

BELINDA

Better Red Than Dead

Belinda Todd is the nation's first homegrown screen queen — love her or hate her, you can't ignore her. Five days a week she presides over TV3's *Nightline*, itself a bold new concept for local late night television with its trademark mix of off-the-wall news items, celebrity interviews, "fantasy" sequences, arts coverage and show-closing rock videos.

Demented production values aside, one of the most prominent reasons for the show's success has been Miss Todd, the carrot-topped vamp who upstages her guests merely by her presence, for that is the quality BT has by the bucketload, that and one of the loudest, shortest wardrobes in town.

This year *Nightline* exploded back on our screens with overpowering graphics and a furiously wacky set in which our Bee looks a trifle lonely (not that she needs Gary McCormick to keep her company). So what's she like in person — at TV3 at four in the afternoon — this 28-year-old ex-South Islander who has risen so conspicuously to the top of the TV personality class? She greets me in TV3's inter-stellar reception area, whisking me away in her dynamic wake with a friendly word or a funny aside for everyone she meets until we reach our destination, a temporarily unused office in the newsroom right next to John Hawksby's new pocket-sized abode. Here Miss Todd deigns to give *RIU* an hour of her time.

So how did a demure weatherperson metamorphosise into the screen queen we see today?

Um... maybe I never was the demure weather person to start with, I feel more comfortable doing what I'm doing now. I like late night television, it suits me, it suits who I am and what I want to be, they're my hours, I'm not very good in the morning.

Where on earth did you spring from?

They found me one day in a gutter, took me out, scrubbed me clean... I came from radio — half the people I used to work with in radio now work in television so it's all the same thing really, it's a logical progression.

Did you always want to be famous?

I don't know whether anyone always wants to be famous except maybe Madonna. It never really occurred to me. I fell in — was she pushed or did she pull — no, I fell into radio and from there I sort of plummeted to television. I don't mean that in the going down sense of the word, but it's never been very planned. Opportunities arose and I took them.

Did you think you were destined to entertain?

No, I was going to pursue a serious career in medicine at one stage, I did all the sciences like scholarship chemistry and maths, but I was always best at English. I really wasn't one of those people who were in all the school plays.

Were you a bit of a show-off?

I suppose you'd have to ask the people I went to school with. Didn't the director of *Bad Taste* put you in his movie?

Yeah, but that was just so I could make a story for *Nightline*. I rang him because I think his stuff is really great and he said 'Why don't you come down and do a bit part and we'll make a story out of it', so no, I couldn't really say he chased me and said 'I have to have you in this story'. It's not one of the intrinsic parts of the movie, it could end up on the cutting room floor.

So you've no more acting plans?

Well, what I do is part acting. I like to be paid for what I do. It's very hard to work as an actress in this country and it's also one of those awful titles to have — 'actor' — it tends to limit, it's a label.

For some reason *Nightline* seems different this year. Has it got a different brief or is just the new set?

Basically, we're still doing what we did, the thing is now that it's a longer show, we have to do more of it and we're still building up the resources to do that. *Nightline* in its form this year hasn't reached its potential. I

don't think it's the show we ultimately want it to be.

How much of an ideas input do you have?

Lots. We're a very small team, we're only four people and Gary and Kerry, so we all do everything. It's an hour every night of invented television, which is an awful lot night after night and you're only as good as the show that went before. That's the other thing with nightly television, they constantly have a comparison of you of that night and the night before and the night to come so you've only just finished one show and you think shit, I have to do it all over again tomorrow. You're a great ad-libber, but you also read autocue. Do you write that all that stuff yourself?

We write as a team, how many intros I write depends on whether I'm shooting a story or cutting a story, but because we've all worked very closely for so long we all write the same. Belinda who does *Nightline* is a very stylised character who says things a certain way which is why television works, television is not reality.

How similar are you to Belinda-on-the-screen?

She's part of me. TV's very two dimensional, she's as much of me as there can be on television. You don't get in-depth and personal because that's not what the medium's about. There's more to me than her. At first people called Belinda a bimbo.

Still do, to a certain extent. You still get a lot of 'whore' feedback for short skirts and things. You get a lot of that, perceptions — the dyed hair — see me coming down the street and you figure 'gosh, it's either a transvestite or Belinda Todd', which is weird.

Do you think people have trouble equating glamour with brains?

It's true in television. You could get someone up there, have them beautifully groomed, get them to read well, blink at regular intervals and they could be dumb as custard. Presenting in its basic form isn't very hard, it doesn't require any intelligence because all you have to do is look at the autocue, smile and blink so people could be quite right in making that assumption, it could be true and I don't have any problem thinking I have to defend it

because I know it isn't. It's fine by me what they think and people always believe what they want to believe anyway.

You know how you read women's magazine articles with girls defending themselves as incredibly intellectual, 'I'm not really a bimbo', it's got to be one of the great cliched lines of the female presenter interview.

What qualities do you look for in a man?

Oh dear god! What a gold American Express card question! A convertible... um... an ageing millionaire with a heart condition... someone big, black and lightly oiled... personality, basically. I'm a head person, I think smart people are a real turn on and funny people. Again, because serious people are so dull. Anyone who takes the world seriously is, one, going to get really depressed and two, get really dull after a while. So, yeah, humour and personality. It also doesn't hurt if they're incredibly gorgeous, well-built, rich... Good to see you've got your priorities right — brains first.

Well, it's true. You can get the most beautiful looking man who's completely dull or totally self-obsessed. And I think good-looking men are much vainer than good-looking women, it's a strange thing. I know a lot of women who are very attractive who aren't really conscious of it, but you strike a good-looking man and most times he knows he's good looking and is using it to his advantage.

I've read that men love you and women are jealous. Is this true?

I hear it too, but of course it's very hard from my point of view because it never directly affects me. It's the sort of thing people say to other people so I dunno — I mean, I have friends who are men and I have friends who are women, but yes, I hear this back from people like my friends. I can be a liability to have as a friend because they'll hear people talking about me and they'll feel obliged to defend me, whereas of course that never happens to me because people don't tend to confront you. It's odd really, I'm probably the most underinformed person about myself.

Is life more fun as a redhead?

Ooh yeah, I think it's a great colour for hair. God should have invented it himself so I wouldn't have to go to all this trouble every week touching it up.

Do you wear a disguise when you go to the supermarket?

Yeah, my disguise is I've got no make-up on, my hair's tied up, I put my glasses on — I just look ugly! People think that you're not you

rather than you are you, which is kind of nice because people don't tend to approach me — the character on television's fairly intimidating and the only people that do tend to come up either have some genuinely nice things to say and must have been harbouring them for a long time or people who have really nasty things to say and they're a bit pissed.

Do you get horrible or nice mail?

A bit of both. I get some very scary mail, loonies write to me. There are some letters you read and you just feel down, but you really feel more misunderstood than anything else. That was the difficulty last year when *Nightline* was combined with the news show — people were convinced I was reading the news and thought it was a terrible style.

Do you enjoy being a celebrity?

It has its ups and downs. People are really nice to you in restaurants and it's much easier to get things done because they recognise my name.

Nightline gets much praise for consistently airing new New Zealand music. Are you a bit of a rock fan?

No, we end up with a lot of music on the show, but it's not because I'm a bit of a rock fan. There tends to be a lot of stories about music that we can do, although I do feel strongly that there should be an outlet for NZ arts and music falls into that category. We cover a lot of art shows, theatre — we've had a great time with the Festival in Wellington and I think that's good because there is still the cringe that comes from New Zealand cultural things, which is the same cringe *Nightline* suffers from. *Nightline* is very indigenous and proud of it, it's a very New Zealand show, interested in New Zealanders and reflecting a New Zealand view of things.

Who are your heroes? Madonna? You've dressed up a bit like her on occasion.

Again, that's for television. You wouldn't dress like that in private?

No, you'd keep stabbing people with your bra — very embarrassing. There are some people on television who are very good — David Letterman — but again, when you're on television it's the sum input of a lot of people, no one person makes a whole television show. When you're in front of the camera there's a whole lot of people making you look good. That's why I really objected to them naming Paul Holmes

Entertainer of the Year because Paul is a product of a lot of people's work. I think Paul does what he does very well, but he doesn't concept it

himself. It was giving one man credit for an entire team's work. Plus I felt sorry for all the entertainers in the country who probably bust their buns writing their own material, straining for all sorts of things. Maybe they'll nominate you next time.

I hope not. I think I fall into the same category, although I probably do more of my own writing, researching and editing. But I think entertainers in this country get a rough ride. We in television do pretty well. I think I'm extraordinarily lucky to have a job like mine because I get to fulfill the performance side and still have a really nice lifestyle, work good hours, have people who look after me — there are very few entertainers in this country who could say life is as sweet.

It takes up my whole life. Somehow the show is always intertwined whether I'm here or not. I have weekends free and normally I sit around like a vegetable. When you finish the show at 11.30 or 12 at night you're up, you're awake, it's to me what 5 o'clock is to a lot of people who work nine to five, so you go out, you drink, you socialise and by the time the weekend comes around you've had it, there's nothing left. So I tend to sit at home, maybe go out to dinner with friends, read, it sounds excruciatingly dull, but left to my own devices that's about all I've got the energy for.

Finally, having scaled the heights of media success in New Zealand, what are you going to do next?

I don't know, it's hard. What I do is fairly specific, it's very hard to leave and go looking for a job like this, I like what I do. Television does change so fast, I have no plans beyond it. Things have always moved fast enough for me to not have much time to look ahead. But there's a lot of things that need to be achieved. I don't think the show is where it should be and we have to keep experimenting until we make it better.

And on that note we concluded the interview. Belinda set a cracking pace back out to reception and I remembered all the questions I'd forgotten to ask her, like what are her vices and what's her favourite TV show (*Mr Bean* she said in the lift). I left her collecting her drycleaning (all those suits!) and stumbled into the late afternoon sunshine, reeling a little from unaccustomed contact with such a high voltage interviewee. She fluffs the odd autocue and she's mistress of some very bad puns, but there's no doubt about it, Belinda Todd's a trouper.

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