## Betty Buckley on Norma Desmond

o play Norma Desmond in Sunset Boulevard, an actress must have certain obvious qualities. She must be of a certain age: preferably have a nodding acquaintance with menopause; and be able to act and sing. But there are more specific qualities that probably only those women who have played the part-Patti LuPone, Glenn Close, me, and our various understudies—are aware of. Having played this great role for the last seven months in London, I have written these qualities here for the Norma wannabes from all walks of life, the musical-theater devotees, those who've never thought about it, and the mildly curious. You must begin your work knowing that everyone—including every cabdriver—does Norma. It's good to have experienced a great deal of pain, suffering, and longing all of your life. World-class film experience is good so you can identify with the narcissism that's necessary to play Norma fully. It's also good to have been spoiled a bit by life (or at least know someone who's been spoiled) so you can understand her self-centeredness. Any decent actress over 45 with major musical and/or film experience can play Norma, but rodeo experi-



ence comes in very handy for riding the nineton house set whenever the operator crash-lands. You must have a very good support team, paid or otherwise. A variety of sweet pets and a world-class Freudian analyst is also very helpful. You will also need a great chiropractor, physiotherapist, and knee doctor. On your opening night, if you fall down the stairs, you must tell the press that you planned it as part of your mad scene. It's good if your name sells tickets. It's also good if the word of mouth about your performance sells tickets. You must have a great dresser and great wig dresser who can see in the dark to assist you in several quick changes throughout the evening, some of which are only 25 seconds long; and stagehands who get you to the right place at the right time (also in the

dark) and throw away your soggy Kleenexes and leftover throat lozenges without complaining. You must then understand with equanimity when the audience doesn't cheer after every costume change. You must have strong stomach muscles, work out every day, get lots of sleep, have

at least two massages, one foot reflexology, one manicure, and one pedicure (every week). You must wear long fiberglass-wrapped nails. You must not eat after the show at night or your Paramount skirt will ride up

the next day. It's good to have had more than one marriage or experience of serial monogamy; a co-star who says after every performance of your big secondact number, "Well done, dahling"; and a throat doctor who, having treated other Normas, has you repeat with regularity, "I'm the greatest."

whole heart that you are the greatest, but be insecure enough to wonder if that could be true. You must at some level enjoy turning yourself inside out eight times a week



and you must also once and for all reconcile yourself to the question "Why do opera stars sing only three or four times a week when we sing eight?" And on your many journeys up and down the stairs of the house set, you must love your banister. You must wear ear plugs when you shoot the leading man and have your hearing checked on a regular basis. (This is also a good reality check for flat singing.) You must research the appropriate turban heights for your particular face. You must really take to your heart a woman who wears not one but two diamond bracelets when she has a massage. You must have a taste for extremes. You must be the advocate of your character, to hopefully elicit the audience's empathy for her passions, excesses, delusions, and madness. You must respect, must regard, must love your Norma. It's very good to have sung and survived long runs of musicals and plays most all of your life; to have at least 32 years of professional experience (and 44 years of performing experience); and at least twenty years of voice lessons with a primo teacher. You need to be old in your head and young in your heart or the other way around. You must be gentle with yourself when you're beat or benched and recovering from an appendectomy. And when it all overwhelms you, you must step back, detach, and remind yourself of how much you wanted this job a year ago. BETTY BUCKLEY

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