



**Ute Lemper, facing page, above and below left, is best known for her rendition of the Brecht-Weill songbook; she has been described as the spiritual heir of Marlene Dietrich, above right**



## LEMPER LIGHTS UP WHEN SHE TALKS ABOUT HER LATEST VENTURE

when, in 1989, Dietrich called her up: “She’d sent me a note of congratulation after I’d won the Moliere Award [the French equivalent of a Tony] for Sally Bowles in Paris, and I’d written her a letter back. She found me in this little hotel in Germany and we spoke for two hours.

“I wish I could remember more of what we talked about,” says Lemper, who has been called Dietrich’s spiritual heir. “It was so long ago. All I know is that — *boom!* — everything just took off from there.”

Lemper has gone on to write songs inspired by Weill’s musical theatre; her 2000 album *Punishing Kiss* featured material written for her by Weill admirers such as Nick Cave, Elvis Costello and Tom Waits.

Her recent Charles Bukowski venture — “a very garage, jazz-influenced, open, theatrical and dirty show” — seemed to position the (German-born) American poet smack-bang in underground Berlin.

She has her critics, of course. There are those who complain that Lemper’s shows have begun to feel weighed down by her Weimar material; that her Germanic self-hatred is neurotic; that her act has become mannered, even cartoonish. All such complaints underestimate her commitment to the Jewish-

German dialogue and the material’s historic context, and the ease with which she inhabits her onstage archetypes. “My work is about the magic of life and the burden of life,” she has said. “It depends on whether you see the glass half full or half empty.”

If she found any medium cumbersome, it was musicals: “My vision changes each time I perform so I was always a little misplaced on Broadway and in [London’s] West End. For six shows a week I had to stay true to a certain style of presentation, which really wasn’t me.”

She rubs the back of her neck with fine-boned fingers. “I have two herniated discs in here from all the whiplash I gave myself dancing in *Chicago*,” she says with a sigh.

For a while she required steroid injections for a pinched sciatic nerve, the legacy of a fall from a horse a few years ago. (She got right back on again once she’d recovered.)

It’s these little aches and pains that remind her that she’s getting older. Other than that she feels — and looks — considerably younger.

“Fifty! I can’t believe it! I feel 35!” She shakes her head in disbelief.

“I feel crazy, horny, passionate, in the middle of f. . king life!”

There certainly has been no stopping her. A modern-day renaissance woman, Lemper has worked with symphony orchestras, held exhibitions of her expressionist paintings, written articles in journals and appeared in films for directors such as Peter Greenaway and Robert Altman — for the latter she strutted naked and pregnant down a catwalk in *Pret-a-Porter*.

She’s just finished shooting a cameo in Woody Allen’s latest, yet-to-be-named flick (“I’m a Berlin cabaret singer,” she says with a comic roll of her eyes). Lemper used to be a regular performer at the plush Cafe Carlyle in Manhattan, where the veteran director, a keen clarinetist, has a residency with his jazz band.

“The audience was getting too Republican for me,” says Lemper, who moved to New York in 1997. “I’m much more comfortable at Joe’s.”

That’s Joe’s Pub on the Upper West Side, a cosy venue around the corner from the apartment Lemper shares with Turkishher, their children Jonas, 2, and Julian, 7, and her daughter Stella, 17, whose father is comedian David Tabatsky (with whom Lemper also has a 19-year-old son, Max). She has a penthouse workspace with a piano and a painter’s easel at the top of her apartment block.

“Joe’s Pub is where I try out all my new projects,” she says. “I did the Neruda there and it went so well I booked some concerts. It’s brand-new; so far I’ve only performed it in Verona in Italy and once at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. I can’t wait to bring it to Australia.”

Lemper lights up when she talks about her latest venture, which marries the intensely rhythmic poetry of Neruda — among the greatest and most prolific of 20th-century Latin American poets — with music co-composed by Lemper and bandoneon player Marcelo Nisinman, and played by a six-piece band.

She picks up the slim volume of Neruda poems I’ve been swooning over by way of research.

“I found this little book by coincidence,” she says, flicking through it. “It was perfect: simple poetry written from the heart. It was about love and pain, joy and obsession. *Puedo escribir los versos mas tristes esta noche . . .*” She recites the opening sentence of Neruda’s *Poema 20*. “Tonight I can write the saddest lines.”

The show features songs in Spanish, French and English.

“It is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever done,” she says.

It also seems the most random — a German artist taking on a South American folk hero? Although she had nailed the elegant *nuevo tango* repertoire of Piazzolla, which she toured with the latter’s original sextet and with Nisinman throughout Europe in 2011, this was different. She was creating music from scratch.

“I’d done the Bukowski show so I knew that

I could crawl into poetry and make music around it,” she says. “I also knew how much I loved the bandoneon, which is an instrument of tango, but so haunting and textured and colourful, it is like a voice itself.”

That night, onstage at the Teatro La Fenice, Lemper tells a funny story about the bandoneon’s invention in Germany and the mix-up with the accordion that saw it being shipped down to Argentina. All while prowling the stage, sitting back-to-back with her pianist and draping her boa around bandoneon player Victor Villena.

Then she launches into *Ne Me Quitte Pas* and soon everyone is bawling their eyes out.

**Ute Lemper** performs at the Brisbane Concert Hall as part of the Brisbane Festival on September 13, then tours to Perth, Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney.

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