

To have and have not



High-maintenance Hollywood legend, wtm non-smoking companion for travel, conversation. Must have gsah, independent means and enjoy art, theatre. Younger men may apply.

LIKE SO MANY WOMEN IN NEW YORK, Lauren Bacall is finding it hard to get a date. Not in a *Sex and the City* sort of way. She's not one to try online matchmaking or place an ad in a lonely hearts column, but she'd still like a man to talk to over dinner and maybe visit a few of the places she hasn't been yet, like Greece and St Petersburg. Perhaps even accompany her on a return trip to Australia, which she'd like to do, having spent nearly five months here almost 20 years ago touring in a production of *Sweet Bird of Youth*. A man to stroll her beloved Paris with.

She was the actress with the smouldering eyes, husky voice and great mystique ... the woman who married and tamed Humphrey Bogart. But despite family, fame and fortune, Lauren Bacall is now a legend alone. She talks to **Caroline Baum** about love and loss.

If it's hard for the average female to meet a suitable candidate, it's probably impossible for Bacall. Instead, like so many women of a certain age, she shares her life with a small pooch, a papillon called Sophie.

The shoes any man would have to fill are daunting: he'd be following in the footsteps of Bacall's first husband and great love, Humphrey Bogart; not to mention her subsequent fiancé of five minutes, Frank Sinatra; her soul mate and late neighbour at New York's famous Dakota building, conductor and *West Side Story* composer, Leonard Bernstein; second husband, actor Jason Robards; and her intellectual crush, Democratic presidential hopeful Adlai Stevenson. That's just for starters.

There have been other admirers and flirtations: a young Kirk Douglas when Bacall, the former theatre usherette, was just starting out in the 1940s on a round of stage auditions and tiny parts in New York as Betty Perske; Clark Gable wooed her by moonlight, but she wasn't interested. She'd met Bogie by then and all other men paled in comparison, to the intense annoyance of legendary director Howard Hawks, who made Bacall a star and wanted her as his mistress. It's a rollcall to give any man performance anxiety.

Besides which, Bacall has a reputation for being a little on the fearsome side. She is known for being rude, haughty and, by her own admission, impatient. Theatre gossip has it that a dancer urged on stage to rehearse with her in the Broadway musical *Woman of the Year* told a stage manager he would go on "only if they've fed her", referring to her

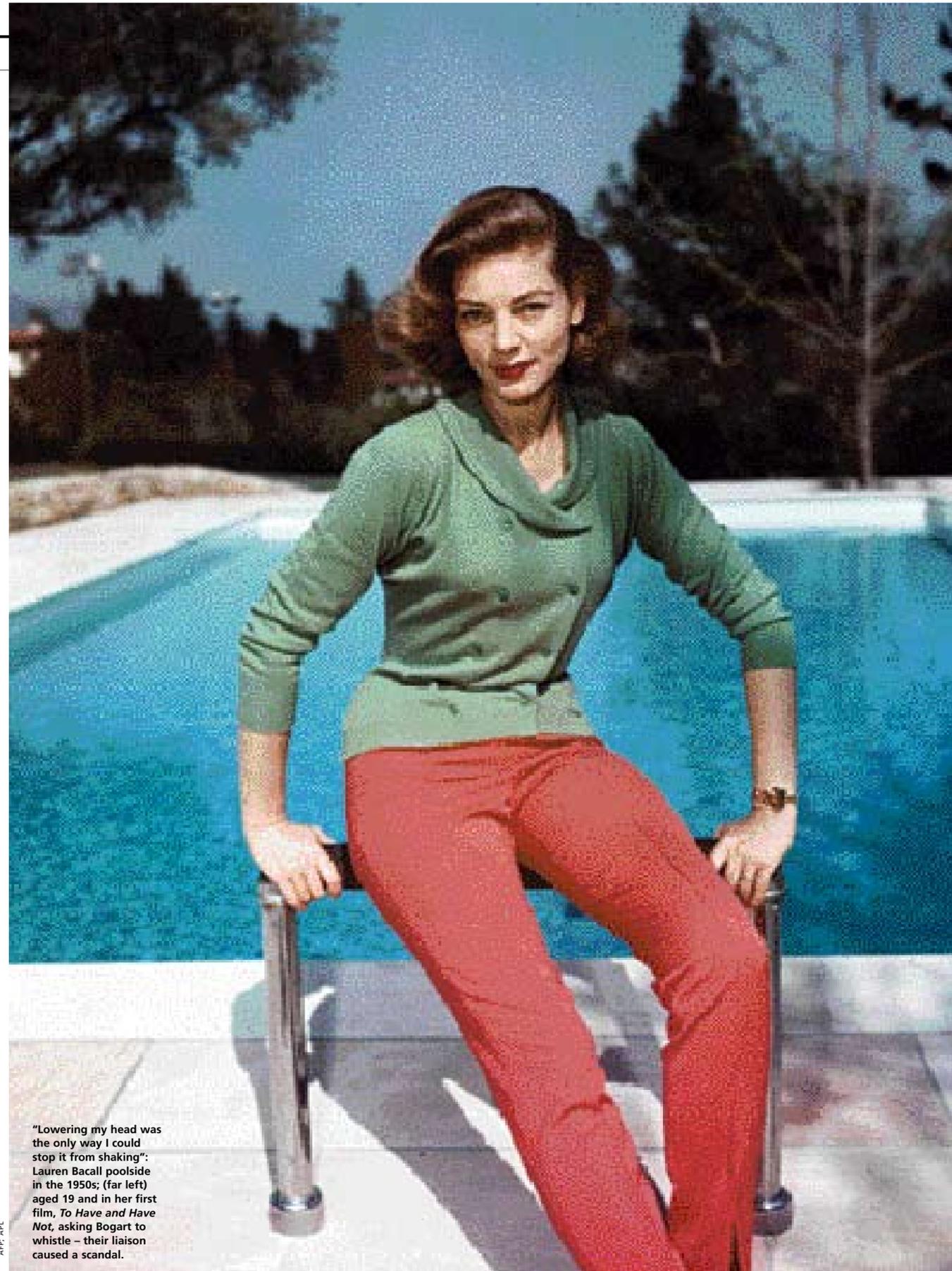
somewhat leonine temperament.

So when I arrive at the Dakota, where Bacall has lived since 1963, it's no surprise that the doorman warns me I may get barked at if announced too early. "It's happened to me a few times," he says, laughingly adding that "She's all bark, no bite."

Well, maybe. A few days earlier, I'd seen Bacall get a little testy with a make-up artist and unnecessarily arch with a reporter who intruded on her while she was eating a sandwich between interviews. On the other hand, she is exceedingly appreciative of the flowers I've sent. She ushers me into a small sitting room, choosing the sofa for herself. Clearly, the fact that I like dogs and that Sophie has chosen to sit on my lap counts in my favour. At 80, Bacall is still a commanding presence, even unmade-up and casually dressed in black pants and a loose brown jumper.

It is true that she has maintained her dignity while others have worn less well: she has not cheapened the legend or the brand in the same way that Elizabeth Taylor has; destroyed herself the way Garland and Monroe did; slammed the door in the face of an adoring public like Garbo did; retreated into seclusion like her best friend Katharine Hepburn; succumbed to mental illness like her friend Vivien Leigh; or alienated her children (Stephen, 56, a writer, Leslie, 52, a yoga instructor, and Sam, 43, an actor) as Joan Crawford did.

Instead, she has kept taking risks, working with edgy directors such as Lars von Trier in *Dogville* and his subsequent film, *Mandalay*. (She became friends with Nicole Kidman during



"Lowering my head was the only way I could stop it from shaking": Lauren Bacall poolside in the 1950s; (far left) aged 19 and in her first film, *To Have and Have Not*, asking Bogart to whistle – their liaison caused a scandal.

Dogville, and more recently played her mother in the controversial film *Birth*.)

The curt remark she snapped about Kidman not being a legend during a press conference at the Venice Film Festival has been blown out of all proportion, she says in her gravelly voice, rolling her eyes in exasperation. "Nicole thought it was ridiculous, too. She's a very talented young woman of 37 with her life ahead of her. You get to be a legend when you are dead." (When asked for a comment on Bacall, Kidman responds through her publicist that she considers her "larger than life. No matter how difficult or challenging things get, Lauren keeps the rest of us together with her no-nonsense honesty.")

Certainly, that husky voice brooks no contradiction. It is as much a part of her identity as *The Look*, which, like most Hollywood ideas, came about by accident. The downward tilt of the head and the upward glance through the eyelashes (a technique later used with equal impact by the Princess of Wales) may have looked seductive and worldly, but in reality, Bacall was anything but. "Lowering my head was the only way I could stop it from shaking," says Bacall, who has been afflicted with terror-induced trembling throughout her acting career.

Today she is slightly unsteady on her feet, limping from a recently sprained ankle, which she rests on a footstool in the shape of a leopard. One entire wall of this small salon is covered with images of cats and dogs, some painted, some embroidered in petit point. The dark fireplace is adorned with her collection of pewter, while the window beyond the white *phalaenopsis* orchids looks out onto Central Park, blanketed by snow. The effect is cosy, snug, like a personally curated cabinet of curiosities, but not especially feminine.

AMUSED BY MY EXPLANATION OF THE Australian word stickybeak, she shows me the dining room, which is a little dark and funeral with its heavy furniture. She says that she has barely used it in the last decade or so, before offering me coffee, which she pronounces "kawfee" in a true Brooklyn accent. Once it arrives, courtesy of her maid Maria, whom she thanks lavishly, she is mother, pouring the milk and passing the sugar. Her mood is light and playful and her humour relies on sarcasm and self-mockery, often a defence of the shy.

When, in her first film, *To Have and Have Not*, Bacall uttered those immortal, sexually loaded lines to Bogart about whistling ("You know how to whistle, don't you Steve? You just put your lips together and blow") she was a 19-year-old virgin, freshly arrived in California on the train from New York and under the spell of Svengali figure Howard Hawks, whose elegant wife Slim had spotted Bacall modelling for Diana Vreeland in *Harper's Bazaar*. It was Hawks who renamed her Lauren, which he thought made her sound aristocratic (Bacall was an abbreviated version of her mother's maiden name). And it was Hawks who understood that the register of her voice could become her trademark. But contrary

to much of the mythology that surrounds Bacall, it is not true that he developed her throaty huskiness by getting her to yell her lines till she grew hoarse. "My mother [a divorced immigrant from Romania] had the same low voice and my daughter has it, too," she tells me. "But it is certainly true that Howard wanted me to stay in that low register unlike other actresses who, in a dramatic scene, tend to let their voices go up. So I would sit on Mulholland Drive in my 1940 grey Plymouth coupé and practise by reading aloud to myself."

It irritates Bacall no end that she is often mistaken for a man when reserving a table in a restaurant, she admits in her newly published memoirs *By Myself and Then Some*, which splices her previously acclaimed autobiography, *By Myself*, with a new catch-up section that covers the past 25 years. As the title suggests, loneliness is a thread woven through her life, first as an only child, then as Hollywood's youngest widow and single mother to two children under the age of eight. She has lived alone for more than a quarter of a century and though she likes being able to suit herself, there is a tremendous sense of loss hovering over the book – not only in her grief for Bogart (his illness and death from cancer form the book's most moving section) but through the passing away of her mother, Natalie (she still dreams of both of them), and her friends, including John Huston, the Oliviers, and her adored Katharine Hepburn. Behind

her, on a wall of memorabilia (mixed in with a Chagall), hangs a self-portrait watercolour by Hepburn, hair piled up under one of her many-favoured disguise hats, painted in honour of Bacall's winning a Tony Award and signed "Auntie Kate".

In her memoirs, Bacall recalls a dinner which remains a highlight to this day: an intimate gathering at Hepburn's home of Katharine, Spencer Tracy, Bacall, Bogart and James Cagney, who seldom socialised. Hepburn and Bacall sat at the great men's feet listening to them reminisce about their careers and Bacall could tell by the look on Hepburn's face that she was every bit as star struck as her guest. "I was pinching myself then and I still am," she says to me of the roster of people she met and entertained, which included Cole Porter, Noël Coward, T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, Gregory Peck, Judy Garland, Moss Hart, Ira Gershwin, William Faulkner, Laurence Olivier, David Niven and the Kennedys.

A popular hostess in her Hollywood incarnation, Bacall also became a collector of beautiful things and a shameless shopaholic. She tells me wistfully that many of her possessions, which she refers to using the Yiddish word *tschotchkes*, are now in storage, but you would never guess it: there are so many treasures gathered around her that the eye is too tantalised to settle. The larger sitting room, painted a cool shade of duck-egg blue, contains walls of Audubons of her favourite pelicans (she particularly likes the pink-billed Australian species), Henry Moores, a Hockney, African tribal art, all displayed in

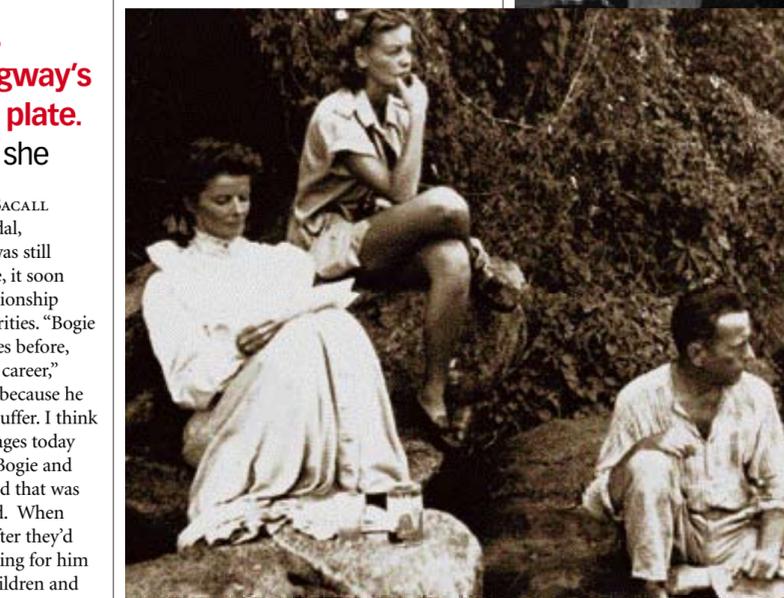
clever groupings without seeming cluttered or contrived (though dusting here must be hell). On the grand piano are more silver picture frames than even the entire house of Windsor could muster. A table in the hallway features a collection of small animals fashioned in gold by the Ashanti tribe and walls adorned with more African tribal art, probably gathered when Bacall joined Bogart and Hepburn in the Congo for the making of Huston's *The African Queen*.

As she explains in her memoirs, the trip was part of the pact that she and Bogart made not to be separated by work commitments. "Would you have missed out on a trip to Africa if, like me, you had grown up surrounded by cement?" she challenges, widening her eyes at the preposterousness of such an idea. Neither was Bacall content to sit on the sidelines doing needlework or watercolours. Dissatisfied with the catering arrangements, and undaunted by the primitive, scorpion-infested jungle location, she simply rolled up her sleeves and took charge of preparing food for the cast – despite confessing to not being a very good cook.



after anyone – unlike Merle Oberon; she was very busy," she says with a slyly arched eyebrow.

Trust and monogamy were cornerstones of the Bogart and Bacall relationship. When Bacall became a passionate campaigner for Adlai Stevenson, defying Bogart, who was an Eisenhower supporter, and developed something of an infatuation for the presidential hopeful, it was strictly platonic – as their friendship continued to be after Bogie's death, even though Stevenson was available. Bacall tells me, after a pause in which she considers the matter carefully, that she was never physically attracted to him. With Sinatra, it was different. "Bogie



ALTHOUGH THE BOGIE AND BACALL romance had caused a scandal, beginning as it did while Bogart was still married to his alcoholic third wife, it soon settled into a very traditional relationship when it came to professional priorities. "Bogie had been married to three actresses before, and he did not want me to have a career," Bacall says, adding emphatically, "because he felt it meant the marriage would suffer. I think it's what makes Hollywood marriages today fail – the two careers thing. I put Bogie and our family first – thank God! – and that was the way he liked it till the very end. When he came back from the hospital after they'd operated on the cancer, I was waiting for him at the top of the stairs with the children and he said to the doctors who brought him home, "This is what makes being married so great." He never stopped me from taking a part, but he never offered any advice either."

He was also, she says, a jealous and possessive man. "He knew that I had been out a couple of times with [actor] Burgess Meredith before I met him and he didn't like that. When they bumped into each other at some steam bath he referred to it and Meredith told him he took me out because I made him laugh – it was completely innocent, because Meredith at the time was involved with Paulette Godard. Bogie was relieved. Even when I was married, I loved to flirt, I think it's the fun of life, but I never went

used to say he only came to the house to see me, which I denied, but he also knew that if I ended up with someone like Frank, it would not last more than five minutes, which it didn't," says Bacall, who had partied hard (but sober, she assures me) in Las Vegas as the official den mother to the original Rat Pack. She says she is still proud of that title.

Because Bogart and Bacall never acknowledged the terminal nature of his illness, her future without him was never mentioned; she doubts he would have given her his blessing to remarry. As for her attraction to Leonard Bernstein, "he was married and I realised I could not have



"I put Bogie and our family first – thank God": (clockwise from main picture) with Bogart and their children Stephen and Leslie; with her mother in 1933; in her favourite role playing opposite Gregory Peck in *Designing Woman*; on location with Bogart and Katharine Hepburn during the filming of *The African Queen*; dining out with Frank Sinatra – their relationship "would not last more than five minutes".

DENNIS STOCK/MAGNUM, APL



handled his bisexuality; I'm not against same-sex marriage, it's just my upbringing". She thinks that if Bogie had met her second husband, the actor Jason Robards, whom she divorced after eight years due to his alcoholism, he might have liked him, "at least when he was sober, which is when he had wit and charm". Although a physical similarity between Bogart and Robards – those jowly looks and bloodhound eyes – is obvious to others, Bacall reveals in her memoirs that she simply cannot (or will not) see it, no matter how often it is pointed out to her.

Nor did the age difference of 25 years between herself and Bogie suggest to her that she might be marrying a father figure, given that her mother left Bacall's father soon after the family had settled in Brooklyn. (He reappeared when Bacall became a star, but she refused to see him. "The only father figure I had in my life was Theodore Roosevelt – I worshipped the man.") Later, she would have a relationship with Joe Layton, her younger co-star in *Woman of the Year*, although this too would ultimately disappoint. "I like being with a younger man, it makes you feel great. But in the end, they feel they are not really in control and they leave," she shrugs.

The only lover to remain anonymous in her memoirs is an Englishman whom she met during her West End run of *Applause*. "I didn't name him not because he was famous, but because he was married and, of course, I didn't realise it at the time," she says, rolling her eyes – yet again – mocking her then innocence. Some wives were wary of her: in her memoirs, she records a particularly uneasy lunch during which Hemingway's second wife Mary placed a bullet on her plate during a conversation about hunting. "But then he was a bastard to her," she tells me and I suddenly get a glimpse of how much more she could have divulged about so many 20th-century icons.

THE CENTRAL REGRET THAT EMERGES IN Bacall's memoirs is her frustration over her career. It's not just things like not winning an Oscar: "Some actresses win awards, I am not one of them," she says matter-of-factly, citing Jessica Lange as the actress whose career and life she most admires. "What I hate is this category of people in film and TV who are celebrities first, actors second." But she refuses to name names, with uncharacteristic tact. She admires Cate Blanchett "because she has a life outside her work which is not all about publicity. She told me she was very nervous about playing Kate [Hepburn, in *The Aviator*] but I told her not to worry, and I think she's done a great job."

The only other Australian actress she mentions (excluding Dame Edna, of whom she is a huge fan) is Judy Davis. "I met her when Colin Friels, who was in *Sweet Bird [of Youth]* with me [in 1986], took me home to dinner – we sat at the kitchen table and had Chinese take-out. I found Judy absolutely intimidating, totally terrifying." Friels, in turn, remembers Bacall as "a workhorse with a great constitution ... a survivor, a great beauty without being a narcissist, a generous colleague who would never steal a scene. After the show, she'd often rent out a late session at a movie theatre and provide the cast with supper and drinks so we could all

relax together – it was also her way of making sure she didn't get lonely." He and Davis have since visited Bacall in New York.

Not only does Bacall readily concede that she did not always get the parts she wanted, and that her marriage to Bogie meant sacrificing her own ambitions, but she reflects that she was never taken seriously by some directors, particularly when it came to the theatre. She claims never to have aimed for the movies – the stage was her real, great love – and she longed to do comedy, for which she was blessed, according to fellow comedian Jack Benny, with perfect timing. "That was the greatest compliment anyone has ever paid me," she says.

Her favourite role remains her part in *Designing Woman* with Gregory Peck, and of her films with Bogart, she likes *Dark Passage* least, but loved doing *Key Largo* "because of the chance to be directed by John Huston".

It's not as if Bacall is under any illusions about her range – she had no desire to attempt Shakespeare, Chekhov or the other classics. She has no taste for tragedy, she says. But she admits to lifelong insecurity and wobbly feelings about her work and why she has not achieved more. Why, she wonders, have directors such as Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen, two quintessential New Yorkers like herself with a great reverence for film icons, never asked her to work with them? She thinks that Allen imagines she hated *Play It Again Sam*, which is not the case. She would have loved to have acted in any of his romantic comedies. It's still not too late; after all, she earned her first Oscar nomination at the age of 72, playing Barbra Streisand's mother in *The Mirror Has Two Faces*.

SHE CERTAINLY HAS THE STAMINA. SHE maintains a disciplined regime of two visits to the gym a week and still does the stretching exercises that were part of her stage warm-up routine. Bacall is also blessed with remarkable, fair skin – peeled but not lifted, she assures me; nor has she renewed her acquaintance with Botox since a single injection between the eyebrows. She professes to have too low an opinion of her own looks to mourn their passing; instead, she is ageing honestly. "The truth is that I never considered myself attractive. I had a flat chest, crooked teeth and big feet. The real beauties in Hollywood were Garbo, who was simply unequalled in every way, Ava Gardner, and Bette Davis when young, the way she looked in *Jezebel*. I never saw myself as a sex object, I was a character actor."

Still, she pursued a glamorous image, intoxicated by the amount of money she had to spend on clothes for parties and premieres after a childhood of privation. She favoured a simple tailored look, which, combined with her husky voice, gave her an aura of alluring and mysterious androgyny often compared to Dietrich's. She was a loyal customer of American designers Norman Norell and Halston, and later became friends with Yves Saint Laurent, who created one of his first smoking jackets for her.

Now, Bacall has donated most of her designer clothes to the Metropolitan Museum's costume department. She has stopped wearing fur out of concern for animals (including the mink coat Bogie gave her), even on New York's bitterest winter days. She rather regrets giving away her clothes, but, she shrugs, "I couldn't pass them on to my daughter, she would never wear them, doesn't lead that kind of life."

By Myself and Then Some is a cut above most movie-star memoirs, partly because of the stellar cast of characters that Bacall paints with brisk,

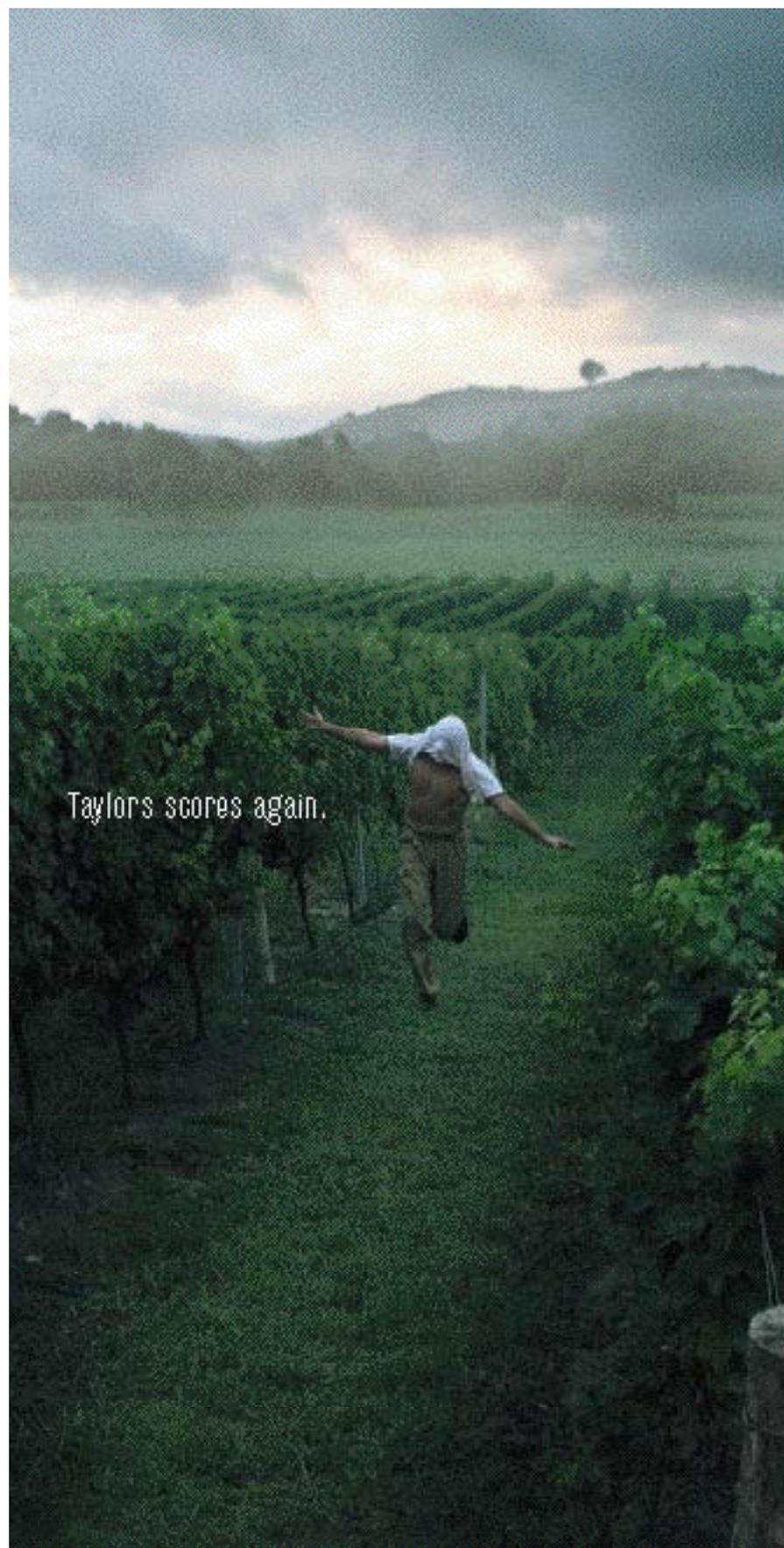


"You get to be a legend when you are dead": with *Dogville* and *Birth* co-star Nicole Kidman.

sharp strokes and partly for its wry reassessment of her own life. Not usually shy of expressing an opinion or standing up for a cause, she confesses to being ashamed not to have countered Howard Hawks's anti-semitic remarks to her or had the courage to tell him that she herself was Jewish; on the other hand, she was brave enough in her 20s, when it could have damaged her

career, to stand up publicly against the harassment of Hollywood artists being hounded by McCarthyism when Bogart was more hesitant in championing free speech. In her memoirs, she makes it clear that she detests the Bush regime and everything that corporate America stands for, describing it as "cold, humourless and dead". She does not hold out much hope that Hillary Clinton will be elected as the US's first female president, but if she thought it would help, you get the impression she'd be out there campaigning. Today, she devotes time and money to supporting an AIDS organisation, Friends In Deed, and a program to encourage young playwrights, perhaps secretly hoping that finally someone will write for her the part of a lifetime. ■

By Myself and Then Some, by Lauren Bacall, will be published by Hodder Headline on Tuesday; rrp \$49.95. Caroline Baum's interview with Lauren Bacall can be seen on *Ovation* (Foxtel/Optus) on March 27.



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