



To have and have not: grace, talent, iconic status – Lauren Bacall has it all. From the moment she first appeared on the silver screen with her late husband Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall has held a privileged place in the hearts of the movie-going public, a husky-voiced symbol of class and seductive glamour. Now, in a new century, at the age of 80, resting on her laurels seems like the last thing on her mind. An icon of Hollywood's Golden Age she may be, but there is clearly a lot more to her than that.

Born Betty Joan Perske in 1924, her natural grace was obvious from an early age, and at the age of 18 she was on the front cover of *Harper's Bazaar*. Before she was 20 she had been talent-spotted by the studios, and the rest is history. She has been widely admired for her incredible staying power over the last 60 years, and her classic style ensured that she continued to appear in polls of the 'world's most beautiful people' well into her seventies.

The startling beauty and sultry manner of the 19-year-old newcomer in *To Have and Have Not* bewitched not only box office crowds but also her much older co-star, Humphrey Bogart. She became famous instantly, and was dubbed 'the Look' for the way in which she gazed up at her husband-to-be. Their 12-year marriage set the tone for Bacall's career, with the obvious passion between the two of them producing a string of classic films which remain firmly entrenched in the public consciousness. Unlike some movie star marriages, their devotion continued off the screen as well, and the pair became one of Hollywood's greatest couples, passionate, carefree and prone to high living. Bacall also became known for her fiery streak, and she was quite capable of holding her own with the Rat Pack (a nickname she coined) and her lifelong friend Frank Sinatra. Her farnkness has upset a few people over the years, but has left no one in any doubt as to her honesty.

These happy years came to a tragic end when Bogart died of cancer in 1957. Many expected her to disappear after Bogart died, but she proved to be made of sterner stuff. She went on to star in films alongside some of the leading men of the time, including Henry Fonda, Tony Curtis, Paul Newman and John Wayne. By the 1970s Bacall was spending more of her time on the stage than in front of the camera, although her performance in *Midnight on the Orient Express* alongside Ingrid Bergman, stands out. Her flexibility between stage and screen has inspired admiration across the acting world. Her

American beauty

With a glittering screen career behind her, powerful performances in a number of critically acclaimed recent films and an eagerly awaited autobiography on the way, Lauren Bacall is still going strong at 80. **Thomas Muirhead** profiles one of Hollywood's great survivors.

versatility also extended to musicals and her success on Broadway exceeded all expectations. She won two Tony awards for Best Actress, in 1970 for her performance as Margo Channing in 'Applause' and in 1981 for 'Woman of the Year'.

In 1980, to the delight of millions, she produced her autobiography, *By Myself*, which detailed her life from the early days with Bogart through her Broadway years to her family life, writing at length about her three children, whom she clearly adores. The book sold millions, as expected, but also attracted considerable critical acclaim, winning a National Book Award.

Return to the spotlight

Some questioned what had become of Lauren Bacall, as her prominence in the limelight faded a little over the next 15 years. It is no surprise that she responded to such doubts with her usual firm resolve. 'I am not a has-been, I am a will-be,' she wrote in her second book, *Now*, published in 1994. As for the future, 'I'll go on believing there is one. Whatever it may be, one thing is for sure – this adventure is not over.'

She wasn't wrong; the last ten years have seen a resurgence in her career, especially on screen. *The Mirror Has Two Faces* in 1996 got her nominated for an Academy Award and saw her secure her place as one of the cinema's revered veterans. Since then she has thrown herself into independent film, a world completely removed from her early fame as a starlet in the personality-driven studio system. She seems determined to prove that she is an actress of substance with a desire to produce work of quality, working with, in her own words, 'younger directors, new ideas and things that are unusual'. She has recently received praise for her roles in Lars von Trier's *Dogville* and Jonathan Glazer's *Birth*.

She starred in both alongside Nicole Kidman, with whom she enjoys a close friendship (Kidman refers to her as 'my New York mum'). The media have enjoyed creating the illusion of a spat between these two. When asked by a UK TV presenter how it felt to be working with fellow 'legend' Kidman, Bacall replied: 'She can't be a legend; you have to be older.' Many have read this as the bitter words of an older woman, but the friendship between the two makes the claims of malice rather difficult to believe. The fact of the matter is, she was right. Legendary status is not something acquired simply by acting well, making good films or being well known. It involves defining an era, doing it with grace and talent, and staying at the top for a very, very long time. Bacall never claimed to be a legend herself, but the media never had any doubts on that score.

With a follow up to her autobiography, *By Myself and Then Some* and three more films coming out in 2005, it is clear why Lauren Bacall remains a legend. Over 60 years ago, she stepped into the limelight with an unforgettable performance opposite Humphrey Bogart, and she is still producing cutting-edge work at the highest level. It seems that this remarkable woman isn't ready for 'the big sleep' just yet. □

