

# arts

## 'I'm waiting for somebody to run my ex off a cliff'

**Debbie Reynolds is a Hollywood survivor — and she's had a lot to survive, she tells Tim Teeman**

The whispering — "It's her!" — starts as soon as Debbie Reynolds, resplendent in glitter-trimmed red trouser suit and honeycomb bouffant, approaches the "subway" dress that Marilyn Monroe wore in *The Seven Year Itch*. "Hello folks," Reynolds says to the fans taking her picture at Paley Centre in Los Angeles, where the first of four planned auctions of her astonishing archive of Hollywood costumes and memorabilia will take place on Saturday. It includes hats worn by Charlie Chaplin and Groucho Marx, Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra headdress, Barbra Streisand's gowns from *Hello Dolly!*, Ingrid Bergman's suit of armour from *Joan of Arc* and a car driven by Laurel and Hardy. Oprah Winfrey and Whoopi Goldberg will be competing to buy the Chaplin hat, Reynolds's son and exhibit designer, Todd Fisher, tells me. Winfrey is determined to buy the Marilyn dress. Streisand wants the *Hello Dolly!* gowns.

Reynolds, 79, would be happier if we were meeting at the opening of her own costume museum, which she has twice tried and failed to build. She wants the collection to stay intact but doesn't think one person or group will buy the whole lot, valued at \$15 million. "so why dream about something that isn't a possibility?"

"It's very sad," Reynolds says, as we're shepherd around her fans by a burly aide. She may be small, but for all her otherworldly starriness she is uncompromising and sharp: though her dimpled smile stays fixed, in a moment she will wish her last, still living husband dead. She will talk about her daughter Carrie Fisher's bipolar depression, about "marrying poorly", how love has eluded her; all equably but with more steel than magnolia.

For 45 years, Reynolds says, "I tried

to get a museum built. I didn't buy it all for me. I bought it to preserve it. I couldn't find a husband that had money. All mine took my money."

Reynolds began collecting as a young actress before buying more concertedly after MGM sold its costumes in 1970. She housed the clothes first in her basement, then in storage. "I feel as if I am their mother and I'm passing them to new parents. I have a little debt, but really I feel I'm at an age where it's time to let go." Is she holding anything back for herself? "Only my heart."

Todd, her son and great protector, bemoans the lack of industry support to safeguard his mother's collection, although one group has said it will buy everything. For all the 60-odd films that Reynolds appeared in — including *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, for which she won her only Oscar nomination — no one role defines her. She had hit songs, but not one endured. In recent years she appeared on *Will & Grace*, but her personal dramas almost superseded her professional ones. In the late 1950s her husband Eddie Fisher ran off with Elizabeth Taylor. The crises of her daughter, Carrie Fisher, have also been consuming. "I'm Princess Leia's mother," she has deadpanned.

Yet Reynolds is one of the last survivors of old Hollywood, and now its custodian — not that modern Hollywood seems to care. "I couldn't believe it when they were selling everything," Reynolds says of



BARRY J. HOLMES FOR THE TIMES; KOBAL/RETNA

the studios. "It was terrible, disrespectful and not very bright. It should be saved, like architecture. It breaks my heart, but my husbands have broken it before."

She asked rich Hollywood friends to become her partner in saving the collection. "If they had said yes, they would be here, but I can't go around the world begging and knocking on doors." Elizabeth Taylor bought Richard Burton's costume from *Cleopatra* for her, "because I was so hard up and she wanted to save it and help me out. But she thought I was crazy. Everyone did."

Reynolds's father, Ray, worked on the railroads in Texas, a man "so honest and straight he wouldn't drive his car the day after its tax disc had expired," says Todd Fisher. He moved the family to Burbank when Reynolds was 7. "I didn't dream of being in showbiz. We could barely afford good food." She wanted to be a PE teacher, "but fate stepped in and life took a new course, as I hope it will now."

She won a beauty contest at 16, a contract with Warner Brothers and her career began. She doesn't seem that nostalgic. "I feel more shaken with every passing year. It comes upon you very quickly. One minute you're 50, the next you're 70. I think about mortality. One of the reasons for doing the auction is to pass it safely into other hands while I'm still here."

But, she says, bright steeliness rebooting, she still works 42 weeks a year, she's planning to come to the UK to perform another stage show (after last year's *Alive and Fabulous*). She knew Elizabeth Taylor's death in March "was coming. I was grateful she was not ill any more: she was in a lot of pain."

How had they become friends after Fisher left her for Taylor? "Once she met Richard Burton, she adored him and he her." A few years later, "when we had both remarried," she and Taylor reconciled on a cruise ship. "Elizabeth said, 'I made a foolish mistake and I'm very sorry if I hurt you in any way'. I said, 'Well, you did, but it's past now and we're going to go on', which we were adult enough to do. You have to let go of painful situations and I always liked Elizabeth. We had been at school at MGM together."

Taylor, she says, "made an error. It wasn't really her fault. Eddie wanted to leave. I didn't chase him out. I was absolutely heartbroken. This was the father of my two children, my first marriage, my first love. But I had to accept it and I did after a couple of years."

She was never reconciled with Fisher, who died last September having trashed her in a 1999 memoir as "the iron butterfly". On *Oprah*, Reynolds made a gesture implying that he wasn't well endowed. "Yes, and besides that his brain wasn't that big either," she says archly. "Carrie says he turned out to be the nicest of my husbands. But he didn't support the children. He didn't call them or send Christmas or birthday presents, or cared about their education or their lives. Why should I respect that?"

She looks down. "I married very poorly. If I knew why, I would go back and redo it all.



**Debbie Reynolds, left; above, with Gene Kelly in Singin' in the Rain; below left, with Eddie Fisher and three-month-old Carrie; below, a red shoe from The Wizard of Oz, for sale in Reynolds's memorabilia auction**

My second husband [Harry Karl, married 1960-73] was a very sweet man but didn't have any sense about money. He was a gamble-oholic, so he lost all of his money, which was millions and millions, and all my money which was millions. My third husband [Richard Hamlett, married 1984-96] was a tragedy."

She helped Hamlett to open a small hotel and casino, which went bust, rendering her bankrupt. "I'm waiting to read that somebody runs him off a cliff somewhere." She miscarried two children, she reveals. "That was the most painful thing that ever happened to me. But my faith meant I felt one day God would send me an answer." Did he? "If you behave well during a painful time in your life, I believe your life will turn around. You have to be courageous, keep going forward. It's hard. You have to be an adult, grow up."

Unsurprisingly Reynolds has no desire to marry again. "I don't even date. I'm 79. I have no reason to. I have many wonderful bright and intelligent friends. We go to plays and have fun."

"The ideal is to be with someone to hold and to share life with. Now I'm past it; that train has left the station." She reveals that she has arthritis and osteoporosis, "but I deal with it because I have to. I have good people who keep me going down the railroad track. If you look through a tunnel at the end is light. Whatever troubles you're having, remember that."

Carrie Fisher said it was painful to watch her mother fade from "celebrity to obscurity", but Reynolds says: "My

life has always been in showbusiness and always active. Stay interested in whatever you're doing whether it's writing, rollerskating or mountain climbing. Don't give up."

Her relationship with Carrie has been legendarily troubled. Todd says that Carrie, who went on to make books and stage performances out of her demons (such as *Wishful Drinking*), first rebelled against Reynolds when mother tried to give daughter advice about her career. Then came Carrie's various addictions. "My daughter is a manic depressive bipolar," Reynolds says smoothly. "That's an illness, something you can't help. Eddie was manic depressive, it's genetic. But she has great doctors and is mindful of her illness. For her to be as functioning as she is shows great courage. In the past our relationship was like many mothers and daughters: I told her the truth and maybe she didn't want to hear it or maybe I was wrong." Carrie has asked her mother to play herself in an autobiographical movie she is making. "I said: 'Oh my goodness, I had to live my life and now I have to live it again.'"

The movie-star mother played by Shirley MacLaine in the movie of Carrie's semi-autobiographical *Postcards from the Edge* was not her,

Reynolds insists. "Mike Nichols [the director] wanted the mother to be as cuckoo as the daughter and an alcoholic, which I am not. How could I have been and functioned all these years? I haven't missed two days' work in 65 years."

She has never had any addictions or been into drink or drugs, she says. "I saw a lot of it but never wanted to. I remember being sick all night after drinking sweet sherry." She recalls stars having shots — "they called them vitamins, but it was speed" — so they could work long days. To today's generation of hard-living stars such as Lindsay Lohan, she says: "Be peaceful, take time for yourself."

Reynolds says her ambition is "to remain happy", to carry on performing live shows "as long as they'll have me". At home she sits on the porch "and listens to the trees. I've learnt to be grateful for what one has."

Before she leaves the Paley Centre, I watch Reynolds posing for pictures, smile on genuine full beam. "Hello, folks... Oh, you're too young to remember Rudolph Valentino... Thank you, I appreciate it..." The show absolutely must go on.

**The Auction: Part One is at the Paley Centre for Media, Los Angeles, on Saturday (profilesinhistory.com)**

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