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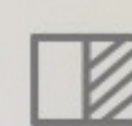
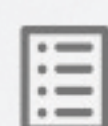
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# ‘Of course I’VE TRIED SEX with WOMEN’

Singer Ute Lemper has brought her 30-year obsession with Marlene Dietrich to the stage. She tells Maureen Paton that they share a spirit of defiance

She has the most sculpted cheekbones since Marlene Dietrich, with whom she has so often been compared. Little wonder, then, that the German-born West End and Broadway star Ute Lemper is finally embracing her destiny by bringing her famous fellow countrywoman to life on stage again in all Dietrich’s sexy insolence, glamour, courage and vitality.

The New York-based actress and singer-songwriter’s obsession with her heroine started more than 30 years ago as an occasional stage flirtation, playing Lola in a 1992 Berlin production of *The Blue Angel*, which made Marlene a star back in 1930. Now that flirtation has become a full-blown musical romance, with Lemper about to tour the UK in a one-woman tribute, *Rendezvous with Marlene*.

When we meet in London the morning after Lemper has performed at a Unicef concert, she tells me that ‘it took me decades to think that I could possibly channel Dietrich in my own show. But I had to grow a lot more through life and career and wounds and happiness and successes and failures to understand and capture the huge amount of achievement in her life.’

The homage is inspired by Lemper’s real-life encounter, a kind of rendezvous by phone, as a young actress and singer with Dietrich herself, who was 62 years her senior. After being awarded one of the inaugural Molière awards (the French equivalent of our Oliviers) for her performance as Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* in Paris in 1987, Lemper decided to send a fan letter in the form of a postcard to Dietrich – who was also living in the French capital but as an elderly semi-recluse. To her astonishment, Dietrich then rang her up and reminisced for three hours, a memory Lemper has treasured ever since.

*Rendezvous with Marlene* is shaped as a dialogue between the two women, with Lemper covering the

songs from all the chapters in her life – from the pre-war Berlin cabaret years to her Burt Bacharach collaborations. And what a story it is. Discovered by film director Josef Von Sternberg, who took her to Hollywood and turned her into an icon, the incandescent star of *The Blue Angel*, *Shanghai Express*, *The Scarlet Empress*, *Morocco* and *Destry Rides Again* became the expatriate conscience of Germany during the wartime years.

The Nazis branded her a traitor to her homeland for creating a fund with the director Billy Wilder and other exiles to help Jews and dissidents escape and also singing so often for the Allied troops in Europe that, as Wilder once wryly remarked, she was at the front line more times than General Eisenhower. ‘I did it out of decency,’ said Dietrich, who left Hollywood in the 1950s to establish a global cabaret career. She died in 1992 at the age of 90.

Dietrich’s defiant stance against fascism is something with which Lemper very much identifies. ‘As a post-war German, I still have not come to grasp how its people could have been manipulated into such brutality and racism, and the belief that they should march into other countries and own them. They were brainwashed into hating Jewish people. It’s awful,’ says the twice-married Lemper, whose current and previous husbands are Jewish New Yorkers.

Divas have a certain reputation for being difficult, so it’s a relief to find there’s nothing aloof about Lemper. Dressed in her trademark black with pearl earrings and matching bracelet, she’s warm, smiley and informal.

Dietrich famously had molars removed to give her the hollow-cheeked look that the camera loved, but Lemper is as nature intended – ‘although when I was a young performer, my cheekbones were buried in a bit more fat! I used to think that Marlene was like a goddess styled to artificial perfection. So, at first it was hard to see the human heart behind the screen image,

*‘It took me decades to believe that I could possibly channel Marlene Dietrich in my own show’*



and direct. She was a great humanitarian and should be a role model to many of us in her choices; the wounds from the war are still not healed and it's important to tell her story.'

Lemper's own story began when she defied her 'authoritarian' parents to go to drama school and then played Bombalurina at the age of 24 in Vienna in the first European production of *Cats*. She had been talent-spotted by Andrew Lloyd Webber and his creative team of director Trevor Nunn and the late choreographer Gillian Lynne. The title role in *Peter Pan*, *Guys and Dolls* and her first Brecht-Weill recording followed, which led to Universal signing her up to launch a series of cabaret songs of underground music from the Weimar Republic, which had been banned by the Nazis for being degenerate. To date, she has released nearly 40 albums as an acclaimed crossover artist, and such leading names as Nick Cave, Elvis Costello, Tom Waits and Scott Walker have written songs for her.

As for the acting, her portrayal of the murderess Velma Kelly in the musical *Chicago* on the West End stage and Broadway won Lemper an Olivier and an American Theatre award – though she missed out on reprising the role in the 2002 film version (for which Catherine Zeta-Jones won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar). 'It would have been wonderful to play her on screen, but you get what you get and you don't get upset – there's nothing you can do,' she says with a shrug.

Yet over the past decade she has found the true artistic freedom she craves by branching out from performing other people's work to creating her own musical projects such as *Forever: The Love Poems of Pablo Neruda*, *Songs for Eternity*, a collection of music by Holocaust survivors, and *Rendezvous with Marlene*.

Like Dietrich, Lemper is very much a free spirit – not least in her private life, as she tells me. Dietrich was openly bisexual and Lemper's show covers the year-long affair between Dietrich and the French singer Edith Piaf. 'Marlene lost her heart once to Jean Gabin, the love of her life, but otherwise she was very open with her sexuality. And she was very motherly towards Piaf, bringing her to America, putting her on stage at Carnegie Hall and kind of babysitting her through the turbulences of life. But ultimately she wasn't able to shelter her because Piaf was too self-destructive,' says Lemper.

It seems the moment to ask this mother of four if she herself has ever been tempted by bisexuality. 'Of course,' Lemper says in her straightforward way, not taking offence at the question. 'I've certainly tried sexual encounters with women, though I did not have a lesbian relationship with any of them. But I would say never say never,' she adds, laughing.

'My strength has been a problem in relationships with men,' she adds. 'To be successful, to be the breadwinner, to be in charge – I would say that the man has a bit more of a problem to accept that reality. It's



**Clockwise from far left: Ute Lemper in her new show *Rendezvous with Marlene***



been the case with both my husbands – they enjoy my strength but at the same time have been competitive with it. It's frustrating to them that they could not be on the same level.'

Now, she discloses, she sometimes even goes out with other men to the movies. 'In the past 10 years I have chosen to do this just to take the weight off the marriage, you know? It's been 20 years now with my second husband. We don't always have to be

together and watch each other and control each other; I enjoy very much other relationships.'

When I ask if those are at all physical, she laughs again and says, 'Maybe. But too much information!'

Away from the stage she spends as much time as possible with her children: Max, 25, and Stella, 23, by her first marriage to comedian David Tabatsky and Julian, 14, and Jonas, eight, by her present husband, musician Todd Turkisher. The family live in a duplex with a roof terrace that has 'an incredible view' of Manhattan, her

home for the past 24 years after many years in London and Paris.

Now 56, she was 48 when Jonas was born. 'I really pushed the envelope with that one,' she laughs. 'It's a door to a different universe that you open when you have children. It's full of fear, worry and pain – and the enormous amount of time you need to give to them. But it's an incredible reward too. You spend the rest of your life worrying about them, but it's a very natural road to take. I do think that we have a huge amount of love to give as humans, and I give it to many people in the audience as well as to my children. And it feels good to give it.' ■

◆ *Ute Lemper: Rendezvous with Marlene* opens in Bristol on 30 January and tours until 8 February. For more information visit [www.utelempers.com/shows](http://www.utelempers.com/shows)

*'My husband and I don't always have to be together and watch each other; I enjoy other relationships'*