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COMEDY'S "IT" GIRL

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PIMPING THE *new face* OF *comedy*



After Betty White's much-hyped stint hosting NBC's *Saturday Night Live* in May, which earned her another Emmy Award, the ensuing "Betty White Fever" is stunning—even to her.

"It's really ridiculous, is what it is," she cracks.
"I call it 'Betty White Overload.'"

BLESSED WITH THE UNCANNY ABILITY TO POKE FUN at herself and not take it all (life, fame, the ups, the downs) that seriously, Betty White seems to be everywhere these days. But if you listen to White talk for a while, you can glean that one of the other reasons she now appears to be living "Happily—okay, Humorously—Ever After," has everything do with how well she's honed another talent. This is a woman who can grab the things she finds most inspiring in life and then weave them into a stunning tapestry whose central theme revolves around giving back and being grateful. It's an art. And she's a master at it.

"I think I am lucky to be at this point and time, at my age, to still be working as much as I am, which is constantly," White admits. "It's such a privilege and I never take it for granted. I love the work I do. I am the luckiest person in the world. My life is divided in half—half show business and half for my animals. It's the two things that I love the most. How can you complain about anything?"

She chuckles. "If you hear me with one complaint, throw me out."

Not going to happen. White may be one of the most humble souls in Hollywood. The ego didn't land. It never took off. That was evident in her first comedic Emmy-winning turn in the '50s series *Life with Elizabeth* and her ongoing appearance in iconic game shows (*Password*, *Match*

Game). And, clearly, it was the case in her groundbreaking television roles—*Mary Tyler Moore's Sue Ann Nivens*, *Golden Girls'* adorable Rose Nylund and even the *Boston Legal* wild card that was Catherine Piper.

Still, few would have guessed that White, at 88, would take on another costarring role, this time as a sarcastic Russian caretaker named Elka Ostrovsky on TV Land's first original sitcom *Hot In Cleveland*, which launched last summer. Sure, *Hot* sizzles for its dynamite scripts and costars Valerie Bertinelli, Jane Leeves and Wendie Malick are like a new set of *Golden Girls*, only 25 years younger, but White's presence just stoked the already raging fires of her mind-bending, late career boom, making her the hottest comedic commodity around.

Funny enough, she only wanted to make a guest appearance in the pilot before TV Land asked her for more.

"I said no," White admits. "Well, of course, I have the spine of a jellyfish. Guess who did all 10 episodes they picked us up for?"

And guess who agreed to do the 20 more episodes that TV Land ordered for season two, which premieres in January? >>>



Check out Betty's favorite *Golden Girls* moment at delightmag.com

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THE WHITE STUFF

Quips and other reflections from today's hottest funny lady:

cl! What makes you laugh most?

BW: I love to laugh and I laugh rather easily but ... Tim Conway. He's the one. And Craig Ferguson. He's a comedian that I can't resist.

cl! Best *Mary Tyler Moore Show* memory?

BW: Mary and I were best friends in real life and it was one of the most exciting things—that one-time guest shot led to the role of Sue Ann Nivens.

cl! The secret to relationships, especially yours with Allen Ludden (host of *Password*)?

BW: Keeping it fresh. We'd do things, like put a stack of records on and dance—silly for an old married couple, but believe me, it was fun. We just enjoyed each other thoroughly and I was so blessed. He was my true love and we adored each other, and made the most of every minute!

cl! One of your greatest inspirations?

BW: Charles Darwin. He was the one that discovered the whole animal kingdom—practically. He would go places, find things and he saw things before humans could really grapple them. I just find him fascinating.

cl! What would you love to do, that you haven't done?

BW: [Laughs]. My standard answer to that is Robert Redford. That's about the size of it.

"How can you walk away from something that much fun?" she beams with sincerity. "The chemistry between those girls is just delicious. And how can I not be grateful? Do you know the number of people on this planet who would give their souls to do what we [actors] do? That's why when I hear actors complaining—and also take credit, like 'Oh, I did a wonderful performance'—well, they can't do it without the writers. The unsung heroes are the writers. They are the ones who give you the words to say."



Ms. White gets cozy with her castmates on Hot in Cleveland

It's interesting to hear White bring up the industry she's thrived in for more than 50 years. Even more so when she reflects on how much it has changed.

"We've gone through this huge youth worship, where once you were over 16, you were over the hill," she notes. "Now, I think the problem with Hollywood youngsters is that they do one good role and they get a modicum of stardom—immediately—and they think that's going to last forever. They tend to abuse it a little bit. You mustn't do that. You have to stay appreciative and professional."

About that ... you couldn't find a better mentor than White. Her deeper passions often make a mad dash toward philanthropic endeavors making it difficult to fully integrate the significance of her charitable contributions over the years. Her most notable triumphs can be found in her four decades of diligent work for the Morris Animal Foundation (MAF), an organization that helps animals maintain longer, healthier lives by advancing animal health globally.

"We've come a long way in the animal business," White says with seriousness. "All I hope is that I have gotten the message out a little bit [about animal health]."

No worries there. At just MAF alone, she's left an indelible footprint, either overseeing or generating numerous studies or projects—on sea otters, horses, canine cancer and too many more to truly list. Not surprisingly, this year, she's matching \$25,000 in contributions through the new Betty White Wildlife Rapid Response Fund, which delivers funding to wildlife researchers responding to natural disasters, like the Gulf oil spill, to determine emerging diseases.

"The need is so great right now," she says. "There are some species that may not make it through [the tragedy]."

White has also been on the board of the Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association since the '70s and served as a zoo commissioner for eight years. Meanwhile, the city of Los Angeles named her "Ambassador to the Animals" and she plays a significant part in the organization Actors & Others for Animals.

"I guess it started in the womb," she chuckles about her deep affection for animals. "My mom and dad were avid animal lovers, too, and it's so interesting to me that I get involved. I am happiest when I am working with animals."

Or working in projects about them. She also lends her voice to the new animated series *Pound Puppies* (on The Hub), a show about a team of fearless dogs with a mission to find homes for lonely puppies.

"That's one of the blessings about celebrity," she reflects. "You can make a couple of points and they are heard. I try to preach responsibility—be responsible for your own animals and we wouldn't have the problems that arise [particularly the importance of spay and neutering.]"

"But I just couldn't make it without animals," she goes on. "They're deep friends; non-critical friends here to support you and they fill a hole inside of me that I just can't explain. What I love is that it doesn't matter if you go out to the mailbox or you go to Tibet. You get the same greeting when you come back in the door."

White is reflective for a moment and it seems fitting to ask what, exactly, helped shape some of her unique outlooks on life, work, people and the animal kingdom.

"You know," she says, "I was an only child and my mom and dad never ever wanted me to just say, 'Oh that was so great,' and not mean it. They said, 'Never let something wonderful pass you by and not taste it at the time—recognize when it is happening.' I have tried to do that and well ..."

She pauses. "It's held me in great spirit." □



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