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*If it's hot, we may go topless.*

**FILM**

**Best Bettes**

New DVDs celebrate the Divine Miss M  
BY FLOYD SKLAVER

Since blasting onto the cabaret scene in 1969, Bette Midler has been one of gaydom's favorite stars. With her brash and brassy brio, she personified our inner outrageousness as well as our hidden vulnerabilities.

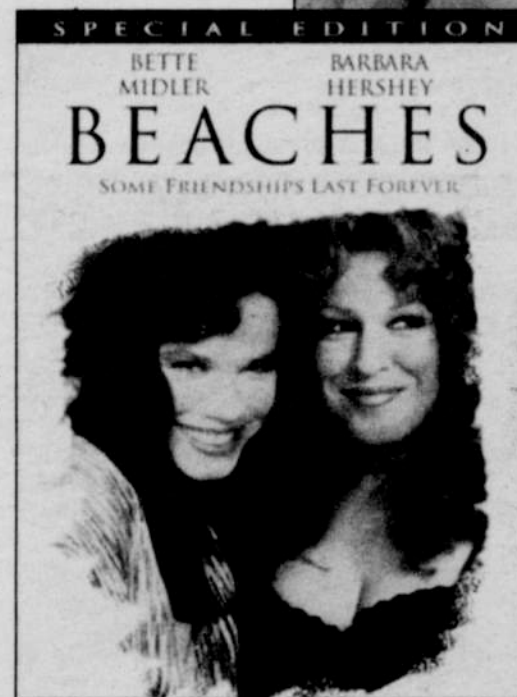
Throughout five decades of performing, Midler has won Grammys, Emmys, Golden Globes, Oscar nominations and a Tony Award. She is considered by many to be the greatest live performer of our generation. Two Midler DVDs are now available: a documentary about the superstar and a special edition of 1988's *Beaches*.

*The Divine Bette Midler* is a 135-minute documentary that aired on A&E's *Biography* last year. Using the typical *Biography* format of clips interspersed by interviews with and about the star, it follows Midler from humble beginnings as the only Jewish kid in her Hawaiian neighborhood through her triumphs on stage, her meteoric rise and fall (and renaissance) as a screen star and the latest stage concerts (most recently appearing in Portland in February '04).

Since Midler is best known for comedy and her outrageous alter ego, The Divine Miss M, it's hard to remember that she began as a torch singer. With rarely seen early footage including clips of smoky nightclub appearances, her premiere performance among towel-clad men at New York City's Continental Baths (accompanied by Barry Manilow on piano), her performance in the Broadway cast of *Fiddler on the Roof* and her first appearance on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* (she appeared 24 times, including as Carson's final guest when he retired), the documentary provides a complete picture of a vast career that spans more than 40 years. (Her flop TV sitcom *Bette* is quickly—and wisely—glossed over.)

According to Midler, "When the torch songs didn't go over, I told jokes." And what jokes they were: raunchy and uncensored and indicative of the newly burgeoning sexual revolution. By being outrageous, Midler was preparing for the age of gay liberation, and her concerts were equal parts music, theater and performance art.

While enthusiasm for "The Diva of All Divas" has waned slightly in the gay community since she questioned the validity of same-sex marriage on *Larry King Live*, nothing prepared me for the emotional wallop I felt while watching her 2001 performance at the memorial service for victims of 9/11. Singing "Wind Beneath My Wings" to a stadium filled with dignitaries, heroes and mourners, there's not a dry eye in the house (or my living room) as she brings heart-wrenching gravitas to a song that had become a banal wedding cliché. It is a



spectacular moment and worth the price of the DVD alone.

Besides the documentary, *The Divine Bette Midler* features complete performances from the TV specials *Diva Las Vegas* and *Old Red Hair Is Back*, deleted scenes from the documentary and expanded interviews. (Unfortunately, the bonus features were not available on the screening copy.)

"Oh, my God, it's *Beaches*. I'm going to start crying already," director Garry Marshall says at the beginning of his delightful commentary about Midler's eighth starring

film role. With bonus tracks aplenty—including a revealing interview with Mayim Bialik, who played Midler's younger self—and co-star Barbara Hershey's screen test, this DVD is a welcome addition to any Midler fan's library. *Beaches* came at a time when Midler's film career was finally revived. Her first starring film, *The Rose*, had catapulted her to star status but was followed by the atrocious *Jinxed*, which did exactly that to her career. It took four years before a studio would take another chance on her. But when *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, from Disney's lower-budget Touchstone division, was a hit, suddenly Midler was hot again. She made *Ruthless People*, *Outrageous Fortune* and *Big Business* within a short period and followed them up with *Beaches*, a screen adaptation of the weepy novel that follows best friends over 30 years of loves and losses.

*Beaches* contains Midler's biggest-selling song, "Wind Beneath My Wings." And whether you love or hate it (both the song and the film), Marshall's commentary is always thorough and entertaining. The director of *The Princess Diaries* and *Pretty Woman* wins us with witty observations and tongue-in-cheek jokes, and his candid honesty about filmmaking and *Beaches* is refreshing. **J**

FLOYD SKLAVER once auditioned to be a Harlette.