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BETTE ON LAUGHS: Bette Midler as late Hollywood agent Sue Mengers in *I'll Eat You Last*. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

I'll Eat You Last:

Divine Miss M delivers dish

I'LL EAT YOU LAST: A CHAT WITH SUE MENGERS

Written by John Logan

Directed by Joe Mantello

Through June 30, 2013

Booth Theatre

222 West 45th Street

(212-239-6200), www.illeatyoulast.com

By Scott Harrah

Bette Midler certainly delivers in this gossipy, entertaining and hysterically funny one-woman show based on the life of late Hollywood agent Sue Mengers. It has been nearly 35 years since Ms. Midler's last Broadway appearance (*Bette! Divine Madness*), so just seeing this icon back on the stage, firing off a litany of raunchy one-liners and bitchy bon mots about Hollywood A-Listers, is a thrill. Just don't expect any true substance or "meat" in this Broadway dish fest. Why? Since the show is not really a bio-drama, there are no cathartic moments, pithy soliloquies or emotional show-stoppers. As theater, this is more like a scrumptious, satisfying snack than a meal, but there's nothing wrong with that.

The title, *I'll Eat You Last: A Chat with Sue Mengers*, basically says it all about the production. It's an amusing chat; not a spoken-word documentary for the stage. To the uninitiated, Sue Mengers was the first female "superagent" in the 1970s and early 1980s, an era when men ruled the business side of Tinsel Town. At one point in the 1970s, virtually every big box-office star was her client, from Faye Dunaway and Gene Hackman to Burt Reynolds, Steve McQueen, Ryan and Tatum O'Neal to Cher and Barbra Streisand.

Sue Mengers' own life itself was a Hollywood-style rags-to-riches tale, and sounds like any subplot in a Jackie Collins potboiler. Like a pulp novel, there is no sentimentality or depth in the paper-thin narrative of John Logan's script, and everything is presented more as a diversion than solid drama. Mengers was born in Nazi Germany and, along with her Jewish family, fled just in time to America and settled in Utica, NY. After her father committed suicide in a Times Square hotel, she and her mother moved to the Bronx. She didn't speak much English after moving to the States, but learned how by devouring old classic Hollywood movies. Mengers yearned for a career in show business, but knew she wasn't pretty enough to be an actress, so she eventually landed a job as a secretary at the William Morris Agency. After working her way up to representing Julie Harris, Sue Mengers went on to become a force in

Hollywood.

Under Joe Mantello's fluid direction, the remarkable epic of this woman's life manages to work as a stage vehicle for Ms. Midler, who spends every moment of the play sitting on a couch in Mengers' posh Beverly Hills home (beautifully designed by Scott Pask). It is 1981 and Mengers is waiting for guests to arrive for one of her legendary dinner parties. Barbra Streisand's lawyers have informed her that the superstar is dumping her as an agent, and Mengers is waiting for a call from Babs herself. She flips through the National Enquirer, chain-smokes cigarettes, tokes on joints, and pops chocolates in her mouth as she regales us with stories of such things as her childhood to her salad days in Hollywood and a recent visit to Sissy Spacek's "mud farm" in Virginia.

We learn all this through Ms. Midler's rapid-fire delivery, with salty anecdotes along the way about "discovering" Barbra Streisand in a gay Village nightclub in the 1960s to her long-term friendship with Ali MacGraw; and why Faye Dunaway was chosen over Jane Fonda to co-star with Jack Nicholson in *Chinatown*. One either has to be over 40 or a fan of 1970s Hollywood to truly understand most of the punch lines to all the lowbrow jokes, hurled with riotous aplomb by Ms. Midler.

Does some of it come across as Bette Midler doing the same old shtick from her early days, regaling us with Hollywood tales instead of those mothball-ridden Sophie Tucker jokes she once told? Perhaps, but so what?

Anyone familiar with the real Sue Mengers knows she was an intense person, but a vulnerable one. John Logan's script only hints at the sad parts of the woman's life, for what is presented here is mostly an extended comedy routine, and Ms. Midler is not given much material to show off her acting chops, but the dialogue is so crisp and beguiling that it does not matter.

Ms. Midler has many fan bases from her multi-faceted career, from countless Top 40 pop music hits, concerts, and TV specials to her stratospheric Hollywood movie success. Overall, sitting and watching the Divine Miss M skewer the "movers and shakers" of the Hollywood of yesteryear is delightful. "Bette" on a great time.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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