

“Some of the nominees for my celebrity government: Jill St. John—Assistant to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare; Lesley Ann Warren—Ambassador to the Spiritual world; Joey Heatherton—Special Liaison between Vegas and the White House; Telly Savalas—President; Raquel Welch—Secretary of Fun, Fun, Fun.”
—Confessions of a Pretty Lady
 Harper & Row

she is actually quiet. And pensive. She is rating her year like a vice president of General Motors reading some corporate report. Instead of her usual, “Ohhhh, baby, I’m sizzling,” she takes a stab at being reflective. “I don’t like to keep a tab,” she says, “but I have to say that this has been a successful year.”

At age 33, Bernhard is actually sizzling. She is a hit on the comedy horizon although she doesn’t tell jokes. She doesn’t exactly have a stand-up act but rather a lengthy commentary on such aspects of life as the color of nail polish, not to mention a full range of emotional topics. On the acting front, Bernhard has grabbed tiny parts in such artsy films as 1983’s “The King of Comedy,” “Track 29” and, of course, the Muppets’ melodrama, “Follow That Bird.” (As a peeved waitress, Bernhard simply barked, “Two tossed salads!”)

Her string of “Late Night” appearances usually revolve around her flirting with Dave. She is Madonna’s best friend. “Her book saved my life,” says Madonna. “If Sean and Madonna get divorced, who will get custody of Sandra Bernhard?” That is the current big joke on the stand-up circuit since the three have been snapped hanging out at all the hip clubs in New York together.

Still, it is difficult at best to become a star on these sort of credits. Perhaps that is Bernhard’s biggest accomplishment to date.

She counters with the idea that the book was big in the accomplishment department. “Ohhh, it’s always such an emotional process to actually sit down and write anything,” she says. “The book is my life. I name names. I name high school friends which is okay since I’m still friends with certain people. Anyway, there’s nothing in the book that will get people named on my case.”

When “Track 29” was released last fall to harsh reviews, Bernhard wasn’t exactly

miffed. “I’m always going up for film things,” she says. “It’s always iffy for someone like myself. Of course I would like to do more films, but I’ve always been picky, picky, picky. Believe me, I’m not in total despair if I don’t get a role.”

Believe her. Bernhard has never been one to delve into despair. Take the “Childhood Fears” she writes about in her book. Growing up first in Flint, Michigan, and later in Phoenix, Arizona, her concerns were diverse. In order of importance, she lists them as: brain damage from airplane glue, fixative sprayed on chalk drawings, bleach, mushrooms, and “my Mother going blind from staring at an eclipse of the sun while I’m away at camp.” Setting these fears aside, Bernhard eventually ditched her hip-hugger teenager years in Phoenix and moved to Los Angeles where she became a manicurist to the stars while studying acting by night.

“Phoenix is a nice place,” she says, casually, “if you just got married.” Bernhard actually hitched her wagon to several comedy clubs where her penchant for creating verbal danger was appealing. Her second break came in the form of the film “King of Comedy,” where she was cast as a psycho-in-underwear that

earned her a National Society of Film Critics award. “After the film, I went on a lot of auditions,” she says. “Nothing was right. I turned down a small role in the film ‘Ghostbusters’ since I just didn’t think it was going to be a good movie.”

The fact that “Ghostbusters” was a smash could have proved depressing, but Bernhard had other callers on the line. A certain David Letterman she knew from both of their comedy club days invited her to guest on his late night talk show. Bernhard says she had the sixth sense to know that playing the cute babe against Dave wouldn’t win her any points since that act was tired and boring. Instead, she hit Letterman like nuclear war.

“He’s so difficult to deal with in the first place,” she says. “He has a million different personalities. I went on for the first time to talk about ‘King of Comedy.’ I was instructed to just talk about the movie.”

Ha! This was Sandra Bernhard and she didn’t follow directions. “Sure, I stand up to him,” she says. “When I first started the off-the-cuff stuff with Dave, I didn’t think about the ramifications. By the second or third time I went on ‘Late Night,’ I just started getting wilder and wilder.”



Good for pain: Bernhard administering to Christopher Lloyd’s back in “Track 29”