

JOAN COLLINS ON

EXCLUSIVE
BY CLEMMIE MOODIE
in Hollywood

AS I hover, awkwardly, for what seems an interminable amount of time, Dame Joan Collins clocks my hanging right hand. "Darling, I don't shake hands," she says, sashaying off.

This begins my lunch with showbusiness royalty and, as of the New Year honours list, a dame.

We may have got off to a shaky start but for the next 90 minutes Joan - sorry, Dame Joan - is a dream: feisty, witty and unapologetically opinionated. Wearing a cowboy hat and Michael Jackson-esque sunglasses throughout, she exudes Hollywood glamour. I want to be Joan.

She's 81 but she looks 20 years younger. Ahead of our interview, I was advised not to mention her age. But I needn't have worried - today, she is happy to discuss everything from Dynasty to Dignitas.

In fact, on the subject of the latter, the actress reveals she is backing calls for assisted dying to be legalised.

She says: "You have to enjoy life, and I live totally in the present. Touch wood, I've never had any health problems... but my husband Percy's mother had Alzheimer's and that's a terrifying illness."

"Somebody said to me the other day that people 100 years ago didn't get Alzheimer's because they died so young, and that's true."

"So if I was in that situation, I don't know what I would do. It would depend on how bad it is. But I agree with Dignitas, totally."

MESMERISED

Referring to having a disease like Alzheimer's, she says: "You don't want to live like that... It is far better to drift off slowly."

"I have so many children, so many grandchildren, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, such a big family, and I wouldn't want to inflict that on them."

"I mean, they don't let animals carry on suffering - so why let humans live?"

At this point, Joan springs, puma-like, from her seat and moves beside me, complaining the sun is too hot on her back.

With a thrice-weekly workout regime, it is no wonder she is still able to do the splits. Sitting in broad daylight in RivaBella, one of Joan's favourite restaurants in Los Angeles, I keep peering at her face. It is flawless and I am mesmerised.

At one point, she clocks me staring and, over the catty businesswoman, dives into her handbag for a foundation compact, part of her eponymous new Timeless Beauty range.

So how does she do it? "I'm religious about not getting the sun in my face," she says. "The sun is lethal out here so I always sunbathe wearing a hat, sunglasses and full make-up. I don't mind ruining the skin on the rest of my body, just not the face."

"I have a few liver spots now but, look, you get old - and it's far better than the alternative."

A size 10, she is careful about what she eats but she's normal with it.

Lunch is a grilled chicken salad with extra avocado, and she actually eats it.

"I watch my weight because I'm quite bosomy so if I don't, I just look like a lump."

"I don't count calories and I eat healthily, but I eat dairy."

"I don't believe in all this no-fat thing."

In her own words,



RADIANT
She smiles alongside fifth hubby



SOAP & GLORY
With John in Dynasty

she "doesn't suffer fools gladly". That hasn't always been the case for the five-times wed star who has now been happily married to theatre director Percy Gibson since 2002.

After arriving in Hollywood, aged 20, in 1953, Joan was ordered by movie bosses to lose weight - and given a box of diet pills containing speed.

She laughs: "20th Century Fox told me I was too heavy and to get down to 8st."

"They sent me to a doctor who put me on little green pills, and in two weeks I hardly slept but lost 5st."

On the subject of Oscars - Joan is on the voting panel - Patricia Arquette's rousing acceptance speech last month calling for greater pay equality between the sexes was close to Dame Joan's heart.

In 1981, Joan joined the then little-known,

HER YEARS AS A FILM LEGEND

You have to enjoy life and live in the present.. I've not had any health problems, but at the end no one should suffer



"When I think back to how tame The Stud was relatively, it's amazing"

struggling new soap opera Dynasty.

Playing Alexis Carrington - the scorned ex-wife of tycoon Blake, played by John Forsythe - she was an instant hit. Four years later it was the top rated show in the US.

She was nominated six times for a Golden Globe Award, winning in 1983. But network bosses paid her less than her male counterparts.

Joan believes this inequality is still rampant today.

She says: "It's endemic, and I think it's so unfair. How do they get away with it?"

"This is something women should be passionate about."

While the actress has had a long and illustrious, award-winning career, she is just as well known for her role in 1978 "soft porn" movie The Stud.

Based on the 1969 novel by her sister, Jackie, it co-starred Oliver Tobias. In film posters, the pair were seen dangling naked on a sex swing above a swimming pool.

A Fifty Shades of Grey of its day, it was a box office hit. So, has Joan read or watched Fifty Shades? She shakes her head.

"I have no desire to," she says. "When I think back to how tame The Stud was relatively, it's amazing."

"Actors nowadays have to do all this awful swallow-the-face kissing. Pausing briefly, Dame Joan adds: 'At least it's only the faces they're swallowing.'"

I ask her how she and Percy, a man 32 years her junior, keep things fresh after 13 years of marriage. She

tells me with a grin: "Although the passion inevitably does have to die down, the lust doesn't have to go."

"Oh God, I never talk about this. I'm not going there... I have to have a little dignity... I am a dame now, after all."

Joan's marital history has been interesting to say the least.

Her first marriage was to film star Maxwell Reed in 1952.

In 1963 she wed actor and singer Anthony Newley with whom she had

two children, Tara and Sacha. Joan then had daughter Katya with third husband Ronald Kass.

At the height of her Dynasty fame, Joan wed Swedish singer Peter Holm, a marriage that lasted just 13

months and ended badly. But with Percy, she appears to have found lasting happiness.

After meeting on the set of a stage production of Love Letters - "I asked Percy to buy me a new eyeliner, and he came back after half an hour clutching mascara. I knew then he wasn't gay" - the pair became firm friends before their romance.

So why could it be that a woman who is so au fait with the naked body, who posed for Playboy at the age of 50, refuses to shake hands with a stranger?

"It's the biggest way to spread germs so I just make it a rule during the winter," she says. "I don't really care if people think I'm rude."

"Would I rather shake hands or kiss? I'd rather do neither, frankly. I'd rather do the Japanese thing of bowing gracefully."

And, with that, the dame bows, and off she goes.



HAT THE HIGH SPOTS Our Clemmie with the star in LA

TOMORROW: THE DAY A PRAWN NEARLY KILLED ME

SIREN Posing in 1951 aged 18

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