed discs too. Never stop moving, or you'll stop moving. I go to dance class every morning and it's just good to stay strong; I like being healthy."

But there were newspaper reports that she collapsed during a concert in Sweden just before Christmas and had to cancel the rest of her Scandinavian tour. What happened?

"Look!" she opens her mouth and bares her teeth. They look fine to me, much better than mine. "I've got four of them missing. It was serious, serious — they took out part of my jaw, they took out all of these teeth! And, because I'm a dancer, I don't complain, you just don't complain, so I was thinking, 'Ow, this really hurts.' And then I went to the doctor and said, 'Please give me something, this hurts me so much.' But it had a bridge over, so you couldn't see anything. And he said, 'Yer, yer, yer; [I think this is meant to be a Swedish accent] and I don't know what the hell he gave me, but I walked around that stage! It was horrendous."

Sorry if you find this as unintelligible as I do — she talks in a sort of breathless rush that often seems to miss out key connections.

Obviously, she has had more than her fair share of health problems; apart from the hip replacements, the wired-up knee, the crushed vertebrae and an operation for polyps on her vocal cords in 1997 which left her unable to sing for 18 months, she has been in and out of rehab for years, attending AA and generally "battling with her demons". She says of her alcoholism:

"My whole life, this disease has been rampant. I inherited it, and it's been horrendous, but I have always asked for help."

She has also had problems with prescription drugs which she claims started when a doctor put her on Valium after her mother's death. Andy Warhol's 1978 diary records her turning up at fashion designer Halston's house imploring: "Give me every drug you've got," and him obligingly handing over coke,



CIPHER SORE EYES: The star of 'Cabaret', Liza Minnelli, is sprightly for 62, but remained an enigma to Lynn Barber

marijuana, Valium and four Quaaludes.

But her most serious health setback came in 2000 when she contracted encephalitis from a mosquito bite and was told she'd spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair.

"I had to learn to walk again, had to learn to talk again. People don't usually recover like I recovered, but I would not give up. I just couldn't — I don't know how you'd do anything else. I was lying there, scared, and my father always told me, 'The way you do something is you think about it.' So on the wall when they turned my head there was a pattern of leaves and I started to count them and I was going, 'Ah, ah, ah,' until I could say them. And then I did the same thing with walking. I really worked to get back. Most people don't come through it."

I wondered at times if the encephalitis had left her with a certain degree of amnesia; certainly the way she described her childhood to me bore no relation to the account given in numerous biographies of her and her mother. Despite growing up in the heart of Hollywood, she claims, "We were brought up to be as normal as possible. It was so much more normal than anybody else I'd ever met. It was a very scheduled life —

breakfast at seven, go to school, it was very organised. And very reassuring and not wacky at all. I'm sorry to disappoint but it was not wacky!"

But hadn't she been exposed to the ups and downs of showbiz? "I don't even know what you mean by exposed. I was right there in the heart of it, but exposed? No. That's where I grew up. If my parents were coalminers, I'd have grown up in a mining town. And I had no interest in filming. I sometimes went to the studios with my dad, but it was slow-going; it was boring to watch. I always ended up in the rehearsal hall watching the dancing. That's what I liked to do."

Her parents split up when she was five, but she says that was fine — "They married again so many times I have millions of parents." By the time she was 13, she had a stepfather, a stepmother, a stepbrother, a half-sister from her father and another half-sister and half-brother from her mother, many of whom she was expected to look after. She was usually the one who had to cope with her mother's addictions, severe depressions and frequent suicide attempts. She claims that the suicide attempts were "just silly things to attract attention," but still, they must have been frightening for a child to witness. She

also went to 14 schools, which can't have helped. So her parents didn't object when, at 16, she announced that she was moving to New York to live alone and try to make a stage career. Her parents said OK — but they wouldn't support her. Frank Sinatra sent her \$500, but she sent it back. She really did support herself, which meant sometimes doing a runner from hotels without paying (a habit she picked up from her mother) and once or twice sleeping on park benches. But, by the time she was 19, she had won a Tony award for her first musical, *Flora the Red Menace* and at 26 she won an Oscar for *Cabaret*.

She once said, possibly quoting her mother, that "reality is something you have to rise above" and that seems to be what she has done with her childhood — banished the bad bits and remembered the good. Anyway, she is not interested in the past and once said that she would never have analysis because "there are doors I don't want opened." She prides herself on the fact that, whereas her mother was always making cries for help, she has always been self-reliant. As she constantly emphasises, she is her father's daughter too — she is far happier talking about Vincente Minnelli than about Judy

Garland. She likes to say that her mother gave her her drive, her father her dreams, whatever that means.

Both parents seem to have given her a very cavalier attitude to marriage — she often had very public affairs while still married to someone else.

Andy Warhol noted in his diary in 1978: "Her life's very complicated now. Like she was walking down the street with Jack Haley, her husband, and they'd run into Martin Scorsese, who she's now having an affair with, and Marty attacked her for also having an affair with [Mikhail] Baryshnikov... This is going on with her husband standing there!"

Haley was husband number two and straight, but they were friends rather than lovers. Husband number three, Mark Gero, a sculptor, was the one she hoped to have children with, but, after three bad miscarriages, she gave up. Then there was her gripping fourth wedding to David Gest in 2002, known as the Night of 1,000 Facelifts, with Liz Taylor, Mia Farrow and Michael Jackson as bridesmaids.

The marriage lasted just over a year, the divorce case much longer. He accused her of beating him up and giving him an "unmentionable" disease (herpes) and ruining his hair transplant by pulling it out.

Perhaps, more pertinently, he claimed that she was "unable to be effectively merchandised" because she was "alcoholic and overweight". She, in turn, accused him of drugging her, of being "a manipulative neat freak" and putting her dog down. There was also a suit from a bodyguard who claimed that she harassed him with sexual demands — all good tabloid fun and I was rather hoping there might be another marriage on the horizon, but she says she will never marry again.

"I'm adamant about it. There is no reason on this earth." So why did she marry as often as she did? "Because I kept trying to get it right and I never did, so I gave up!" But why did she ever think David Gest was right?

At this point, the PR announces that I have had long enough (a paltry 45 minutes) and it is time to start filming. Minnelli hugs me warmly — she feels light as a sparrow — and seems to think the interview has gone well.

I am baffled. A few days later, I see the same woman on TV and conclude that I really did meet Liza Minnelli, but who she is or what she is like as a person I have no idea.

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The goddess of gab back on form

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continued their work with Carr. Terry, a dervish of activity as ever, continued her blur of columns and consultancy.

Over the years, she has been criticised in some quarters for supposedly not declaring her interests when wearing her journalist's hat, but she's having none of it. "I always have. One particular journalist said, 'She never stops' but there's no point in fighting about it. Whenever

I've been advising a particular politician, I don't go on a programme discussing him or her, or else I do declare my interest. So it doesn't arise. I've worked with all of the main parties and nobody has ever asked what my politics are. There is no affiliation. It's not like Eoghan Harris, who passionately believes in a certain politician."

Given the standard of public speaking among our elected leaders (as typified by

the unspeakably tedious leaders debate before the last election), hers would seem an uphill struggle. She smiles. "The key thing is the single transferable vote and the localness of our politics. There isn't an absolute requirement of eloquence. Tom always says that most people in Ireland are great communicators in the kitchen or the pub, but in front of an audience they iron themselves flat." She notices an increasing

tendency toward blandness. "Young politicians are interested in being told what to wear. They're sort of surprised to be asked, 'What do you want to change in the country?' I don't mind people with egos. It's the safe people. God preserve me from safe people, people who would stay revving in neutral rather than leave track marks on anything."

There's no danger of Terry playing it safe. She's a curious mixture of down home Irish

tones and an almost American openness and derring-do.

As she kisses me at the door she demands to know how many books I'm writing this year. Later we dance our dance again. After nearly two hours of firing off quotable zingers, she sends me a generous, warm letter (a speciality of hers, by all accounts) telling me she is curled up in a foetal position, dreading the end result.

Meanwhile, I'm looking at

her dog-eared chapter about interviews and wondering if I got even half of her instructions right.

I stick the letter inside the book and put it back on the shelf. Now that's what I call getting paid.

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