

JOAN COLLINS: Sex Symbol in Her Prime

Rosalind Brunt

The Joan Collins Story has been running off and on for 35 years. But only in the last three has it entered a superstar phase - ever since Collins appeared as 'the evil Alexis' in the American series *Dynasty* in August 1982 and hoisted the show from 38th to No 1 in the US ratings and into national tv top tens around the world.

As with all superstars, Collins' story is composed of three main ingredients: the acting roles and accompanying publicity of press releases, celebrity interviews and studio pictures; the 'personality' roles and brand images created in feature articles, modelling, advertising and product endorsement; and 'the real person' with a so-called private life that centres on sexual activities with other famous people and gets publicly discussed in gossip columns, tv guest spots and memoirs and 'confessions' that are serialised in women's magazines and the popular press. Any amalgam of these sources is what gives us, the non-famous, the public, the impression that we, personally, *know* what the superstar is actually like - so that, quite unhesitatingly, we say, 'I love Joan Collins'/'I really hate her!'

The illusion of intimate acquaintance is reinforced by the sort of star Joan Collins is: the sex symbol. Indeed, the special frisson of the Collins story is her longevity in this role and that she is a sexier sex symbol in her late 40s and early 50s than when she was a Rank and Fox starlet in her teens and 20s. Aged 50, she flaunted her body across a *Playboy* spread 'to prove that a woman can be attractive at any age' and contrasted her own positive attitude to 'the prime of life' with that of her contemporary, Bardot's neurotic shrinking from the unsightliness of 'old age' at 48. Stories about sex symbols tend to present the star either as victim, as with Monroe or Bardot herself, or as survivor, like Elizabeth Taylor. Joan Collins is definitely and defiantly in the second category. And yet her first incarnation as sex symbol is a disturbing story of sexual victimisation as well.

Throughout the 50s she appeared in 20 'mediocre' and 'mainly forgettable' (her

words) British and American movies, playing girls who 'got into trouble' as in *Cosh Boy* (1953) or sexy sirens as in Howard Hawks' biblical epic *Land of the Pharoahs* (1954). These roles got Collins publicised as Britain's answer to Jane Russell or Ava Gardner and combined with her off-screen 'personality' as an outspoken early Bohemian and habituee of London jazz clubs to create the gossip column images of Britain's Bad Girl and The Coffee-Bar Jezebel.

But the 'real life' story, first revealed in her bestselling confessions, *Past Imperfect* (which has been revised last year by Coronet) tell an altogether grislier tale of 50s' double standards. At the beginning of the decade, she is beaten up by fellow RADA students as a 'slut' because she offers 'to go all the way' with them; and when she doesn't on her first date with Rank star Maxwell Reed, she is drugged and repeatedly raped. Blaming herself for being unchaperoned at the time, she marries him at 19 and is subjected to continual sexual sadism, only leaving when he proves to be a pimp and blackmailer as well. Deciding it is now 'my life to live for myself' she embarks on a series of affairs with playboys, Hollywood studs and pro-

ducers' sons, getting constant sexual harassment from their fathers when 'just be nice to me baby' would result in better film parts.

In 1959, against her own wishes, but because her then fiancé, Warren Beatty, says 'a baby will wreck both our careers', Collins has an illegal abortion. But in the 60s, she opts for motherhood and surrenders the sex symbol role to bring up two children during a self-abnegating and ultimately distressing marriage to actor-producer Anthony Newley.

In the 70s, after a third marriage to the business manager of the Beatles' Apple company, Collins determined to start her 'comeback' with a series of horror movies, culminating in the frightful *Empire of the Ants*, 1977, and guesting in American tv series. These ventures provided her with some of the capital for a new project: taking control of her own career through massive self-promotion. She did this by putting together, and then starring in, the film of her sister Jackie's bestseller, *The Stud*, with its 'sex-on-a-swing' scene. The film appeared in 1978 and coincided with the first publication of her 'sizzling' memoirs. The combined effect of these two outstanding commercial successes was to relaunch Collins as star and sex symbol



and, additionally now, 'hot property', able to 'command her own price' in the media marketplace.

I deliberately exploited myself. Totally,' she said, but also maintained that she was striking a blow for women's liberation because, both as the film's Fontaine character and as 'the real' Joan Collins of the memoirs, she had challenged sexism and ageism by taking younger lovers, treating men 'in the way men have always used women' and posing nude as an 'older woman'. However, Collins regarded the sequel film, *The Bitch* (1979) as 'gross exploitation', but she could not get release from her contract and fought in vain against its selling point slogan 'Joan Collins *Is* the Bitch', fearing, rightly, that it would be an epithet that stuck. The enormously popular Cinzano commercials which she made in this period with Leonard Rossiter and which certainly added to her value as 'household name', also reveal the limits of her own control over her image as 'personality'. In my view, spilling the drink down sophisticated jetsetter Collins was not so much about his boorish pretensions as a punitive joke against her beauty and poise.

But it was in 'real life' that Collins came into her own and took most control. After her eight-year old daughter's near-fatal road accident in 1980, Collins poured all her energy and determination into bringing the child out of a coma and a year fighting for her recovery from severe brain damage. There was massive media coverage at the time and again, when Collins published her diary of the recovery in 1982 (*Katy - A Fight for Life* Gollancz/Chivers). The story, repeatedly told, of a fiercely protective motherhood that is simultaneously riddled with guilt about 'neglecting children for career' has struck a widespread public response, particularly from women. It also forms an important aspect of the character Alexis in *Dynasty* that women can identify with and highlights the most attractive elements of Collins' career: a refusal to go under, and immensely resilient optimism and what she calls in her diary 'the power of positivity'. 'Shape up, Joan!' she constantly tells herself and it carries over to her acting life where she has a reputation for being the sort of star who doesn't indulge in temperament but takes pride in professional discipline, cutting out the booze, hitting her marks, joking with the crew and cast -

in short, 'Joanie's a Real Trouper'.

Stories of the stars as actors-personalities-real people are offered to the public as sort of moral tales, lessons in living. When they're about stars who are survivors, they are saying to us that you too, with a bit more effort, could live a richer life. They hold out the *possibility* of determining your own life and serve as beguiling 'coping strategies' that keep you going on going on (*sic*). For myself, the gutsy 'buck up and never whinge' aspect of the Joan Collins Story is something I can relate to, together with the 'independent woman' drive of both the 'real' Collins and Alexis as they seek to control their careers, make their own way economically - as well as being sexy, sophisticated, courageous and absolutely in their prime.

Last November, this phase of the story was magically resolved with The Wedding of the Year to husband No 4, handsome 38-year old Swedish ex-pop star and double-glazing businessman, Peter Holm. But then, why are such happy endings not available to all of us other women who are also trying to buck up and not whinge?

Because while we are invited to identify with the stars, we also learn to appreciate that they are, after all, 'unique'. There can only be 'the one Joan Collins' who gets to 'make it' in this way and, regardless of how many snakes of life she's slithered down, like all survivor-stars, her career is about climbing competitive ladders that take her above and away from her public's little lives.

At the same time she can't do without other people. The self-assertive individualism of her story constantly hides and denies the reality of the social relations and material circumstances that produce her as 'star'. Just as her beauty is not only a matter of fortunate genetic inheritance, Joan Collins, sex symbol in her prime, is also the product of particular life-chances, economic resources and the massive labour of invisible others. That she survives by her own efforts and willpower is only one side of her story. But as a story for our times, and one that certainly presents the face of Thatcherism at its most glamorous, it's hard to beat. Joan Collins at least will never be a Moaning Minny.