Hollywood, Etc.: Banking on Bette

by Lee Grant

LAS VEGAS - Bette Midler, the raunchy, raucous, riotous Divine Miss M, was taking a seat on a pile of suitcases the other morning outside the Colosseum at Caesars Palace and, in her flared skirt, nearly tumbled over backward.

BETTE MIDLER - Bette Midler is taking over for Celine Dion at Caesars in Las Vegas. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin

"Wow! I almost pulled a Britney," she blurted to media folks and hundreds of hotel guests who gathered at the theater's entrance. But there were no paparazzi like that scandalous time Britney Spears made a revealing exit from an automobile.

Midler and a clutch of hotel and local entertainment executives were formally announcing that she would take over from Celine Dion as the high-end resort's "resident artist" beginning next February.

It means Midler will be off the road for at least two years, committing to 100 shows annually at Caesars, five nights a week for 20 weeks.

"We'll have feathers, rhinestones, sequins, half-naked ladies," she said. "We'll be singing our hits, bringing back our chestnuts. I can't wait." Elton John, Jerry Seinfeld and perhaps Cher (still being negotiated) will fill in the other dates.

Scott Schecter, vice president of entertainment for Harrah's (which owns Caesars Palace and a number of other Las Vegas properties), said garnering a performer with the drawing power of Midler was crucial for a $95 million venue with 4,100 seats that Dion's fans have been filling since 2003 at a top ticket price of $250.

"Celine set the bar," said Schecter. "To replace her we had a wish list, and it was short. It had to be a big star

and a Vegas production worthy of the Colosseum. Bette's that artist.

"We're a luxury brand, from the rooms ($700 a night in the Augustus Tower), the restaurants (Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill), right on through to the entertainment. From us, people expect great quality. Celine's show has that. Bette's is next."

Inside the quiet hall with its mammoth stage, huge ceilings and tiers of balconies, the 5-foot-1 Midler was curled in a seat. She was discovered in the early '70s performing at a gay bathhouse in New York City, accompanied on piano by Barry Manilow (the "Copacabana" singer has his own show in town at the Las Vegas Hilton).

Even then, she was warbling what became trademark numbers - "Friends," "Do You Want to Dance," "Chapel of Love." Midler signed with Ahmet Ertegun, the late Atlantic Records honcho, and her first album, "The Divine Miss M," was a hit, winning her a Best New Artist Grammy.

Recently on TV, Midler narrated a PBS "American Masters" documentary on Ertegun, who died last year at 83 after falling at a Rolling Stones concert, a band he had signed to the label. On the program, he recalled seeing Midler at a club in the early '70s and people "jumping up on tables."

In conversation, Midler recalled the man quietly. "A dear friend," she said.

Midler is 61 years old and in superb shape. "How do I look?" she asks. "You look fabulous," someone responds. Says she, "That's all I want to hear. The show is (expletive) but I look fabulous." There is exercise and a good diet "but no vices. I have a glass of beer. I'm not debauched. I'm a believer in moderation."

She told a TV reporter, "For this 30-minute (Caesars Palace) press conference, I've been in hair and makeup since Sunday."

Over the years, her memorable shows have been a mix of vintage production numbers for old-time songs ("Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B"), ribald jokes swiped from early cabaret legend Sophie Tucker (Midler's college-age daughter is named Sophie), and moving renditions of hits like "Wind Beneath My Wings" and "The Rose."

Always, she made a point of nailing the various cities in which she performed. Midler's not sure how she'll be addressing Las Vegas audiences. "They come from all over the world," she said. "I don't know how many locals there'll be. The jokes will be more about casino life. The casino is the city."

Midler has played Las Vegas many times, all the way back to opening for Johnny Carson at the Sahara in the '70s (her TV performance of "One for the Road" on a Carson farewell show in 1992 had the talk show host wiping away tears).

Midler grew up in Hawaii (she was once a cannery worker in a pineapple factory), the daughter of a house painter for the Navy, surrounded, she has said, by the military. "From a Distance," her 1990 hit, which she performs in concert with gospel-like fervor, became an anthem for military families during the war in the Persian Gulf.

At the suggestion it might be resurrected in that manner once again, Midler sighs, "I get disenchanted. This is such a strange war. I see all these people out going shopping. When are they going to recognize we're in a war?"

Midler has a huge backlog of material from early numbers like "Delta Dawn" and the title tune to her film "The Rose" to Tom Waits' "Shiver Me Timbers" and recent albums celebrating the work of Rosemary Clooney and Peggy Lee. How does she winnow that down to a 90-minute show?

"So much stuff, so much material, lots of ideas," she said, assuring that there'll still be the usual cast of characters from the wheelchair-choreographed mermaid Dolores del Lago ("the toast of Chicago") to her tacky backup singers, "the staggering" Harlettes, whom Midler acknowledges this way: "We have a great relationship. They adore me and I pay them."

Will Las Vegas audiences adore her? "I'm the biggest Bette Midler fan since I was 7 years old," said Karin McArthur, 21, a journalism student at Ryerson University in Toronto, who was with her mom, Delcy, 51, waiting for the announcement ceremony to begin.

The two were going to see Dion later that night ("she's Canadian, we're Canadian") but will be back when Midler comes to town. "Oh, my God! She's the Divine Miss M," said Karin.

Midler's first show is scheduled for Feb. 20. Ticket information: 877-723-8836.

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