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The voluptuous joy of Karen Black

The screen legend comes to the Gladstone to debut her new one-woman show

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BY DAVID BALZER July 23, 2009 12:07

Karen Black: My Life for a Song
Jul 25-26, 9pm (8pm doors). $20 (available at the Gladstone Hotel or Suspect Video). Gladstone Hotel Ballroom, 1214 Queen W. Call 416-531-4635 for reservations.
www.gladstonehotel.com.

How do you introduce Karen Black? Maybe she's the kooky goddess of all things cult: a scene-stealer in videos by Cass McCombs and LT; the voluptuously horrific namesake of Kembra Pfahler's performance-art band; the star of Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses*, of Dan Curtis' *Trilogy of Terror* and of disaster-movie *Airport '75*, in which she plays Nancy "the stewardess is flying the plane" Pryor.

But this neglects that she was to the Hollywood Renaissance what Anna Karina and Jeanne Moreau were to the French New Wave, appearing in such pivotal 1970s films as *Easy Rider*, *Nashville*, *The Day of the Locust*, *The Great Gatsby* and *Five Easy Pieces* — all of which turn, to a significant degree, on her distinctive presence. Oh yeah, and she played a jewel thief in Hitchcock's underrated last film, *Family Plot*.

When Black comes to the Gladstone Ballroom this weekend — thanks in large part to David Daniloff of *Rue Morgue* — she will showcase yet another facet of her career: writer-performer for the theatre. Coming off the recent premiere of her play *Missouri Waltz*, Black unveils a new one-woman show, *My Life for a Song*, which combines Americana character studies from Faulkner and Katherine Anne Porter with her previous autobiographical one-woman show *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Sing the Song*. Fans of Black's work with Robert Altman should take especial note: this is a chance to see her act onstage, as she did for the late director with *Come Back to the Five and Dime*, *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean* (later a film containing one of her best performances), and to see her sing, as she did as Connie White in *Nashville*.

Bruce La Bruce will interview her, and there will be a career-retrospective montage and audience Q & A. But don't expect wistful, self-important, cabaret-style reflection. "I think that the way things come about for actors, and maybe especially for actors in Hollywood, is that you don't have as much of an overview as you might want," says a convivial Black, on the phone from LA. "There aren't any signposts in Hollywood that tell you what's going to happen next, nor even what street you're on.

"I'm a lighthearted person," she continues, "even though I have a lot of commitment to people and things. Lifelong commitments. I don't think that I sit around and reflect on things. I write poems, but I write those fast, too."

In fact, she has been prolific since the very beginning of her career, with over 150 films under her belt to date. Currently, she's got half a dozen projects in pre- or post-production, and boasts of her contribution to small films like *The Blue Tooth Virgin*, which just got a distribution deal. It goes without saying that she does not subscribe to the notion that it's difficult for women of a certain age to get work in the industry.

"I'm not a complainer," she says. "If I were, I would have stopped doing movies long ago, and I wouldn't have been very happy. I like working. My goal in life is to continue art. And there are people who have great art, sometimes people who don't even know how good their work is. So that's what I'm doing and that is my purpose and I'm quite happy about it. My life is like a salon."

Still, her film work has not, by and large, been for Hollywood since the 1970s. Black has said that, after *The Day of the Locust*, rumours began to circulate that she was difficult to work with; and in an interview with Charlie Rose in the mid-'80s, she indicated that it was not a choice to do independent films. (She also reminds me that she's done many "bad films.") Isn't her career a sobering lesson on what happened to the Hollywood renaissance, specifically to her strong, intelligent peers like Barbara Harris, Shelley Duvall and Louise Lasser?

"Some of the leading women now have wonderful personalities," she rebuts, citing Drew Barrymore and Julia Roberts. "I think I've always been a character actress. I don't know that I'm a personality. I don't even know what I'm like. I know that I'm warm-hearted. I know I have a lot of life force. But I don't worry too much about that — what I am like. It's not interesting. I'd rather read."

What Black does find interesting — and this is made abundantly clear in her empathic, dynamic acting style (which, by the way, she refuses to define as Method) — is other people.

"I just love getting concepts," she says, "and really being a concept. When I did *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean*, I spent months on that character. I went to gay bars. I worked with a transsexual woman. It was very hard to deliver what was actually required of me. But in order to embrace what's actually required of you, you have to understand it. You have to grasp the concept. It's not some characteristic of myself as a personality; it's just a love of concept.

"And some kind of integrity," she adds. "You have to live up to snuff. You have to live up to your own standards."

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