

## STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

## SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO JOAN COLLINS

**I** declare without shame that as a teenager stuck in rural, rural, rural Ontario, I was demented – D-E-M-E-N-T-E-D - over **Joan Collins**, falling for her when she appeared to save ailing nighttime soap opera called *Dynasty*. She not only saved the show, but stole scenes as the high-camp low-morals British clotheshorse Alexis Morell Carrington Colby Dexter Rowan for nine delicious – and far too brief - seasons.



Photo: Simone Koffman

Collins had me at one of her first lines: 'I'm glad to see your father finally had your teeth fixed. Too bad he didn't have your mouth wired shut,' a catty rebuke Alexis spat at her own estranged daughter, Fallon, who'd just been snide following Alexis' testimony against her ex-husband, on trial

for the murder of his son's gay lover.

The outrageous, fast-paced lurid ode to excess ruled the airwaves for years, with one hundred million people worldwide tuning in weekly. Collins broke television barriers: never before had audiences seen an older woman (forty-six at the time) in an aggressive lead role, in which the said older woman was also unashamedly sexual and independent.

I ate it up. My locker in high school was covered in pictures of her. I would write 'Joan Collins was here' on my desks. I kept scrapbooks. Can still quote dialogue to this day; saw her on Broadway, read all her novels, and both versions of her autobiography.

What a bio. Acting since she was a child, sister of author Jackie Collins (she starred in *The Bitch* and *The Stud*, based on her sibling's novels), offered up for sale to an Arab sheik by her first husband, engaged to Warren Beatty, famously nursed her daughter from a months-long coma, appeared in countless film television and stage roles, received numerous awards, and granted the title of Officer of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth in 1997.

Fast-forward to 2006 and the bitch is back, in Toronto for the next few weeks to star in *Legends* at the Royal Alexandra Theatre. *Legends* sees Collins re-uniting with her *Dynasty* nemesis Linda Evans (Alexis to Krystle: 'I just can't wait for the day when I see you walking out of this house carrying the same two cheap plastic suitcases that you walked in here with!'), to play acting arch-rivals both vying for the same career-reviving role opposite Paul Newman. The show heads out on a U.S. tour and then to Broadway following its Toronto run.

I sat down with Collins, now 73, at the theatre during a media day last week. We talked about the insanity of the fame she found herself in during the *Dynasty* era, what makes her a good wife these days, and about the fine art of being a bitch.



**Are you over media day?**



(Laughs, rolling her eyes.) Oh, no. How many more? Bring them on!



**Can I tell you why I have the best job in the world?**



Why?



**I'm better now, but I have to confess that back in the day I was afflicted with little Joan Collins Madness. Magazine clippings, biographical trivia. I can still recite old *Dynasty* dialogue - and I'm not kidding. When you posed for *Playboy* at age fifty, my late father, hoping against hope that I might be straight, bought me home a copy. I don't remember the pictures, but I do remember the article. Again: I'm better now.**



(Laughs.)



**At the height of it, my classmates made me a Peter Holm voodoo doll when you married him.**



This is too much! (Lowering her voice.) We don't call him Peter Holm, we call him The Swede. (Indicates my recorder.) Oh, I love this. Please don't tell me it also takes pictures.



**That's funny; Linda Evans liked it too. No, nothing so fancy. So, while I proudly admit I was nuts over you, Alexis, Dynasty, I know I wasn't the only young gay boy in a lather. Have you ever stopped to consider your appeal?**



I think that one of the reasons that gay guys like me is that they like women who are larger than life. Shirley Bassey, Barbra Streisand, Judy Garland, Liza Minelli, are all a bit larger than life. And are easily imitated. I had a great friend who played for *La Cage Au Folles* in La Cienega. His name is Gypsy, have you ever heard of him? Quite a famous female impersonator. He said the reason why they liked the character of Alexis, was that even though she would be an acting part rather than a singer like Judy or Barbra, was that she was so easy to imitate. You know, put on the big shoulders and the big hair and the eyelashes.



**I read something on your website where you spoke of acting in such a way that it made me think that the profession has been a love affair of sorts for you.**



Oh god, yes.



**You meet actors, and you get a sense that for many it's a fame-driven thing. But when I read your site I did think 'this is someone who has acting in their blood; it's old school'.**



I can't remember what I said now.



**You were talking about how acting is either feast or famine and that luckily for you it had been mostly feast -**



Oh yes. I really love it. Otherwise I wouldn't be doing it. A lot of actors get times when the parts aren't easy to come by. It doesn't matter what they say – Meryl Streep and Shirley MacLaine can say 'Oh they write parts for older women'. (*Laughs.*) I'm afraid those two are in the minority. It would be easy to say, 'Oh, I'm going to give it up, I don't want to do it anymore'. But I don't want to do that. I did take up writing, because I did realize that as an actor you can't just rely on acting to put the bread on the table. But it didn't mean I wanted to give it up. It was a secondary thing. I also love writing, and I've written some very good books. She said, modestly.



**Read them.**



(*Hamming.*) Why thank you, thank you. (*Laughs.*) And I've got a new one coming out called *The Art Of Living Well*, on September 23rd. So I remember when I was at RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts), saying when I was sixteen, 'I hope that I'm still going to be acting when it's the year 2000. I'll be very, very, very, very old, and I'll be probably in a wheelchair and I'll be like Flora Robson' – do you know who Flora Robson is?



**Distinguished English actress.**



Well done. And I thought I'd be like her, having to be wheeled onto the stage to play Lady Bracknell. I really did feel that way; I really do like it. I like stage acting more than anything. I never really had wonderful roles in movies, but I had a wonderful TV role.



**But your thinking back then was that of an artistic person entering the profession, rather than someone seeking fame.**



Oh, I never sought fame. I did say, when a reporter asked me once, when I was at the height during *Dynasty*: when I was on every magazine cover, and the paparazzi were all over me, he said, 'What will you do if all this ends?' And I said, 'This isn't a question of 'if', it's a question of 'when'. Of course it's all going to end. It may be next month, it may be next year, but it's certainly going to end. You can't keep up this kind of fame. It's not going to last.' And I didn't particularly like it anyway. I didn't like having helicopters hovering over my garden, photographing me when I went out to de-head the hydrangeas.



**What do today's starlets lack that you had when you were first starting?**



Waists.



**Do you think you made your fame and fortune, or do you think it was destined?**



My, that's an interesting question. (*Ponders.*) If you speak to my friend Arlene Dahl, who is an astrologer, and who has done my chart several times, she'll say that it was destiny. And also another friend of mine who died, his name was Ben Garry and he was an astrologer, he told me years ago when I was engaged to Warren Beatty all about my future life. And all of it came true. Even what he said about Warren, who was then in his twenties – we were both in our twenties – he said, 'He's not going to get married until he's 50'. He also said that I would have nine lives, and that every time it looked like something wasn't going to happen, something would happen to resurrect my career or my finances.



**Is it your Gemini temperament that you credit for your wide range of pursuits?**



More my *joie-de-vivre*. I have a tremendous zest for life. I find it quite difficult to sit around and do nothing. I'm not much into the cooking or embroidery. I write articles for the *Spectator* and for the *Daily Mail* and for the *Times*. I've written for *Harper's Bazaar*.



**I read your piece on flying British Airways.**



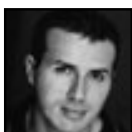
(*Laughs.*) Oh yes. That was quite funny.



**Funny and true. You've always been candid about your misadventures and mistakes you've made along the way. A lot of people wouldn't detail so much for fear of what the rest of the world thinks.**



(*Considers.*) I don't share so much. I have an extremely private side that people don't know anything about, other than my closest family, husband, and friends. I share what I want to share, and that includes my opinions. (*Points to the couch opposite us.*) If you ask me, 'Don't you think that's a beautiful sofa?' I will say, 'No, it's absolutely hideous.'



**It certainly is.**



(*Laughing.*) Because what is the point in lying?



**So then how much of your image is the real you?**



I don't know what my image is. Really. Is my image Alexis? Is it a woman who stalks around in stilettos and big shoulders? Then it's not me. I don't.



**I read you love *Desperate Housewives* and that you had hoped to be on it. Then the media ran with it and said you were going to play Terri Hatcher's mother.**



Yes, and instead I got on *Footballer\$ Wives*.



**I know. You and Tanya. There's a grudge match.**



Have you seen it?



**No, we're far behind in the series here. I've seen the first two seasons, but Zoe Tucker brings to that show what you brought to *Dynasty*. She chews up the scenery the way you did.**



*(Grabs my hand.)* Oh! We have a *bitchfight*.



**I think by now your audience probably expects that. But you and Zoe Tucker together are a casting agent's dream come true.**



Wait until you see!



**You said that it was 9/11 that really made it hit home for you how short life is, and that it propelled you into deciding to marry your husband, Percy.**



Yes, and it's working well. It's been almost five years.



**This seems like the stable, quiet relationship.**



We're not as stable and quiet as you would think. But we're both on the same level; we're both gypsies by temperament. We love to travel, we love to be on the go, we love to play Scrabble, we love to swim, we love to go to the beach. We love working together. *Legends* is the fourth time we've worked together in a play.



**What makes you a good wife?**



(Laughs.) You'd really have to ask Percy. Always looked after your man. Never let him out of your sight.



**I read that you said, 'Once you've worked on *Dynasty*, you can do anything.' What did you mean by that?**



Did I say that? (Considers.) You know what I actually said? It wasn't that. I said, 'Once you've worked on daytime TV,' that's what it was. 'That you can do anything. Because I was on –'



***Guiding Light*. Three months.**



(Laughs.) I have *such* respect for the actors who do daytime TV. It is so incredibly demanding and hard. Day after day.



**Did you enjoy it?**



I did up to a point. But when it came time to renew, I didn't want to. Three months is enough. Life is too short to learn forty-five pages of dialogue a day and be stressed out. I was getting a stomachache and I thought, 'No, no more'.



**Fill in the blank. Joan Collins was \_\_\_\_\_.**



A legend. (Laughs hard.) I just thought of that – how's that for a promo?



**The PR people here couldn't ask for more than that. Like I said, I've got the best job in the world; thanks for your time. I've never asked this before of anyone I've interviewed, but may I have a photo with you? I'm sure at this point you understand.**



Darling, of course. Let me just make sure I fix my lipstick.

