

DEBBIE REYNOLDS

Brings Movie Magic to "Mother"

Despite previous reports, Debbie Reynolds is anything but "perky". "Now, isn't that a boring word?" Reynolds rolls her eyes. "She's so perky! She's so feisty! Those are my two least favorite words."

So how would Reynolds describe herself? "Enthusiastic. I have an enormous amount of energy, a lust for life. I don't want to give up a day. I really do want to 'be in the play!'"

That indescribable essence—which gave Tammy her guile, Mollie Brown her gumption, and the singing nun her verve—exudes from Reynolds despite attempts at a demure demeanor. Reynolds, poised elegantly in a wool herringbone suit accented with tiny gold buttons and matching earrings, her mid-length tawny hair conservatively coifed, could easily be a woman of leisure on her way to a Sausalito Woman's Club luncheon.

But you won't find her taking lunch.

"I've never done that in my whole life, *ever!*" she exclaims. In fact, Reynolds laughs, she has dallied through a meal only recently—two months ago, when several girlfriends insisted that she join them for dinner.

"It was a *riot!* They have *fun!*" she purrs, punctuating select words without once raising her voice. "I'm always being criticized if I go out. Everything in my life ends up in the paper. But my girlfriends are rowdy, I mean, they're *funny!*"

Not as funny as Reynolds in her new film, "Mother" (now showing at Mill Valley's Sequoia Theater). Reynolds, in the title role, plays a Sausalito matron who endures a trying visit from her Los Angeles-based writer son, played by actor/director Albert Brooks, as he seeks reasons for his own failings in their relationship.

Personality clashes come in ways we can all imagine: a depression-era mom's Costco consciousness does not sit well with her baby boomer son's eclectic vegetarian tastes ("He buys gourmet expensive items that she would never spend her money on," laughs Reynolds), and Brooks finds his mother's love life hard to accept.

In explaining her character, Reynolds says, "She had her own talents, yet she put them aside in order to raise her children. Now, at the age of 40, her son wants to move back home! He can't have relationships, and he's blaming it on her. That's very hard for a mother."

Bridgeway, Princess Street and Mollie Stone's Market are easily recognized in the movie's scenic cameos. In fact, the funniest sight gag takes place in the Mollie Stone's parking lot. Inside the store, a Brooks/Reynolds dialogue on the generational differences

toward grocery shopping is another hysterically funny bit.

While "Mother" is indeed a comedy, the role of Beatrice is not a typical "Debbie Reynolds" role.

"I worked really hard to make it that way...I stopped (her Las Vegas nightclub act) a month before filming began so that I could get rid of 'Debbie Reynolds' and become the character. To play Beatrice, who is so much my opposite, I had to cease being me. I could never let 'Debbie' seep in. I want to tell you, there were days I thought I couldn't do it." To keep in character, Reynolds kept to herself between takes, holing up in her trailer.

Did Reynolds have any role models for the soft-spoken Beatrice? "No. She is not like anyone I know. All my friends are either really 'out there'—or very bitter and angry at life."

The most difficult scene for Reynolds involved a series of Marx Brothers-like trips to and from the refrigerator as she tries her motherly best to entice Brooks into eating something, anything—including a Costco-sized brick of cheese, frosted sherbet, and iceberg lettuce that had seen better days.

"It's very hard to work with so many props, and still be low key," she explains. "I never worked harder on a role, with the exception of 'Molly Brown!'"

The true test of the relationship occurs when Brooks' character pulls his childhood mementos—sports trophies, lava lamp, rock star posters and cowboy lamp—from the garage and reverts his mother's unused sewing room back into his old bedroom. Beatrice then realizes her life has been turned topsy-turvy.

"She's being so kind," exclaims Reynolds. "I told Albert, 'you know, you've written this mother pretty sympathetically.'"

If Reynolds' role had been played broadly—if the character had been more neurotic, say, or nagging, the prodigal son joke would have fallen flat. Instead, Reynolds' understated performance keeps Beatrice from becoming a cliché. As to the success of this endeavor, Reynolds is modest. "I've just seen it once, and I was so nervous that I couldn't judge it at all."

Those that do judge—the film critics—are singing her praises: Reynolds is "divine!" gushes Janet Maslin, while Rex Reed calls Reynolds "a revelation". The *New York Times*, *Newsday* and the *New York Daily News* have all put "Mother" on their Ten Best Films list for 1996. Thus far, Reynolds has garnered a Golden Globe nomination for best actress in a musical or comedy. Critic Jeffrey Lyons predicts that "Debbie Reynolds may get her Oscar at last."

After a 25-year hiatus from the screen, Reynolds is very appreciative of her screen renaissance.

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"You just don't find good roles for women my age. They go to Shirley Maclaine or Anne Bancroft. Albert Brooks was good enough to let me do it."

She heard about the role from her daughter, actress/writer Carrie Fisher, who lobbied Brooks, an old school chum, to consider Reynolds. She won it over such contemporaries as Doris Day and Esther Williams.

So once again, Reynolds is, in her own words, back "in the play". Or, in Hollywood vernacular, she is a "player"—the subject of Oscar talk, scripts over the transom, and a respectable \$750,000 for her next role, as Kevin Kline's mother, in the movie "In and Out".

In 1947, 16 year-old Mary Frances Reynolds, a Burbank, California tomboy, won a local beauty contest and a contract with Warner Brothers studios. Her natural vivacity and innate comedic talent won Reynolds roles opposite June Haver ("The Daughter of Rosie O'Grady"), Fred Astaire and Red Skelton ("Three Little Words"), and Jane Powell ("Two Weeks with Love"). Her big break came in 1951, when she was cast opposite Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor in the legendary film musical, "Singin' in the Rain"—despite her lack of professional song-and-dance training. It is no wonder that, in 1954, the 22 year-old Reynolds was chosen by Modern Screen as America's most popular female star, edging out Grace Kelly, Elizabeth Taylor, Doris Day, June Allyson and Marilyn Monroe for the honor.

A date with the infatuated teen heart-throb and singing sensation, Eddie Fisher, was a studio publicity department's dream-come-true. Reynolds and Fisher were dubbed "America's sweethearts" by the media, and what might have been a passing relationship took on a public life of its own. The momentum swept them right to the altar.

Five years and two children later, their divorce—the result of Fisher's highly-publicized affair with his best friend's widow, screen siren Elizabeth Taylor Hilton Todd—was the first of three for the Reynolds.

"I pick men so poorly. I seem to pick the ones that want a 'star'—a money-making workhorse and glamour puss and a slave at home...who puts the slippers out, makes the drink, does all the things she's supposed to, and wants to do—but they expect it. But they don't love you. Then, they leave you—with your money. I have really lost faith in my ability to pick a mate. I'm 64. I cannot do that anymore."

Is Sausalito a town Debbie Reynolds could live in? Easily, purrs Reynolds. "I loved it...I loved walking around and talking to the people. And the *shops!*"

Currently, Reynolds' homes are in both Los Angeles and Las Vegas, where she owns a 197-room hotel complex, with a casino, and a theater. It also has a state-of-the-art multimedia movie museum, designed by her son, Todd Fisher, who manages the complex for his mom. Cleopatra's throne, Laurel and Hardy's car, Dorothy's ruby slippers and the other famous set pieces that fill the building are purchases Reynolds made at the MGM auction in the mid-'70s.

She has no doubts that these cherished icons are a cornerstone in the Reynolds legacy. "It was so stupid—to auction off the history of American film! The styles, the culture, the dress—everything gone!...I had a dream about it, a vision from God. I was told to go buy everything I could afford. I took every dime I had in the bank, which was about \$300,000. In those days, that was a lot, but it wasn't enough. I bought everything I could."

As for her show, which plays in her Las Vegas theater, Reynolds gives her audience anything but the innocence of Tammy.

"They're always surprised to see how bawdy I can get. I'm more like Sophie Tucker, or Joan Rivers. I love the stage, it's my favorite. The live audiences are so wonderful, because I've always been there for them, signed the autographs, sent the pictures off. They can expect that of me."

Always the trouper. Now the indescribable Debbie Reynolds is on top again. Does it phase her? Not in the least.

"You hit your lows and you hit your highs. I've done it all now...All my dreams—even dreams I've never had—I've done. So if I were to go tomorrow, I could say that I've had a great run."



**DEBBIE
DOES
SAUSALITO:**

Debbie Reynolds and
Albert Brooks, outside
Mollie Stone's Market,
Sausalito.