

Liza Wants To Be A Hit, Just Not A Huge One

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Liza Minnelli is literally sweating over her planned return to Broadway.

Now on a rigorous training program, the singer has been dieting and working all day with composers and vocal coaches in preparation for her month-long engagement at the Palace Theater.

Minnelli says she is 40 pounds lighter than she was a year ago, when she walked out onstage at the National Italian American Foundation gala in Washington and several thousand people gasped at her voluminous size.

How has she done it? "I work with a trainer from 7 to 8 each morning, I dance every day, and I'm eating mostly protein and healthy food," Minnelli told me Monday at the Regency Hotel, where her friend Michael Feinstein, the singer, was opening his new nightclub, Feinstein's at the Regency.

"Then there's the rehearsals with Marvin Hamlisch, John DeLuca, Billy Stritch and Fred Ebb," she said of her one-woman show, "Minnelli on Minnelli," which opens Dec. 2 and goes through New Year's Eve. "That I do until 6:30 each night. Then a half-hour of vocal training followed by dinner, a massage and sleep."

Surrounded by Gabriel Byrne, Michael Keaton, Bianca Jagger, Sandy Gallin, Ross Bleckner, Jonathan Tisch, Eartha Kitt and Gloria Reuben, all of whom had come in support of Feinstein, Minnelli spoke wistfully of her connection to the Palace, a Broadway site most identified with her mother, Judy Garland, who played there countless times in the 1950s.

"Coming back to the Palace is special," said Minnelli. "The first check I ever got in my life I got at the Palace. I was 5 years old, and they gave me \$ 5 to dance behind my mother as she sang 'Swanee.' "

Minnelli, who will be talking more about her Palace engagement today at a Radio City Music Hall press conference, says she's working hard to make her comeback a success.

"Whenever I didn't show up somewhere," she said of her past no-shows and canceled performances, "it was always because I couldn't, never because I wouldn't."

A GET-TOGETHER FOR THE RIVERAS

For a couple who are separated, Geraldo Rivera and his wife, C.C. Dyer, seem to be spending a lot of time together.

The CNBC talk-show host was with his wife Saturday when she was honored at the third annual Kidsbridge gala in Red Bank, N.J. Dyer even mentioned him in her remarks following her introduction by Jon Bon Jovi.

"I'm really being honored for my husband's generosity," she said before making a reference to the "unwarranted attention" hurled their way since they announced their separation last month.

And although they continue to live apart, Geraldo returned to his New Jersey home on Sunday to help his wife host an 80th-birthday party for his mother, Lillian Rivera.

Anything for a mother, right?

OUTSPOKEN LENOS ARE ON GUARD

Celebrities often pay a price for speaking their mind in public.

Just ask Mavis Leno. The wife of "Tonight Show" host Jay Leno says that on their kitchen wall is a photo of a man who has been stalking them by writing letters she describes as "aberrant."

Not surprisingly, these letters come in the wake of Mavis' outspoken criticism of the Taliban regime over its alleged human rights abuses against women in Afghanistan.

"If you're going to do human rights work, you are going to go against the wishes of evil people," she said Monday at a midtown benefit to call attention to this "gender apartheid."

Mavis doesn't see herself ever pulling back, she said, because "celebrities in our country live with a certain amount of risk anyway. You get used to the idea of always having to think of who is at the gate when the gate bell rings. But frankly, these things are too important to chicken out on."

Which means she has no fear for her security. "Jay and I don't worry about it," she said. "We don't have bodyguards hanging around 24 hours a day. We don't let it take over our lives. We both believe in the essential goodness of people."

The event, co-hosted at the W New York Hotel by Glamour magazine and the Feminist Majority Foundation, attracted such A-list women as Meryl Streep, Laura Dern, Melissa Etheridge, Marlo Thomas, Glamour editor in chief Bonnie

Fuller and Al Franken, who bombed at the podium, especially with such jokes as, "Why don't we focus on what Afghan women can do? They can cook, bear children and pray. As I recall, that was fine for our grandmothers."

QUICK HITS

The New York Observer has backed off from a recent item suggesting Matt Damon and girlfriend Winona Ryder were buying a downtown loft together. Tomorrow's Observer says that Damon alone is purchasing the 7,000-square-foot space on Lafayette St. This doesn't mean that the two have broken up. Quite the contrary; Damon and Ryder are still very much together.

Destiny's Child will be giving its free concert Saturday at the NBA Store on Fifth Ave., not the NBC Store, as reported yesterday.

VH1 has been trying to keep the locale of its "Concert of the Century" under wraps. The Tommy Hilfiger-sponsored event will air live Saturday, with performances by Eric Clapton, Garth Brooks, Sheryl Crow, Gloria Estefan, B.B. King and Lenny Kravitz. Well, don't tell anyone, but they're doing the show from the White House lawn.