

Nobody Really Knows Me—

I CAN STILL SEE myself, age three, walking into the big auditorium in my home town of Richmond, Va., for my first dancing lesson. There were three boys and 25 girls. And, of course, the mothers gleefully watching their offspring. I loved it!

It has been said that I went into show business because I've always been an extrovert or because my mother, who used to act in little theaters in Toronto, Canada, and later taught dramatics at Maryland College, wanted to see her own ambitions realized through me.

The truth is that I got into show business because I was born with weak ankles and couldn't walk straight! When I was three, Mother enrolled me for dancing lessons, strictly for orthopedic reasons. Rather than make it obvious and make me apprehensive about taking corrective measures, she convinced me what fun it would be.

She was right! I loved appearing before an audience. But now that I look back—and I didn't feel this at the time—I think I did so well because I must have been a lonely child. The audience became my friend.

A year later I gave my first public performance at the Mosque Theater and learned a very important lesson. I accidentally tripped on the curtain and everybody laughed so hard that I kept tripping through the rest of the show. I should have gotten wise and left ballet for acting right then!

Instead, I went right on figuratively knocking myself flat to become a dancer, having a lot of laughs and cries in doing so but never quite making people know me—the real Shirley MacLaine, not the one in gossip columns or fan magazines.

Well, maybe I am hard to understand at first. I have a wonderful marriage with a man whose business keeps him thousands of miles away most of the time; my career is at a high point, yet I'm subject to moodiness and depression. I'm supposed to be a friend of the most exciting people in Hollywood, yet I'm still lonely.

Despite all this, I don't think I'm any more complicated than anybody else, and maybe my own story—unadorned by malicious gossip or laudatory press-agentry—will prove it.

That early taste of audience approval, for example, led me to a lonely and different life right from the start. I tried to make friends, but my schedule was so crowded there just wasn't time. When I was in school I got up at six, took the bus at seven, started classes at eight. I finished school at noon and went straight to

cheerleader practice, or one of the many other activities I volunteered for. Those lasted until 4; next I would rush to my dance lessons; home for dinner at 7:30; then rehearsals until midnight. It's easy to see why today's hectic schedule doesn't bother me.

In spite of the fun I got out of dancing, it wasn't everything to me. If I hadn't broken into show business, I might have become a physicist. I majored in physics in high school and would have taken it in college if I had continued my formal education.

I always had a great desire to learn—undoubtedly my father's influence—but the desire to entertain was greater. My father was in education before he became a band leader, and then turned to the real-estate business. That part of his life was not lost on me, either. Dad, who is still in real estate in Virginia, claims I could have done as well in his field as in mine, maybe because of what happened when I was 12 or so.

DAD WAS "SITTING ON A HOUSE" one weekend—which means he was waiting in a car and keeping an eye open for prospective buyers for a certain home. I told him cockily that if he could sell a house, so could I! Dad wanted to step out for some coffee anyway, so good-naturedly he said, "I'll let you watch the house for me, and if you show it to a buyer I'll give you 10 percent of my commission." He left both me and his half-smoked cigar in the car and walked off.

I had never smoked before—but then I had never sold a house, either. So I put the cigar in my mouth and had just lighted it when a family walked into the house. I rushed in after them. By the time I caught up with them, I was so green and coughing so hard that they must have taken me for a lung patient. I staggered ahead of them and, between coughs, described the home in glowing terms. Two days later they bought the house, but I've yet to get my commission from my father!

He more than made up for it, however, when he helped me get started in New York. I used a summer vacation to try out for the chorus in the revived "Oklahoma!" and Dad paid all the expenses until I got the job.

The years in New York were neither as easy and fun-filled nor as miserably difficult as they have sometimes been described. I moved into an apartment hotel for girls only. No male visitors were allowed above the lobby, and the doors were locked at 11:30. It

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Except ME By SHIRLEY MacLAINE

She's the most talked about and least understood star in Hollywood—possibly because she has never before revealed so much about herself and her marriage