

What makes an ordinary life extraordinary?  
When you live it like Mimi Weddell

# Flats Off

90 IS THE NEW 40!



STARRING MIMI WEDDELL • DIRECTOR JYLL JOHNSTONE



EDITORS KATE STILLEY STEINER AND BILL WEBER • MUSIC FRANKIE SPELLMAN AND STEVIE BUZZELL  
PRODUCERS JYLL JOHNSTONE AND MICHAEL ARLEN DAVIS • A CANOBIE FILMS PRODUCTION © 2008

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## Short Synopsis

*Hats Off*, a feature-length documentary, profiles the beauty and eccentricities of an extraordinary woman, 93-year-old actress Mimi Weddell.

With the style and grace of Katharine Hepburn, the smoky wit and wisdom of Dorothy Parker, and her own personal philosophy, “rise above it,” Mimi is truly an iconic American original, rising above the mundane and difficult confines of her own daily life, to reach for the stars and fulfill her dreams.

*Hats Off* captures the essence of this unique woman whose full-time acting career began at age 65, and whose daily routine mocks the traditional image of old age. From her 14-hour days at acting auditions and cattle calls, to her weekly gymnastics and dance workouts, Mimi Weddell exudes a ‘can-do, will-do’ attitude in the face of life’s trials and tribulations, and moves through her challenges with grace, encouraging us all to be more than we are.

A gentle examination of family relationships, love, and ultimately the dreams which drive us, *Hats Off* is a compelling and entertaining documentary that inspires, and urges us to celebrate the underdog, and the Mimi in us all.

*Hats Off* is a Canobie Films Production starring Mimi Weddell. Directed by Jyll Johnstone and produced by Jyll Johnstone & Michael Arlen Davis. Co-starring Sarah Dillon, Kit Dillon, Tom Weddell, and Anna Weddell, *Hats Off* running time is 84 minutes.

## Long Synopsis

*Hats Off*, a feature-length documentary, profiles the beauty and eccentricities of an extraordinary woman, 93-year-old actress Mimi Weddell.

With the style and grace of Katharine Hepburn, the smoky wit and wisdom of Dorothy Parker, and her own personal philosophy, “rise above it,” Mimi is truly an iconic American original, rising above the mundane and difficult confines of her own daily life to reach for the stars and fulfill her dreams.

*Hats Off* captures the essence of this most unusual woman, named at age 90 by *New York Magazine* as one of the “50 Most Beautiful People in New York,” whose full-time acting career began at age 65 upon the passing of her husband, and whose daily routine mocks the traditional image of old age. From grueling 14-hour days at cattle call auditions to her weekly gymnastics and dance workouts, Mimi Weddell exudes a ‘can-do, will-do’ attitude in the face of life’s trials and tribulations, and moves through her challenges with grace, encouraging us all to be more than we are.

Shot over the course of 10 years, by critically-acclaimed, award-winning director Jyll Johnstone, (*Martha & Ethel, Throwing Curves*) *Hats Off* covers a time span when most seniors are planning their funerals and estate bequests. Instead, *Hats Off* follows the breathtaking pace of Weddell, a bohemian free spirit now forced to share her east side Manhattan apartment with her two more traditionally-minded grown children and a grandchild. Like most families, their relationship is complex, and the mother-daughter/mother-son dynamic adds a fascinating layer of depth to an already compelling and entertaining film.

When her beloved husband Dick dies, “leaving nothing behind but bills, poor man,” Mimi does what she has to do to stay afloat, even attending an audition on the way to his memorial and landing the lead role in the cult film *Dracula’s Last Rites*, which marks the beginning of her career. Since that time, 25 years ago, Mimi has been seen in print ads for companies **Louis Vuitton**, **Burberry**, **Juicy Couture**, and **Nike**, to name a few; in photo spreads for *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*; on TV series including *Sex and the City* and *Law and Order*; and in feature films such as: *Across the Universe*, *Hitch*, and *The Purple Rose of Cairo*.

But Weddell isn’t a star. She never wanted to be. She just wants to work.

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## About Mimi Weddell

*“Grace is... You dance as you walk through life. If you don’t dance, you cannot aspire. You do not lift up from this earth.” - Mimi Weddell*

Actress-Model-Mother-Independent Thinker-Free Spirit Mimi Weddell is extraordinary by anyone’s account. A striking beauty who speaks with authority and passion on any number of topics, Mimi, cigarette holder in hand, strikes a pose the moment the camera is on her. The Grande Dame instinctually finds her light and begins to put on a show.

And what a show! 93-years-old and moving with an intensity most 20-year-olds only dream about, Mimi conquers the world on a daily basis thanks to her wit, grace and her mantra—“Rise Above It”—the phrase written on the walls and even the kitchen floor of the New York City apartment she shares with her daughter, son, son-in-law, and until recently, grandson. “Rise Above It” will become a new catch phrase when audiences young and old meet and fall in love with the unsinkable Miss Weddell.

### **MIMI on the film, HATS OFF...**

Ask Mimi what she thinks about the film which chronicles ten years of her life from age 80 to 90, and instead of a review you are treated to her observations of the process. For Mimi, it’s all about the work, and the joy the work brings. Well, that, and now the added pleasure of watching the film with audiences at the **Telluride Film Festival World Premiere**, and at the equally prestigious **Palm Springs International Film Festival**.

“The audiences are darling, splendid! I had a small moment of apprehension just prior to seeing the film with the audience,” admitted Mimi. “I’ve changed a great deal over the ten years that the film was shot. I’m slowing down and I can’t stop that.”

“You can’t put on camera all the subtleties of one’s life. I hope the film speaks to what I might have done or how I may have affected others.”

### **MIMI on getting married again...**

At Telluride, one gentleman asked the question Mimi says she’s heard many times before. “He asked if I wanted to get married again,” exclaimed Mimi. “Right after Dick died, it never occurred to me to get married again, I was too busy. Sure, if I’d thought about someone replacing Dick, but Dick’s élan, his panache—damn few men like that in the world as it is! It’s a rare man who can give you water and make it taste like champagne.”

## **MIMI on working with director JYLL JOHNSTONE...**

“When Jyll first approached me about the film, I didn’t know it would be such a production, so I said ‘sure,’” admitted Mimi. “That’s my attitude about everything, so of course I said ‘sure’. I never thought it’d be ten years!”

“Jyll is so delightfully casual,” said Mimi. “She never raised her voice or made demands. She has such ‘speaking eyes’; they tell you a lot more.”

“I had the pleasure of appearing in *Across the Universe* as an extra,” Mimi continued. “Director Julie Taymor was nearby. All I had to do was sit, looking for the entire world like a grand dame, and watch her, observe her. You could feel her holding her control. When you see the stamina and genius it took her to do that, it’s remarkable. Jyll has the same capacity as Julie does, more and more I saw Jyll with that same control. Women, especially if they’re creative, aren’t intuitively tuned in to that control, which men are naturally. It’s rare when you see it. It was wonderful to watch that in Jyll.”

## **MIMI on the meaning of work...**

“At this age of 93,” confided Mimi, “projects have to have substance for me to consider them. They have to *do* something. That’s the impetus for me—not saving the world (it’s so pointless), but there has to be something in a project that means something more than its individual parts. I always do a better job, whether I’m paid or not, if I’m on a project that will impact people.”

## **FAMILY BONDS**

*Hats Off* challenges the audience to think about their own family dynamics while they watch Mimi’s relationship with her grown children. For Mimi’s daughter, Sarah, who plays a large part in the film, Mimi’s life and her own are powerfully entwined.

## **SARAH, Mimi’s daughter (and co-star) SPEAKS OUT...**

“Coming back home as an adult and living with my mom for twenty years is not something I’m proud of,” Sarah said. “And if my mom lived in Des Moines, Iowa, we wouldn’t be living together. But when I came back from Europe with my family, the jobs in my field (book conservation and binding) were in New York City. I was making \$17,000 a year at the Metropolitan Museum as a book binder, with a sick husband, a small child and a job that couldn’t pay the dry cleaning bills. We had no money. Moving in with Mimi was a financial blessing. Mimi became my partner in raising my son Kit.”

“Now I think it’s ironic,” smiled Sarah, “that I’m ‘taking care of’ the woman who used to take care of me. And what if I hadn’t moved back in? It’s so much luckier that I didn’t

have to uproot a family to come back to care for Mimi. It all flows into the role I have to take on, which I am happy to do.”

“Mimi thinks her children are the earthbound ones. I think -- lucky for you, you have someone who is tethered to the real world! Talk to me when you can’t figure out how to pay the phone bill. Talk to the earthbound girl!”

“I would think that just seeing Mimi on camera, at the gym, hanging from rings, confident in herself, would inspire anyone. Her sense of style is so unique; she dresses on a shoestring for heaven’s sake, not on those million dollar budgets other models have. If she can do it, anyone can do it.”

### **How Mimi and director Jyll Johnstone met...**

“I’ve known Mimi since I was little,” explained filmmaker Jyll Johnstone, about how she started the process which would lead to the 11-year journey bringing *Hats Off* to the screen. “I went to school with Sarah from the first through the sixth grade, but I got to know Mimi later in the ‘80’s when I was an actress and I’d see her down at SAG going out on cattle calls just like me.”

“She was different than the other character actors—elegant, refined, and certainly far cleverer; I just thought I’d start following her around to see what she was about.”

### **The director’s POV...**

“The film for me really is about pulling back the curtain,” said Johnstone, “on acting, on aging, on family relationships. It’s all about what is and isn’t exposed.”

“So often, here in America, in our culture, the elderly are put away, and aren’t spoken about,” continued Johnstone. “I admire that Mimi wants to go out and work, she doesn’t give up, she just keeps on going. I am totally in awe of that. I think the film has really helped me in understanding that it’s okay to age, because look, you can be a Mimi!”

“In their family, Mimi took on the typically male role. Much more than Dick, Mimi was the breadwinner, the person who financially as well as emotionally kept them together, even though she wasn’t often around. But she also kept these incredibly high standards: Her children would go to private school; they would be taught to a standard she set for them. She kept her own dreams as well her family’s needs at the same level.”

“She has made her dreams her reality. She loves the day-to-day of it. This is why Mimi is inspiring...to me and to all of us who worked on the film.”

“When we first began to film Mimi, it wasn’t at all clear where this exploration would lead,” admitted Johnstone. At first, no one would even allow us to film her auditioning. But when at last they did, a new level emerged, as did the beginnings of a story.”

“Still, it wasn’t until a year ago, with the fourth rough edit, that I thought we had something for an audience.”

“It was because at last I saw her *age* on film. I had a context to compare the Mimi of today with the Mimi of ten years ago. Her amazing spirit and will leapt out from the screen.”

“Mimi shows she is a survivor in a very entertaining and gracious way—even in challenging environments like cattle calls. I got to embrace her passion, her enjoyment of what she does. She’s not looking for stardom; she’s looking to refresh her passion as often as possible.”

## **Jyll Johnstone & Michael Arlen Davis**

### **Producers**

“Jyll begins with character,” notes Michael Arlen Davis, filmmaking partner and husband of *Hats Off* director Jyll Johnstone. “Is the person interesting? Intriguing? Once she’s started filming, Jyll typically takes time to sit on the project, consider it. Mull it over. Then she films some more. It could be six months later...or a year...or in this case...eleven.”

“This process doesn't always pan out,” admits Michael. “And one has to have a great deal of patience. Jyll has started filming projects where the story never gels, never becomes apparent and those have been let go.”

“Michael is my support,” says Jyll. “He allows me the time and space to find the film creatively and birth it. He is a wonderful collaborator.”

Michael continues, “I stay out of the process until the very end; in the case of *Hats Off*, I stayed out for eight years until the third rough edit. When I finally saw it, I flipped!”

“My job is to work on the budget, move us through the post process,” adds Michael. “Jyll handles all the creative and manages the post details—the mechanics, the polish and look.”

“Our goal is to make films that we would like to see,” says Michael. “Not formulaic films or anything a studio would necessarily make, but small stories about interesting people and characters so that when an audience sees them – they’re moved, they feel the work has added value to their lives. The film is not really ‘thought out’ as much as ‘felt through’; more instinctual than rational.”

“We believe Mimi’s story is a very American one: iconic in its own way.” Michael sums it up, “We hope the film is inspirational in any of the forms in which people may view it—in a theatre with others, at home with family, or on their laptop while traveling alone.”

## Frankie Spellman & Stevie Buzzell

### Original Music

“The definition of music is: sound, silence and time,” says Frankie Spellman, one half of the music team that composed the soundtrack for *Hats Off*. Frankie, who started out as an actor before returning to his musical calling, and Stevie Buzzell, who Frankie calls his musical soul mate, had already been working for years via long distance—Frankie in Florida and Stevie in Maine.

“Stevie and I had been ghost writing and composing music for television for a few years when we got the opportunity to write the music for *Hats Off*. When they first contacted us about scoring the film, Jyll and Michael were in Italy so the main mode of communication had to be through email. We auditioned by writing a few songs based on Jyll’s description of the film, without having seen any footage.

“Easy enough, we thought! We’ll just write some geriatric music. The first few songs we uploaded didn’t get the positive response we were expecting. After listening to each song they would email us explaining that we missed the point.”

“Feeling our disappointment they finally sent us a rough edit DVD. When we viewed it, we sat slack jawed. We went back to the drawing board. We understood that we had to write music that had Mimi’s energy, wit, sophistication and fortitude.”

“Mimi has had some disappointments in her life, but she was born a stoic New Englander. I get that,” admits Frankie. “I used it to remind us to be rich with emotion but not overwrought. And Michael and Jyll emphasized from the start that the music needed to sit under the film, not alongside, or even worse, on top.”

Frankie and Stevie compose to each other’s strengths: Frankie is the melody and lyric man, Stevie the chords fellow and master of 17 musical instruments. Using a Powerbook G4, mac.com, high quality microphones and pre-amps, as well as many real musical instruments, Frankie and Stevie were convinced they could create just the right creaky, clacking key noise to make music that would fit to the character of Mimi. It was the very personality of those real instruments, rather than just sampled instrumental sounds, that both Frankie and Stevie felt would bring life to their work. In the end, they used nearly a dozen instruments on the soundtrack, including mandolin, acoustic guitar, classical guitar, clarinet, alto sax, drums, baritone sax, tenor sax, acoustic bass and electric guitar.

“The first song we wrote after seeing the rough edit was a quirky Dixieland-ish tune called “Possum Ramble” (the film’s first music cue). When we uploaded the song, we didn’t get an email response from Jyll and Michael. We got a phone call instead—with congratulations for finally getting Mimi and the film!”