This page was exported from - The Auroran
Export date: Thu Mar 28 23:38:38 2024 / +0000 GMT

In This Our Lives: Keeping a promise to Bette Davis



Photo courtesy of Kathryn Sermak

By Brock Weir

She never went anywhere without leaving an impression.

Whether she was on the silver screen blazing an iconic trail with indelible performances as Margo Channing or Baby Jane Hudson, simply being herself, telling it like it was in her distinct clipped voice between puffs on her ever-present cigarette, or inspiring music with the mere batting of her eyelashes, she remains an icon to generations of film fans nearly 25 years after her death.

Her legacy is one which was introduced to generations of new generations this year, brought back to life through Susan Sarandon's Emmy-award nominated performance on the FX series ?Feud.?

She was one of those rare people who became a legend in her own lifetime, but she was much more than that to Kathryn Sermak. Bette Davis was her teacher, mentor and, in the end, her best friend.

The unlikely, deep connection between the personification of the hardy ?Yankee? and the freewheeling, cosmopolitan California girl beats at the heart of Sermak's long-awaited memoir ?Miss D & Me: Life With the Invincible Bette Davis.?

Released earlier this week by Hachette Books, it covers the enduring bond between the two women over the last decade of Davis' life as she forges ahead into the twilight of her career battling for the good scripts that had become a hallmark of her legend, battling through the lingering impacts of a devastating stroke that threatened to derail it, and battling through a devastating personal betrayal which threatened the most important bonds of her life.

?It has been a labour of love,? says Ms. Sermak. ?It has taken forever, but now I can look in the mirror and say, ?Okay, Miss D. It's done.'?
This universal story of a bond between two women separated by generations and geography has an added box office appeal in Bette Davis, what Kathryn calls ?the icing on the cake.?

Just 22 when her world collided with that of the 71-year-old screen legend in 1979, Davis hired the recent college graduate on what she later described as a ?hunch.?
Sermak only had the vaguest idea of who Davis was, but was enticed at the prospect of a trip to England to assist the star as she worked on Disney's ?Watcher in the Woods.? A friend, however, convinced her it was a singular opportunity to learn directly from a master and left a copy of Davis' memoir, The Lonely Life out for her as something of a crash course on her potential future

employer.

?I took the book and stayed up all night reading it,? Sermak recalls. ?I was amazed and loved that she was so direct. Call it a premonition, but I woke up the next morning and just knew I had the job. She asked me just two questions: ?What is your birth sign?' and ?Can you cook a three-minute egg?'?

As it happens, Sermak only thought she knew how to cook a three-minute egg, but Davis was a tough task master. It turned out to be a test which, in turn, gave way to a learning opportunity, setting the pattern of their early relationship.

?Miss Davis didn't teach by talking, she taught by action,? she says.

It was the same way Davis learned as a young actress, cutting her teeth on early small roles at Warner Brothers before working her way up to being their top star. It wasn't a walk in the park. She learned the rules of the game early on; which rules to respect, and which rules to rail against in the fight for better scripts, better roles, and artistic integrity.

?She taught me the same way they taught her,? says Kathryn, describing their first five years as ?boot camp.?

As they forged ahead together, one thing that was not on the curriculum were Bette Davis' past glories.

That came later, towards the end of her life, once they had formed a bond that had shifted far beyond employee-employer to best friends, when Davis decided they should collaborate on a documentary.

It was only then that Kathryn had an opportunity to dive fully into the Bette Davis canon from the very first picture at Warner's. As Kathryn watched Miss D evolve on the screen, she had the same feeling when it came to their relationship.

?All of a sudden I started seeing her differently. I started seeing what other people, the fans, were seeing. I always saw her more like my mother, my grandmother, my friend, but something was changing. When I told Miss D, she wanted to talk about it and I told her I was admiring her work now but I was coming to a fine line ? and if you cross that fine line you are just like everybody else and you lose that other relationship.?

That relationship was altogether too important to lose. It had weathered many storms and had become increasingly valuable over the previous decade, particularly as the indomitable Davis fought back from the bring of death after a mastectomy which was immediately followed by a devastating stroke, and fought to overcome the heartbreak of a memoir written by her elder daughter, B.D. Hyman, when it seemed Miss Davis was losing the fight for her life.

?Miss Davis was always predictable about being unpredictable,? says Ms. Sermak, theorising that Hyman wrote her book expecting her mother not to be around to defend herself. ?Doctors gave her weeks to live and it wasn't looking good at all. I always wanted to take the high road and Miss D would never hang out any dirty laundry, but Miss Davis told me, ?You can always set the record straight.' For much of [what is written about in Hyman's book] I was never around, but I can say when I was there and that is my truth, I was there, and this is the side you didn't see, this is what your mother went through.?

While ?Miss D & Me? goes a long way in addressing some of the misconceptions that have been fostered by various individuals since Davis' death in 1989, in the end, Sermak says this book is a gift; a gift not only to ?Miss D? herself, but to her fans as well.

That fighting spirit was instilled by Davis in Sermak as she battled to tell her story her way, going through several publishers, proposals and iterations before all the pieces fell into place.

?I needed time to heal and the timing had to be right,? she explains, noting she was galvanized by her own mother's passing to finish the book. ?Any earlier and I don't think I would have had the maturity I needed for the book I wrote today. It hit me that life is so short and I still had this on my plate as I promised Miss D I would do it. You have to be raw, open and honest to go real deep and

that is what Miss D. did in The Lonely Life.

?This book was written out of love, Miss D passing the torch of lessons learned, and I pass it on to you, the reader.?