

THE  TIMES

04.06.11

MAGAZINE

The world's
most
controversial
fashion
magazine

By Lisa Armstrong



Liza Minnelli:
'I will never
marry again'

By Tim Teeman

When an
autistic child
becomes an
adult

The parents' story

He smoked dope with his father
He crashed his son's gap year
He's planning to go into space

Will Richard Branson ever grow up?

By Ginny Dougary

Liza Minnelli at home in
her New York apartment

**WOULD YOU EVER MARRY AGAIN?
'ARE YOU NUTS? PULEEEEEZE.
NO... MY NERVES'**

*Four husbands, three miscarriages,
two hip replacements and numerous addictions...
There's only one Liza Minnelli*

INTERVIEW Tim Teeman PORTRAIT George Holz

In the late Eighties, when Liza Minnelli's *Results* album with the Pet Shop Boys was released, my friend Dave and I would greet each other, arms outstretched and dramatically slurring our words, "He-llo, it's Liizzza." Like her mother, Judy Garland, she snugly fitted the old-school definition of a "gay icon": distinctive voice, much married, a survivor of the twin demons of drugs and booze, a rollercoaster life lived with drama and joie de vivre, gay former husband, Judy Garland for her mother... and a great hairstyle for drag queens to copy. Now, 22 years later, in her Upper East Side apartment on a muggy day in New York, here is the star emerging from her bedroom heading for me, arms outstretched in simple black shirt and trousers, going straight for a kiss. "Hello, darlinghh," she says with delicious, breathy

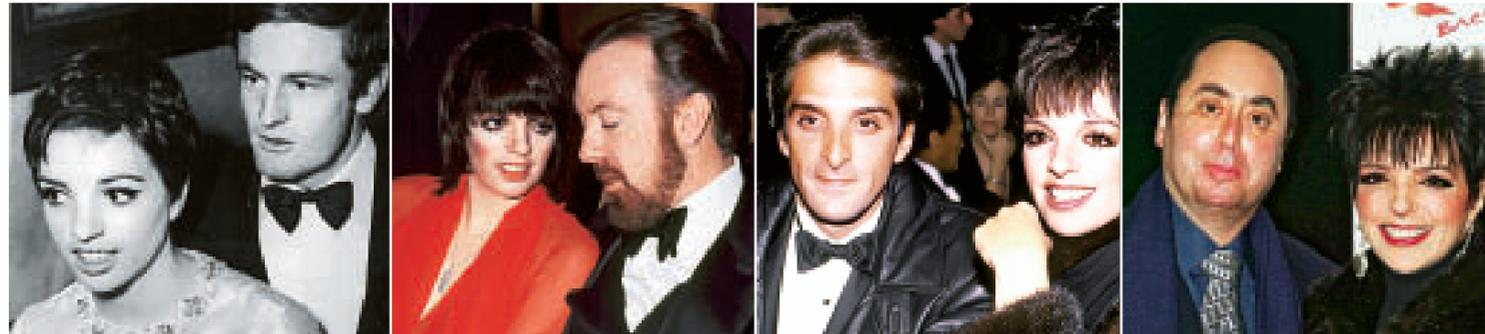
recorded her "shovelling it in" before making out with Mikhail Baryshnikov while still married to second husband Jack Haley Jr. She has been married four times, finally and most scarringly to music producer David Gest, who famously kissed her with vacuum-cleaner intensity at their wedding in 2002, attended by a surreal barnyard of the glamorous and now dead (Elizabeth Taylor, Michael Jackson). The marriage would break down with accusations of abuse on both sides; they were divorced in 2007. At one point, Gest attempted to sue her for \$10 million, claiming she beat him. Minnelli denied the allegations. Her representative says I will "lose her" if I mention his name.

That turns out not to be so. When I ask Minnelli would she marry again, she exclaims, "No. Are you NUTS? Puleeeeee, my nerves, no. NO. Been there, done that; there's no reason on earth for me to get married again.

"I don't think you get married unless it's fun and you enjoy being with somebody," she says tightly. "But I had also" – and she enunciates this pointedly – "just come through brain encephalitis when I married HIM, so, ha ha ha, THAT is all there is to say about THAT."

Has Minnelli missed not having children? "Sure, I mean, losing three babies, come on, and one so late in the pregnancy..." She pauses. "I had to give birth to that child. It was horrendous."

She recounts how, afterwards, alone in the labour ward at night, she was starting to get so depressed from the effect of the chemicals, and she heard a woman down the hall screaming. So she took herself off, carrying the IV bag she was attached to, to find her and held her hand, then went into the delivery room and helped her deliver her baby. "It was such a moment of hope," she says. "'Hope' is a wonderful word:



excitement. Big smooch. Dave, we had it spot-on – on the surface, at least.

Minnelli sits down at the living-room table, lights a fag (the first of many, her only visible vice). Make-up's a bit cakey but not OTT. The 65-year-old singer and actress is recovering from a knee operation, but still working trouperishly: late last year she released *Confessions*, an album of spiky love songs streaked with that bittersweet knowingness of hers, and has forthcoming concerts in London, Manchester and Glasgow where she will sing songs from it, alongside better-known standards, including *Cabaret*. Today, in her greeting, her movements and speech, she seems a little (not a lot) scattered, shaky. Is she OK, tired (as I'm told she is after a fashion shoot the preceding day), drunk, on something, unwell? Or is this just service-as-normal, wide-eyed Liza-with-a-Z?

Never far from one's mind are Minnelli's many physical traumas – double pneumonia, viral encephalitis, two hip replacements, three miscarriages and, most recently, the knee operation, the recovery from which has been slow and painful – and her demons. She has been addicted to Valium, sleeping pills, alcohol and cocaine: Andy Warhol in his diaries

Can't have kids. It's just a legal thing. I just like to have fabulous lovers." (How many she has is "maaaa business", she says, switching to Southern belle.) "Do I have to be in love? No. Some people do, or they don't feel complete. I have the gift of not feeling that way any more. I'm happy." Does she wish she'd been single more when she was younger? "No, I wouldn't change anything. I can't, so why bother?"

Her longest marriage was to third husband Mark Gero, a sculptor, from 1979 to 1992. "A wonderful man, we built this apartment together, we're still great friends. I was friends with Peter [Allen, her first husband, who later came out] and was with him two days before he died [of Aids in 1992]. Jack [Haley Jr, her second husband, between 1974 and 1979] and I were wonderful friends." Which leaves the phantom of Gest. I say that I recall seeing her and David on an old *Ruby Wax Meets...* show years ago. "David who?" Minnelli retorts. Gest, I reply. Was the relationship fun at the beginning?

From left, Liza Minnelli with her four husbands: Peter Allen, 1967; Jack Haley Jr, 1977;

Mark Gero, 1986; and David Gest, 2002; starring as Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*, 1972

you just have to find it. I have 21 godchildren." She laughs with gusto. "I love kids."

Minnelli's viral encephalitis of 2000 was the most life-threatening illness she has faced. It was feared she would not walk again, I say. "Or talk again," she roars. "And look at me, I can't stop! I don't remember being frightened for long. After they told me I might not be able to walk or talk, I thought, 'No, this isn't right.'"

"I knew it was possible to retrain another part of the brain to open it up. I counted the stripes on the wall and said the alphabet over and over. One day I said, 'I'd like to try to walk,' and my doctor nearly fell over. Ha ha ha. But it came, one step at a time." She won't countenance thoughts of mortality: "Let's talk about me, not me dying."

She adopts the same forge-ahead attitude to her addictions. "People have no idea what I have gone through. If they've read anything, those who like drama see drama; if someone values courage, they'll see courage." Can she describe her addiction to alcohol, for example? "Let's say you're going out and it's a stressful situation. You have a drink to calm you down. It works for a little while, then you cross a physical-chemical line and it doesn't work any more. You feel worse. Then you think, 'Hang



on, this isn't working. I want to feel better." How did she beat it? "Friends and AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]. I've been going a long, long time, every single day. It's useful and interesting. Someone will raise their hand and say something horrendous has happened, the next person will say, 'My cat is shedding all over my furniture.' We're a bunch of friends, all over the world. It's like going to lunch every day. It's not some cult and it works."

Where did Minnelli's demons come from? "Stuff happens to every kid, but not on the front page," she says forcefully. "That was very difficult, especially when they made things up. Suddenly you read you're drunk someplace and you're in a completely different city." She softens. "You learn how to live your life. The minute my front door closes I call my friends, go to shows, cook." She goes to dance classes with her friend Marisa

'People have no idea what I've gone through. Those who like drama see drama; if someone values courage, they'll see courage'

Berenson under the tutelage of Luigi Facciuto.

Minnelli's apartment is in a large but not grand block on a quiet, unratty street. Joan Rivers, who lives nearby, presides over a mini-Versailles of well-upholstered gilt. Another near neighbour, the fashion designer Valentino, has Meissen porcelain and pictures by Warhol and Damien Hirst on the walls. But Minnelli's place, while big (and with hidden doors linking to unseen rooms), is spartan, more show-homey than cosy; you'd expect more flourishes and extravagance, and their lack is telling. Her life may be known for drama, but Minnelli does not revel in it, or fetishize it. Her living room furniture is shrouded in white sheets, to protect it from her two dogs.

There is a vintage record player, a gift from her half-brother Joey (the son of Garland and producer Sidney Luft), and arts medals in glass cases awarded to her and her father, the film director Vincente Minnelli. Propped against the wall of the main corridor are large prints of her when she was so pixily luminescent as Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* (for which she won an Oscar in 1972); of her mother and father ("They're so in love"); of Minnelli on a film boom with her father, rumoured to be gay, who directed such greats as *Meet Me in St Louis* and *Gigi*. ➔

her as an infant; and, on a shelf, a painting by the singer Tony Bennett of a New York street blurry with yellow taxis barrelling past a theatre bearing Minnelli's name.

She reveals a picture from a fashion shoot. Nice pins, I say. She says they're "dancer's legs", sturdy like her father's. Her mother's were daintier.

Minnelli first wanted to be an ice skater, but after seeing the Sixties Broadway musical *Bye Bye Birdie* decided to become a dancer. "They looked like they were having so much fun. I wanted to be in the chorus, but with maybe a line or two. I worked hard: as a



stagehand, in summer stock theatre. I did everything to learn my craft.

"Being the child of famous parents wasn't the privilege everyone thinks. I appreciate people admiring my work, but their assumptions can be annoying. 'Well, of course she's talented: look at who her mother and father were.' But my success wasn't pre-ordained. What about Frank Sinatra Jr? So many kids don't follow their famous parents."

She refuses to dwell on her mother's problems: her drug and alcohol addiction and her death from an overdose of barbiturates, aged 47, in 1969. "If I asked for help, she gave it. She appreciated me and respected me for leaving home and working hard. I was proud I never leant on her for money or a job.

"I was really tight with my parents. I was protective of them. She was my mother, not a movie star. You loved *The Wizard of Oz*, and so did I. I didn't know who that kid, Dorothy, was. I knew her as the woman who made me shepherd's pie. You didn't. The woman who drove me to school. You didn't."

Charles Aznavour became her mentor. She first saw him perform when she was 17. "I felt I didn't breathe from the moment he walked on stage to when he walked off. Every song was an acting piece. I thought, 'That's what I want to do.'"

In 1965, aged 19, Minnelli became the youngest actress to win a Tony, for her debut Broadway role in Kander and Ebb's *Flora the Red Menace*. She was also a nightclub singer,

'People's assumptions can be annoying. Being the child of famous parents wasn't the privilege everyone thinks'



and her singing career flourished on stage and TV, in specials such as *Liza with a Z* and *Liza Minnelli: at Carnegie Hall*. In 2008/9, *Liza's at the Palace...* on Broadway won Minnelli her third Tony award (to add to the Oscar, an Emmy, two Golden Globes and a Grammy Legend award: she is one of a very few entertainers who have swept the awards board).

"Luckily, Kander and Ebb wrote wonderful songs for me," Minnelli says. "*Cabaret* was written for me, so were *Maybe This Time*, *New York, New York*, *But the World Goes 'Round*. I love them all."

Her film career has included *Arthur*, *Stepping Out* and a demented cover of *Single Ladies* in last year's roundly panned *Sex and the City* movie sequel. She "may" do more acting in the future – a few years ago she appeared in the TV comedy *Arrested Development* – "but I can't look back, only forward".

Suddenly she says, "I want to show you something." We enter a room with a piano and director's chair. "This is where I sing, but look at these," she says flicking a switch to light a shelf of awards. She beckons me to lift her Best Actress Oscar for *Cabaret*. It's heavy. "I won them and deserved them," she says proudly.

However halting Minnelli seems today, she is a barnstorming live performer. *Confessions* is

a brilliant album: a collection of intelligent and cynical songs about love, longing, loss – "and solutions", says Minnelli. She made it with her longtime pianist Billy Stritch, when she was recovering from the knee operation at home in bed. "We took a piano in there. It was fun. The songs are lovely. You fall in love and go, 'Ooooh, what's going on?' Then it falls apart." Does that encapsulate her love life? "It's been very interesting and... fabulous," she says ("fabulous" is her default word).

Does she like being in love? "I think everybody does, but what I really like right now is that I'm not." She says this abruptly. "I'm really happy with not being in love! When my friends tell me their 'He said, she said' stuff, I think, 'I'm free of that.'" She clasps her hands together. "Yeeessss!"

Minnelli is also "fine" with ageing: she says she doesn't feel old; indeed she feels younger now than at 30. Again, there is this steadfast refusal to look back. With age, she says, has come freedom and a way of achieving what she wants "properly". "Today is all we've got. If you've got one foot in yesterday and another in tomorrow, you're p***ing all over today."

Her health, she insists, is "perfect, I'm so healthy it's stupid. You have to be an athlete to tour. I have all the energy in the world." She admits her knee operation was "a hard one to get through. It's painful. They're still working on it, but I can walk." She doesn't subscribe to characterisations of her as a survivor. "That's too dramatic for me. If my example helps others, great. But if I think of myself as a survivor I have to think about what I've been through. I can't accomplish what I want today if I'm thinking about yesterday."

However, Minnelli embraces the "gay icon" mantle: "They have good taste," she says stoutly, smiling, but again not camping it up that much for an easy bow. "Look, whatever makes you happy. I don't care who my fans go to bed with, so long as they come to my shows." Should gay marriage be legalised? "Sure. Why not? It's not a question of competing with male-female marriage. All couples deserve equal benefits and the right to have their relationship recognised. You don't have to understand or condone it, it's really none of your business. It's about being equal under the law."

At the door, Minnelli hugs me tight. "Stay safe and remember this," she says. "Get through the next 15 seconds. Sometimes I can't even do that. So I get to 13 and say 'Good morning' and start my day all over again. It works. Remember: 13; I think 10 is for pussies and 15 is too long." Isn't 13 unlucky? She laughs. "Not for me. That's my lucky number, darling." ■

Liza Minnelli's UK tour runs from June 29 to July 6 (tickets from ticketmaster.co.uk and ticketline.co.uk). Confessions is out now on Decca

Liza Minnelli with her parents: a hug from Judy Garland in 1965, following

her debut on Broadway aged 19, and film director Vincente Minnelli in 1951