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'I burnt myself out. I didn't have anything left'

Two years ago, Bette Midler was in a state of collapse. Now, after rest, therapy and a new film role, she is ready to face the future, she tells **Tim Teeman**

Three years ago when I met Bette Midler promoting *The Best Bette*, a greatest-hits album, she talked breathily-dramatically about singing at a gay bathhouse in New York in 1970. Barry Manilow on piano, recalling a picture "showing me in a 1930s costume... and all these cute young men in bathrobes watching me". She had just shouted at George W. Bush to "get the hell out of my neighbourhood" when his motorcade passed her Upper East Side apartment.

But today Midler's mood matches our airless hotel room. She isn't rude, just quiet and thoughtful — a very different Divine Miss M — speaking about ageing and pondering whether she will sing again. Her brash persona features in the movie *Parental Guidance* where, alongside Billy Crystal, she plays a grandparent reconnecting with her daughter and grandchildren in a pratfall-heavy comedy contrasting old and new parenting methods. Midler mugs merrily, but the film is chiefly memorable for Crystal's bizarrely smooth face.

Midler, hair teased into curls, in short black skirt and scoop-neck top, looks with her peachy cheeks like she has had something "done", but insists she hasn't

Bette Midler in the early Nineties, and, far right, today

had plastic surgery: "Well, I'll never say never." How about Botox? "I've done that," she reveals. "So what's the big deal? They put it out there for you, so if you have the means..." On her cheeks? "Oh, I don't do that. I just do this," she says, touching her forehead, "cos I have that hatchet in the middle. It's part of ageing. People want the mental picture of themselves to jive with the real picture of themselves. For some people it's very distressing when it doesn't. There's a reason there's more dermatologists than anybody else."

She cautions against going "to terrible extremes and looking a little crazy". A flash of vintage-Midler. Phew.

She is "fuzzy-minded", having spent the morning songwriting. She recently told Oprah Winfrey she'd "settled" into herself "60 per cent... the other 40 is still struggling". She tells me: "At a certain age you see the horizon rising to meet you, you see the end of the line. You thought it was infinite but you realise it's finite. You want to be doing things you value and are worthwhile. My husband [of 28 years, Martin von Haselberg] and I talk about how we'll spend the 'next chapter', as they euphemistically call it, all the time." And? "I really don't know. I haven't

decided." More singing? "I don't know what's on the cards for someone like me. There are things I can do, but do I want to do them? Why waste whatever time you have left doing things you don't want to do?"

Of mortality, Midler says: "Oh, one always feels it, but I feel very strong." Midler, 67, and von Haselberg, 63, "fight ageing tooth and nail. Nobody wants to get to the point where you can't move, because then there's no reason to go on". She does Pilates and t'ai chi. "We had our struggles, but we have a lot of compassion and don't let a problem fester," she says of making a 28-year marriage work. "We just kept putting one foot in front of the other. It's the same with my daughter [Sophie, 26]. You have a baby, then suddenly she's out in the world and you think, 'How did that happen?'"

Midler has "always been an extremely ambitious person", desperate to leave Hawaii where she grew up. "When I was 14 the mirrorball was so in my eyes I couldn't see straight. It [her ambition] was like a fire." She wanted the stardom of Bette Davis, who she was named after. "I didn't know what it was. My take on it was really superficial. I was too young. I played the game." She won't "dwell" on the bathhouse days. "I'm so proud of what I've done. The fact people go back to that as if I've done nothing between now and then is really distressing." Your gay fans just cherish it in a celebratory way. "I know, but it's just not me. It was a blip on the screen."

Her movie career took off with a Golden Globe-winning role in *The Rose* in 1979, dipped, then re-sparked with *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986). Von Haselberg "helped keep the home fires burning. I couldn't have done so many things without him". "I feel I did my part," she says. "I think our daughter is pretty stable. A lot of these trainwrecks parents have — we haven't had that." Sophie wants to be an actress: "She loves it in her heart, and to do it properly you really have to."

When Midler was young she wanted to "get away from the negativity" of her father, Fred. "My journey was to set myself free from 'You're not good, you'll never amount to a row of pins, you can't do that'..." It was "nothing compared to what so many people are



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going through. Maybe they should have had my dad. Mine was "a reverse psychology, an 'I'll show you'."

However, Fred was "a big believer in equality, social justice and charity — they were obligations to him". Today Midler campaigns on global warming and recently encouraged fans to fundraise for Native American tribes buying sacred lands in South Dakota. In 1995 she founded the New York Restoration Project, which creates green spaces in the city. "I think people have to stand up for what they believe in, or what are you?"

Like her character in *Parental Guidance*, Midler wants to be a grandmother. "When my daughter turned 15, I asked if she would have a baby. She said, 'I'm not going to have no damned baby so you can run off with it'. I wasn't treated well as a child and I loathed other children. Kids were mean. But my daughter wasn't and neither were her friends. She doesn't give Sophie advice: "She tells me what to do." Did she ever want more children? "By the time I realised how much fun it was [she had Sophie at 40] it was too late."

Work has "always been how I feed myself creatively, until the last couple of years". In 2010 she suffered adrenal exhaustion after two years in Las Vegas with her *Showgirl Must Go On* show. "I just got exhausted, burnt myself out. Physically I didn't have anything left. The obligation was to keep going whether you wanted to or not. By the end I was having a vitamin B-12 shot every night. I was whipped, I really didn't know who I was any more."

Afterwards, Midler "couldn't play music, couldn't listen to music, couldn't do anything. I wasn't having a nervous breakdown. I had a little bit of a collapse, lay down, pattered around, stayed in pyjamas all day. Eventually I started talking to a therapist, working out again, picked up a guitar."

She feels "much, much better. Laying low has been a big help. This picture [*Parental Guidance*] was a relief, a lovely distraction. I like being active, I really enjoy my showbiz life". Will she make more films? "Who knows." I say I went to a *Beaches* "cry-along", which was both silly and intense. "I had to be forced to sing *Wind Beneath My Wings*," Midler, who played the brassy diva C. C. Bloom, says of that film's standout song, "but once I got into it I enjoyed it. It certainly kept my career afloat". It's much harder to "wend your through pop today, it feels like it's been made in a factory". Midler has been offered a couple of Broadway roles, "but eight shows a week might be more than I'm capable of".

She "would never say" she's considering retirement "because it always comes back to bite you in the butt when you wanna come back. I might step back for a period. I think I've earned it. I've worked pretty steadily since I was 19."

Three years ago Midler campily conveyed a message of professional frustration to Meryl Streep: "Do you have to say yes to everything?" I remind her of it; she replies softly: "Life wouldn't be anywhere near as much fun without her [Streep] in the world". Of course actors shouldn't be misdefined by their on-screen personas, but in that airless hotel room I find myself hoping Midler rediscovers her inner C.C. Bloom. ***Parental Guidance* is released on Boxing Day**

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