

# ‘Diabetes? It’s a pain in the ass! And a blessing in disguise’

At 83, Broadway superstar and showbusiness legend Elaine Stritch has lost none of her famous feistiness – and none of her frankness either, as she describes life with diabetes, the ‘sack of rocks’ she’s carried for over 30 years.

INTERVIEW: PIERS FORD

Elaine Stritch cuts a singular figure as she steps out of the lift at the Covent Garden Hotel in London. Lean and wiry at 83, she is wearing knee-length white shorts with a matching cap pulled down over her blonde hair, and is laden with bags. The voice is instantly identifiable: gravelly and astringent, with that familiar, commanding timbre.

Its owner has some errands to run before we settle down for our interview, so I immediately find myself on bag-carrying duty as we set off on our Sunday afternoon mission. The actress has been in London with a revival of her award-winning one-woman show, *Elaine Stritch at Liberty*, staying on after the end of the run to catch up with friends and shows in the capital, which she called ‘home’ for more than ten years.

The next couple of hours are entrancing. Not, perhaps, for the hapless assistant on the Boots pharmacy counter, who has run out of one of Elaine’s prescription drugs and temporarily has to bear full responsibility for the lack of synchronisation between the British and American healthcare systems. But certainly for me, in the company of this Broadway legend.

At one point during her exasperated exchange with the pharmacist, Elaine turns to me and says: ‘My husband used to say

that everybody has their own sack of rocks.’ Diabetes, the reason we’re standing at the counter in the first place, is clearly one of her rocks. But at the same time, as she makes clear in her devastatingly frank, funny and poignant show, it has also been a life-saver, in an ironic kind of way.

In *At Liberty*, Elaine looks herself coldly in the eye and tells us exactly what she finds there after a life that has embraced tremendous professional success, laced with alcoholism, and personal happiness cut cruelly short in 1982 by the early death of her husband, fellow actor John Bay. Peppered with key songs from her career and an endless string of anecdotes, many of them typically self-deprecating, the show is a tour de force.

‘Diabetes?’ she muses. We’re back at the hotel and she’s tucking into two bowls of carrot soup, served at her request in paper cups with lids because they retain the heat better. ‘I don’t know. It’s the pits, it sucks, it’s time-consuming, it’s a pain in the ass. But if you want to look at the glass half full, you are given an opportunity to live just as long as anybody, maybe even longer, if you take care of yourself. And that’s why I sometimes think it’s a blessing in disguise. For me. Because I have a tendency to kick my heels up and not give a s\*\*\*. It’s a kind of ultimatum.’

Born in Detroit in 1925, Elaine attended drama school in New York with the likes of Marlon Brando and *Golden Girl* star Bea Arthur, and was herself starring on Broadway by the age of 20. She would go on to work with people like Ethel Merman and Noel Coward, and eventually arrived in the UK in 1972 with the London production of Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Company*, two decades of stage success safely under her belt. Here, she met and married Bay, and became a British television favourite, most notably as the brash American thriller writer Dorothy with a purse-lipped butler (Donald Sinden) in the ITV comedy *Two’s Company*.

## An unwanted role

Elaine’s type 1 diabetes was diagnosed while she was rehearsing a BBC radio production of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

‘I’d started to get very thin and to begin with I was the happiest girl in town,’ she recalls. ‘But my husband, who never really noticed things like that, said: “Elaine, you now have no ass at all, so I think you should look into this.” Then I started to get a thirst – not for booze – and I was drinking Coca-Colas all the time. And they weren’t diet ones so I was feeding right into my diabetes. Irene Worth, who was in the play with me and a ►►



good friend of mine, said: “Elaine, you’re very short-tempered. What is the matter with you? I think you should go to the infirmary”.’

Tests revealed that Elaine’s blood glucose level was extremely high and she was despatched to the London Clinic where diabetes – a word she only vaguely remembered hearing in her youth – was explained to her. A Chinese nurse introduced her to the world of insulin injections.

‘I was so scared but she showed me how to do it and when I managed, I was so thrilled I jumped up and down on the bed. And she exited with the timing of a brilliant actor. She reached the door, turned around and said: “I wouldn’t do that to myself for anything in the world.” Honest to God, it was brilliant. It gave me such a lift.

### Sobering thoughts

‘So did my husband. He was talking to the doctor – they thought I was asleep – who said he wanted to prepare John for some of the things that would happen to me. “She will start to be very impatient because diabetes goes up and down and that tends to be a trait,” he said. “She’ll be a little bit short-tempered, so you can expect all that to start.” “Start?” I heard my husband say! He was a barrel of laughs, actually, and he took such good care of me. It was a shock when he died. Who knew that he would go before me?’

Ironically, says Elaine, diagnosis came at a time when she had stopped drinking. The joke around London theatres was that she’d stopped drinking and it was such a shock to her system that she got diabetes.

‘Ho, ho, ho,’ she says deadpan, her acid sense of humour kicking in on cue. ‘I don’t know what the medical profession feels about this, but I think maybe alcohol had something to do with my diabetes. The terrifying thing is that when you have enough to drink – and by that I mean too much – you don’t care about food. So if you’re a heavy drinker, you’re constantly going up and down, your blood sugar is either real low or real high.

‘Actually, to drink as a diabetic is so dangerous. Not so much because of the alcohol but because if your judgement is grey, your vision a little off, you’re not going to know what time to take your insulin. You’ve got to be sober to live a day as a brittle [unstable] diabetic, which is what I am, totally insulin-dependent. You’ve got to know exactly what you’re doing with your shot, what your

blood sugar level is. And you can’t if you’re sitting around with Heinekens or Tanqueray martinis all afternoon.’

This common sense is now part and parcel of her life, but Elaine admits it took her some years to get there. Her teetotalism didn’t last beyond the diagnosis, and after John’s death – as she explains with unstinting honesty in her show – the drinking became a lot more serious. The turning point came after the wrap party for the Woody Allen film, *September*, in 1987. Elaine had a good part in the picture and returning home to the Carlyle Hotel in New York, where she still lives, after a long and celebratory evening, she collapsed outside her room with a major hypo. She was only saved by a waiter who happened to be passing on room service duty.

‘I stopped drinking for lots of reasons, mainly because it didn’t work for me any more,’ she says. ‘But also because I finally realised what it takes for me to get through the day with this disease.’

Today, she says, she’s had enough of hypos and the ‘funny’ stories that often go with them. And the intervals between have become longer as her management of the condition has improved. Living in hotels helps because apart from the fact that she is well looked after, never alone and surrounded by action – ‘The Carlyle is a brilliant hotel. If you come to America, spend your last dime but stay there’ – everybody knows that she has diabetes and what to do if she needs help. She remembers another close call in Salt Lake City.

### ‘Orange juice ma’am?’

‘Before I go to bed I take Lantis, for which I’m very grateful because it sees you through the night with less danger of having a hypo,’ she says. ‘And just before I turn my light out, I have some cereal. I put the milk in the freezer so it gets really cold and it’s delicious. So there I was, making a movie in Salt Lake City. I’d had my normal amount of daytime insulin and a light dinner three hours earlier. And I got into bed with my All Bran and Grapenuts all mixed up with a little bit of granola. Gorgeous. I couldn’t wait to put my feet up and watch the *Tonight Show*. The only trouble was, I fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillows and I hadn’t had my Lantis nightcap...’

Elaine came to on the floor. ‘You’re really fighting for your life and there’s no blood going to your brain’ – just enough to reach the phone and slur a call for help. Because



**Above:** Elaine travels widely but home is the Carlyle Hotel in New York: ‘it helps because you’re well looked after and never alone,’ she says.

she’d told the staff what might happen, they realised she was having a hypo.

‘The next thing I know, these three managers in tails turn up, each with a carafe of orange juice,’ she says. ‘And there I am in my T-shirt, barely decent, this blonde actress up to her ass in All Bran. They had to help me to the loo. Embarrassing? I couldn’t have cared less, I was just trying to stay alive. And they were so dear and sweet and elegant about it all. And they were responsible for me being alive. They were my friends.’

Elaine says the best advice she’s been given is ‘not to chase your diet with insulin. Settle on the best amount of food for you, and match it with the amount of insulin you need to eat it. Then stick to it. Check your blood glucose regularly, and exercise plenty.

‘It isn’t the trick of the week,’ she says. ‘Just find out how many units of insulin you should take for this kind of meal, what’s healthy for you. You might need more or less with age, but you’ll find that out. Do as you’re told! I have good genes and I think I’d probably live a long time if I didn’t have diabetes. But I’m not doing too bad. There aren’t a lot of people with diabetes who are in better shape at 50 than I am at 83, so I have to be grateful for that.’ ■