

Petula's Perfect Year

The British pop star-turned-show stopper takes *Sunset Boulevard* on the road.

By Sheryl Berk

The woman knows how to make an entrance: "Are there any bagels?" Petula Clark asks, bursting into her publicist's office early in the a.m. "When you're in New York, you're supposed to eat bagels, aren't you?"

A quick survey of the breakfast buffet turns up scones, muffins, and doughnuts, but no bagels. "Now, if I was Norma..." Clark says, poised to pounce. But instead, she grabs a bottle of water, plops into a comfy chair and smiles. "Scared you, didn't I?" she teases. "This Desmond lady has given me quite a reputation."

Clark is nothing like the demented and demanding silent screen queen she plays in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Sunset Boulevard*. As the show makes its way from Schenectady to Spokane this year, Clark reprises



Linger where the neon signs are pretty: Pop diva Petula Clark will see the U.S.A. in *Sunset Boulevard*.

the role she played to critical raves in the West End from 1995-97. (Next stop: the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, Feb. 2-7.) "Unlike Norma, there's nothing manic about me," she says, adding with a laugh, "unless you count my hair, which is totally out of control today because of the weather."

Clark is soft-spoken, self-deprecating, even somewhat shy in person. "I'm not very gifted at interviews," she confesses. "I have a hard time putting into words what I feel." But that's okay — because, like Norma, she's capable of communicating her emotions with just one look. Asked "How do you feel about doing this tour?" she struggles for just the right way to phrase it, then her lips part in a wide, Cheshire-cat grin. And that says it all.



With stage son David Cassidy in the Broadway production of *Blood Brothers*.

You are the only member of the *Sunset Boulevard* touring cast who isn't American.

Yes — how odd is that? I'm surrounded by Americans, and Norma is American. But you know, Norma is such a law unto herself really, that she'd probably have all sorts of accents. She's the kind of woman who would break into French, or Spanish, or Russian, you know? Her accent isn't quite anything — just affected.

How did you first come to play the role in London?

Trevor Nunn talked me into it. I didn't want to. I had just come back from the tour of *Blood Brothers*, and I was ready for a rest. We spent three hours in the Really Useful offices with me insisting this was *not* a good idea.

Why didn't you think it was a good idea?

I didn't think I was at all right for it. I kept saying, "No, no, no." Trevor kept saying, "Yes, yes, yes." And the next thing I knew, I was rehearsing.

How did you approach the part? Did you watch the 1950 Gloria Swanson movie?

I knew that Elaine Paige had been told by Trevor to see the movie as often as possible. But he didn't want me to see it at all. He wanted me to do it just the way I felt it. The show is so powerful. For the first month, it was all I could do just to get through it.

It's quite complicated musically — every move is timed to incidental music, as if you were watching a movie. So not only do you have to learn what you are singing and saying, but also what music plays when, for instance, I put that glass down. Given the technicalities of the show — the set and the costume changes — you're more concerned with just doing it correctly than with getting under the character's skin.

Yet you did become Norma.

Yes, most definitely — but I think maybe she became me! I did it for over a year in London, and let me tell you this: By the time I got the makeup on for each performance, I was really not me anymore. This may sound corny — hell, life is corny — but when the show ended, I missed the cast and the crew and the applause, but what I

missed most of all was her. The thing that really turned me on about doing the show on tour was that I would see Norma again. I'd have my friend back. Do I sound delusional? Well, I guess that's appropriate!

It's understandable — it's so easy to hate Norma, but also to feel for her.

I also find her quite funny. I think that's probably one of the differences between the way I play her and the way Glenn, Elaine, Betty, and Patti played her. I think I give her a bit more of a sense of humor.

Is this your favorite role? You don't miss *Blood Brothers* as much?

Well, the thing about *Blood Brothers* is that the role was pretty well me. Not that I've ever been an impoverished housewife with seven kids, but I have great respect for Mrs. Johnstone and for that way of life. I liked Mrs. Johnstone a lot more than I liked Norma when I first started playing her. But Norma grows on you. Mrs. Johnstone was immediate — I felt the connection right away. But she doesn't have Norma's depth. I think Norma is a pretty fulfilling role for an actress/singer, because it stretches you dramatically and musically. And I find that hard to let go of.

You agreed to do the *Sunset* tour for a full year?

Yes, after they picked me up off the floor, I said, "You're joking, aren't you?" but I agreed. When I did the *Blood Brothers* tour, it was supposed to be for three months. Then they said, "Would you do another three months, and another..." Well, I wound up doing it for a year. *Sunset* is scheduled to tour through the year 2000, but I'm not sure I'd make it through the year 2000. I'm not as young as I used to be!

Is it physically difficult?

Oh, yes. The stairs, the heavy costumes. You climb over 800 stairs per show — but, you know, it's good for the thighs. The hardest thing is the emotion of it. Playing *Blood Brothers*,



The ladies behind the *Sunset Boulevard* tour: Clark is flanked by choreographer Kathleen Marshall (l.) and director Susan H. Schulman.



KEVIN MERRILL

Clark's new solo recording, *Here for You*, was recently released.

I could use my own experience of being a mother. The thing about *Sunset* is I have to tap in on things I'm not terribly keen on tapping into, like hate, jealousy, and fear: fear of aging, fear of losing your lover, losing everything. The reason why Norma goes mad in the end is because she can't face it. She's lost him, she's lost her career, everyone's been lying to her. She retreats into madness — it's a choice that she makes. She'd prefer to be mad than have to face it. And those are the really exhausting things. I have to put myself through it night after night — I'm not a skillful enough actress to fake it. But it takes its toll.

You don't mind the traveling?

You see, I've been traveling all my life, so it doesn't really make much difference to me. I have a very curious mind; I love going to different places. Hopefully, I'll have a chance to get out and see the sights, the countryside. Not just hit the malls, another city, another Gap, you know? This is an amazingly beautiful country.

Does your husband come with you on tour?

No. He will be joining me from time to time. My friends and family, as well. They'll be coming to the fun places like San Francisco and New Orleans — I'm not sure how many will turn up in Detroit! But they don't know what they're missing.

None of your three kids were interested in performing?

No, none. Kate lives in Paris, and she is a painter. Patrick is in Geneva — I think he should have been a musician, because he has a clever ear, but he won't get into it. Barbara lives in New York and has a son of her own — so I'm a grandma to a two-and-a-half year-old. They all give me great joy. My grandson heard me sing for the first time on stage in Atlantic City recently and he was totally amazed. When I asked how he liked it, he said I was loud!

Do you prefer performing on stage to recording albums? You have a new CD out on Varèse Sarabande, *Here for You*.

It's two totally different worlds, and I think my new album mixes both of them because I do some theater songs, some pop, and movies as

well. Do I prefer one over the other? I don't know. It's like, "Do you like milk better than wine?" Too different to compare. It depends.

You've been in show biz since you were a little girl.

I was very shy as a child. I think a lot of people in this business are shy and they use performing as a way of getting over that. At least in my case, I do. I'm a very different person on stage — talking about myself like this is the most difficult thing for me to do! The BBC very sweetly sent me some recordings of myself from when I was about eight — I was an old hand by then. I have to say, the voice was good. It wasn't great, but it was perfectly in tune with a good strong sense of tempo.

What was the first thing you did professionally?

You mean being paid? Well, I was paid with a tin of toffees, and to me, that was the big time. I was about seven, and I performed in this big department store. Then I sang on the BBC overseas service when I was eight. That was my first broadcast.

Was singing something you

wanted to do? Did your parents encourage it?

Well, my mother was Welsh. That may not mean anything to you, but the Welsh are a bit like the Italians. At the drop of a hat, they'll sing. I think it was in me. My dad heard me singing around the house and encouraged me to do something with my talent. During the war, I used to travel around singing for the troops. Julie Andrews and I both got started that way. We just actually talked about this — we weren't rivals, but we think our parents were!

Yet Julie became known here in the U.S. before you did.

She came here to do theater, and I didn't come to the States until I released "Downtown." You know, it happened really without me having anything to do with it. I put out a record in England and suddenly it was a hit here. I had a name in England and France, where my husband was working and we were living, but here, no one had heard of me except for this one song.

Do your old fans come to see you in the shows?

Oh, they're still going strong. There is a hard-core group that has been with me even before the '60s. But I have a lot of new fans, too. I did a U.K. tour just before I came over here, and they were quite upset about losing me to the States for a year.

Do you ever worry about getting older, about your legacy as a performer?

Not really. I've never thought about age. I think that's the wonderful thing about being in this business, theater. You can be anyone on stage — there's very little age restriction. The pop business is something else entirely. But I think I'll be around for a while. There's a bit of life in the old girl yet, and I'm going to enjoy the next 12 months. I think Norma and I both will. ■

SHERYL BERK most recently interviewed Cathy Rigby and Kenny Rogers for *InTheater*.



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