

queen bea

When it comes to television icons they don't get any grander than Bea Arthur, star of *The Golden Girls*. Known for her husky voice and sharp wit, her career has spanned over fifty years through theatre, film and television. Now the legendary star is bringing her critically acclaimed Broadway show *And Then There's Bea* to Melbourne. Arthur talks with MATTHEW MYERS

I asked Bea how she felt about the diva tag.

You know I must tell you, I really don't understand it. I mean I almost feel that I've replaced Judy Garland. I've been very active in all the AIDS-related charity evenings and I've also been very active in issues relating to discrimination. I think it may have started with shows that we did on *Maude*, where we really tackled subjects that had not been spoken about before.

I think there is also a measure of camp. I'm sure it was true in Australia, as well as in England and the United States, that on the night *The Golden Girls* was shown in various gay bars, people would show up in costume. Then again somebody said to me that it had to do with being a 'strong woman,' and I guess also being 'anti-establishment'. I mean I come out and feel like I should be singing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*!

How important do you think the Norman Lear comedies were for their time?

Oh I think Norman revolutionised... I mean first of all he was the one who brought issues into television comedy. Prior to that it was just 'mother, dad and the children being silly' –and suddenly here comes Norman Lear with *All In The Family* dealing with prejudices. Then bringing me along as *Maude*, my god! We talked about dealing with homosexuality and as *Maude*, a middle aged woman, I had an abortion! Prior to that no-one not only ever had an abortion, but no-one even discussed it!

As an actor, do you ever get the chance to put your own creative input into the script, character or story?

Actually, I never thought up an idea for a show, except one day I looked in the mirror and thought 'Oh god, I need a face lift!' So I presented Norman with the idea of a face lift and he did a show about it. But I'm in awe of writers!

There are a lot of celebrity sites on the Internet. Do you ever look at websites devoted to you?

I don't have a computer. I just learnt how to work my VCR, and by that I don't mean how to program it, I mean how to turn it on and off!

Was there a favourite episode of *Golden Girls* for you?

No I can't say there was. What I did love in the entire series was the relationship between me, and my mother (Estelle Getty). I thought the love/hate relationship was heaven, and also loved the fact that she was about three feet shorter than I was. One episode I particularly loved was when she had entered us into a mother/daughter beauty contest at the Shady Pines Rest Home, and for the talent portion we did Sonny and Cher singing *I Got You Babe*. I thought it was wonderful. The writing was so brilliant. You know it's very interesting that Susan Harris who started *The Golden Girls*, as a young writer had done the abortion show for *Maude*.

Do you keep in contact with the rest of *The Golden Girls* cast?

Yes...but not really. You know LA is so enormous and to have to go from one district to another, and of course Rue (McClellan) lives in New York and Estelle (Getty) is not well at all. Also, in LA when you're working here everyday you see people that are 'absolute family,' but then when it's over you go about your own life.



One of your great skills seems to be comic timing

Everybody tells me this. I

don't understand what it is. The particular gift I have, I do not understand it. It is very real to me; it is very honest to me. There are so many really brilliant actors, and once they are told they are playing comedy, turn into people from another planet. I mean their voices change. Do you know what I mean? I find that comedy is being very serious – very serious. But then again, a dear director friend of mine said 'some people have a funny bone and some don't.'

So what can audiences expect to see and hear in your show?

A fun evening! It is not autobiographical. Some of the things I mention are things that have happened to me or things I've heard and I even tell a joke or two. There's wonderful music and it's just 90 minutes of entertainment. It's not going to make waves. Billy (Goldenberg) and I simply wanted to make a fun evening and I think we've accomplished that.

Do you have one personal career highlight?

Absolutely! It was in 1954 when I was in the original US production of *The Threepenny Opera*. I played Lucy Brown, and I came out on stage and I sang the *Barbara Song*, and I was there all alone and suddenly knew that I had something to offer and that's where I belonged. It was like a revelation, where I knew that all the work and all the studying had paid off.

There is a perception that many people in the entertainment industry are in awe of working with you!

Oh my dear, are you serious? Give me another minute and I'll sing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*!

And Then There's Bea plays at the Athenaeum Theatre Collins Street, Melbourne October 15 to 27. Details: 1300 136 166

