

Telling It Like It Is

Life Lessons from Four "Old Breads"

By Glenn Plaskin

Three years ago, at one of Elizabeth Taylor's regular Sunday brunches, actress Shirley MacLaine and screenwriter Carrie Fisher, plus a troop of Taylor's grandchildren, were gathered around the swimming pool eating chili, fried chicken and ice-cream sundaes. Bemoaning the scarcity of good acting roles for older women, Taylor and MacLaine implored Fisher to write a script just for them. "I'll try," said Fisher, "but I'll have to include a part for my mother" (Debbie Reynolds). Soon after, Fisher and writing partner Elaine Pope whipped up a screenplay about four Hollywood stars in a satire that mocked and mirrored the colorful histories of the veteran actresses themselves. Adding spice to the mix was former *Dynasty* vixen Joan Collins.

Part fact, part fiction, the hilarious result is the much-talked-about *These Old Breads*, a TV movie to be broadcast this month on ABC. With a wink at yesteryear, these Hollywood legends—now in their late 60s—flaunt their lighter sides while parodying their own lively pasts. All four stars talked with FC in separate telephone interviews.

That's Entertainment!

"This show is bawdy, delicious humor," says Collins of the script in which she, MacLaine and Reynolds play three former musical comedy stars who loathe one another. "It's a spoof on our lives," says Reynolds, who plays a Miss Goody Two-shoes—"the nicest of the girls," she remarks.

Taylor describes the man-crazy pot-smoking agent she plays as "a tough cookie." And Collins says her character is "a narcissistic woman, very conscious of her sexual power, who's going with a mobster." MacLaine's character "is a New Ager who meditates and believes in reincarnation," she says. Taylor and Reynolds describe their climactic scene as echoing the real-life scandal of 1959 when Reynolds's first husband, Eddie Fisher, left her to marry Taylor. Long ago reconciled, the two stars played out their scene with glee. "I tell Elizabeth's character I didn't need her messing up my life," says Reynolds. "And I tell Debbie, 'I did you a favor!'" says Taylor. "I say, 'I was perfectly capable of losing him myself,'" notes Reynolds.

Behind the Scenes

"It was like having four mothers," says scriptwriter Fisher, laughing. "Joan wanted the last word in the fights; Shirley wanted to include all her past-lives stuff; Elizabeth wanted the confrontation scene with my Mom to be the *real deal*."

Although feuds and jealousies erupt in

the screenplay, the actresses, who've known one another for over 40 years, deny any real-life friction. "The teasing was done in a spirit of good humor," maintains MacLaine, and Reynolds gives examples of their kidding: "I'd say, 'Shirley, stop talking on the phone to your other life!' Or, 'C'mon Joan, let's go, dear. You can only put on so much lipstick.'"

MacLaine says she was sometimes amused to see her costars spend 2½ hours in the makeup chair. "I take only seven minutes for makeup...can't sit any longer," she says.

"Joan and I were a little nuts about looking our best," admits Reynolds. "But it's a battle to keep yourself looking and feeling like you want to. I'm a colorful 'old broad,'" she adds. "The other girls don't like the word *old*, but I don't mind it, because the alternative is...you're dead."

During breaks on the set the stars traded war stories about their many husbands, a combined total of 15 ("Guess who gets the blue ribbon!" says Taylor), their children (10), grandchildren (13) and their ability to rebound from physical and emotional setbacks.

Body and Soul

All four women have faced numerous life challenges, physical and emotional woes, yet they all remain energetic and youthful in spirit. Few have surmounted as many physical catastrophes as 68-year-old Taylor, who, in the last few years, has recovered from three hip-replacement surgeries, the removal of a brain tumor, broken vertebrae and viral pneumonia. "I've been pronounced dead twice," she says matter-of-factly. "But my spirit wouldn't die. And it's that spiritual me, my inner being, I can tap when I'm in trouble. My spirit keeps me out of the way of the speeding train even *after* the train has run me over. You have to face adversity straight on no matter how painful," she maintains, "and you have to work at being strong and resilient."

True to her word, Taylor has pushed herself beyond her illnesses. In the past year she has hosted numerous AIDS fund-raisers, been involved in the day-to-day operation of her AIDS Foundation, tended to her perfume business and traveled to London, where she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Still, she battles the residual effects of various ailments: "I've learned to live with the fact that I'll have back pain for the rest of my life," she says, adding, "I exercise to strengthen my back muscles."

Reynolds, MacLaine and Taylor all marveled at the limber Collins, who, at 67, does 150 sit-ups a day. "I've exercised since I was three," says Collins. "It's my discipline—like brushing my teeth. I was born with natural energy!"

"I'm no slouch, either!" booms Reynolds, age 68, who

continues to kick up her heels two hours nightly, 42 weeks a year in theaters around the country. Her get-up-and-go is especially valiant considering that she suffers from both arthritis and osteoporosis. "Of all people!" says Reynolds. "I'd danced all my life, exercised and was a vegetarian. Now I take my calcium pills and Evista and I have an exercise program that involves stretching similar to yoga."

MacLaine practices both yoga and an Eastern exercise called qigong, "a variation of tai chi," she says, "but more spontaneous. When I'm done, I feel balanced in body and spirit." MacLaine's prescription for looking and feeling healthy: "Drink lots of water, get good shoes, a good hat and stay out of the sun."

Taylor says she has no beauty secrets. "You have to be at peace with yourself. I love to laugh. I think laughter can cure. You can see it in a person's face. Around age 40, when your face has lost the glow of youth, what you are inside starts to form on the outside. Either the lines go up or they go down. If they go up, that's a good sign." Collins agrees that outer beauty is a result of inner serenity: "Beauty comes from inside and you get the face you deserve," she observes.

Beyond beauty, the actresses discussed some of life's emotional pitfalls, such as stress and depression. Collins says that when she's stressed out, she takes care of herself by "having a massage, lying on my bed listening to music, reading, watching American Movie Classics or just chilling out with a nice cup of tea." MacLaine shared the stress-reducing spiritual practices featured on her Web site (MacLaine.shirleymaclaine.com) and in her book: *Going Within: A Guide for Inner Transformation* (Bantam).

"We were all very interested in the basic spirituality of what you turn to when you think your world has fallen apart," says MacLaine. "We agreed that the love of your children gets you through a lot and that the key to sur-



Having a ball as *These Old Breads* are film divas Debbie Reynolds, Shirley MacLaine, Joan Collins and Elizabeth Taylor.



The beautiful Elizabeth Taylor in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1958.



Shirley MacLaine shone brightly in the 1969 musical *Sweet Charity*.

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