

The COMEDIAN

Q: Is there anything you would still like to do?

A: Robert Redford

She's best known as one of the Golden Girls, but it's as the edgy host of Saturday Night Live that Betty White has new cult status. Not bad for 88

INTERVIEW Tim Teeman PORTRAIT Michael Elins

Betty White finds it surprising that she is the only surviving Golden Girl. "Because I was the oldest," the actress says, laughing at the memory of her co-stars of that brilliant sitcom featuring four older women bitching and eating cheesecake in an extremely pastel Miami house. Estelle Getty (Sophia), Bea Arthur (Dorothy) and Rue McClanahan (Blanche) have died, leaving White, who played the dippy Rose Nylund, transformed into a media darling. Now 88, she makes Angelina Jolie look like a sloth.

Let's count up her projects. She is appearing in the second series of sitcom Hot in Cleveland and briefly in another primetime show called Community. Having written two books, including an autobiography, she is writing two more. She stars in her own calendar surrounded by oiled hunks and has launched a clothing line featuring hoodies with built-in MP3 headphones. She is in a new film, You Again, alongside Sigourney Weaver and Jamie Lee Curtis and - don't draw breath please, White isn't - may be about to play God in a movie Curtis has talked to her about.

"I don't see this as a career resurgence, or whatever people are calling it. I've never stopped working," White says. "I go from one thing to the next. I feel very happily employed."

Her re-emergence derives from a Facebook campaign led by a fan - David Matthews of San Antonio, Texas - who lobbied for White to host American TV entertainment institution Saturday Night Live. After 500,000 supporters signed up, White became SNL's oldest presenter. The joke with White can

often be summed up as: "Did that nice old lady with the spun-gold bouffant actually just say/do that?" White says she was scared to death. "You're not supposed to look at the person you're talking to: you have to read off cue cards, which I hate because my eye skips over the words. I memorise everything, which I couldn't do because sketches kept getting thrown out or being rewritten."

SNL producers had already asked her to do the show twice before but she had turned them down. "My agent insisted I had to do it," she says. "I almost fired him." She doesn't deliver these spontaneous zingers self-consciously, but straight-faced, in the homely tones of a cuddly grandma, which makes them all the funnier.

"You'd do a scene, be bundled off stage, into a closet, have your wig unpinned, another wig pinned on, step out of your dress, into another and thrown back on again. All I could think was, 'Which sketch am I doing now?'" Would she present SNL again? "Oh no. Let's quit while we're behind, I think."

White's popularity is such that now she travels with an assistant. "People always stop and say hello to me, but I have ended up spending so much time talking. I have missed a couple of planes." She pauses. "You don't want to be rude though, because you wouldn't be in this wonderful position without their fantastic support. I love it."

Her schedule sounds mad, whatever her age. The night before we speak she'd just got back from addressing an "expo" for 25,000 pensioners in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Next, she is off to Chicago, to volunteer at a riding programme for disabled children, and then to Atlanta, to film a movie for the

Hallmark Channel, called The Lost Valentine. She's been married three times: first in 1945 to Dick Barker, a US Army Air Corps pilot, then in 1947, after they'd divorced, to Lane Allen, an agent. That marriage only lasted two years. In 1963 she married her true love, TV host Allen Ludden, who died of stomach cancer in 1981.

"He was something so special," she sighs. "And, you know, for a year I said, 'No, I won't marry you.' What wasted time. He was the best in the world and I miss him."

She deliberately chose not to have children. "I love children, but I didn't have a desire to have them," White says. "I think babies come into families where they're really wanted. If I had gotten pregnant it would have changed my life." She pauses. "I don't think you can do justice to a career and a family. A lot of women do, I know, but I don't think I could have done - and I haven't regretted my decision for one moment."

As for her advancing age - pah! - White intends to sally forth: "I'm blessed with good health. I have boundless energy." How does she confront the idea of her own mortality? She laughs. "My mother taught me this rather wonderful piece of philosophy. She said that we know the answer to many things, but the one answer no one knows is what happens to us in that moment we die. When we lost someone close to us, she said to me, 'Now he knows the secret.' That took all the fear away. So, I'll enjoy this for as long as possible, then, one day, I'll know the secret."

We both fall quiet. Is there anything she would still like to do?

"Robert Redford," White deadpans quickly. "But I'm not sure if he'd be up for that." ■

