

Midler riding high on success of all-female production company

The Associated Press

Amid the determinedly male movie world, one company stands out like a beacon in the Hollywood sky: All Girl Productions. The president: Bette Midler. Is this a payback for decades of macho dominance?

"That's right," declares the president with a mischievous smile. "You know what they say about payback: It's a bitch."

She describes the origin of the name: "We were there in the conference room, and we were all girls. We kind of liked that name because it had a certain arrogance to it that we felt we needed because we were so brand new in this game. We really didn't know how the game worked. We found out soon

enough. Also, we wanted a sense of humor, a little wit. We didn't want to be just 'Gigantic Pictures' or 'Magnificent Pictures.' We didn't want anything abstract. We wanted to let people know who we really were."

All Girl made its debut with the successful "Beaches," co-starring Midler and Barbara Hershey and directed by Garry Marshall. Now the company has produced "For the Boys," a half-century panorama of show business with

Midler and James Caan as partners who entertain the troops in three wars. The 20th Century Fox film was directed by Mark Rydell, who also served as executive director.

Midler is riding high after a tumble that seemingly wiped her out of a film career. Her cinematic debut came in 1979 with a corrosive portrait of a Janis Joplin-style rock singer in "The Rose," also directed by Rydell. Her performance garnered her an Academy Award nomination as best actress.

What happened next? "Nothing," she says. "I didn't get any other pictures. I couldn't figure it out. I didn't know if (producers) thought I was demented, that I really was that character and perhaps had died, or if they thought that was the only part I could play. Whatever they felt, no other pictures came my way for a long, long time. My agent at the time said if I didn't make another picture, they would forget that I ever made a picture at all."

She was persuaded to appear in the well-named "Jinxed," about which she had a bitter and public feud with the late director Don Siegel. A rough patch followed until Walt Disney Co. hired her, at a much-reduced salary, for "Down and Out in Beverly Hills." She continued to work at the studio with other

comedies — "Ruthless People," "Outrageous Fortune" and "Big Business." Less successful were "Stella" and "Scenes From a Mall" with Woody Allen.

"Hollywood failed her," observes director Rydell. "When she appeared on the scene in 'The Rose,' she stunned everybody into a kind of stupor of worship. But (the studios) didn't know what to do with her. She is not a conventional beauty, not what is considered a normal movie star. She languished, she suffered, nothing happened for her. When Paul Mazursky asked me if she could play the part in 'Down and Out in Beverly Hills,' I said, 'She can play any part in anything; she's the 800-pound gorilla.'"

Midler grew up in Honolulu, the only Jewish girl in a multiracial neighborhood. She still feels her Hawaiian roots: "It's called the aloha spirit. A real kindness, a real tenderness toward other people — toward other Hawaiians, let me amend that. Did I learn survival? No. They didn't do so well in that arena. I think I got that from my folks. They were from the jungles of Jersey."

She studied drama at the University of Hawaii, and a small role in the 1966 film "Hawaii" brought her to Los Angeles for interior filming. She soon departed for New York, where she appeared in "Fiddler on the Roof" and began making her name known in night clubs. Then came the show business onslaught that climaxed with "The Rose." "For the Boys" marks the first all-out musical since her film debut. ("Beaches" was a drama with songs.) Whatever happened to the movie musical?

"Musicals fell out of favor, sometime in the late '60s," she said. "The people who really knew how to make them were all passing away. They never

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