



Teri Garr gives MS the kiss-off

BY EVAN HENERSON, Staff Writer

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Teri Garr has a great title for a memoir or a solo performance, but her health won't cooperate enough for her to use it.

That's a good thing. The comic actress - who receives a Distinguished Alumni Award from California State University, Northridge, on Saturday - would prefer nobody have to answer the question "Does This Wheelchair Make Me Look Fat?"

So if there's ever a sequel to her 2005 memoir, "Speed Bumps: Flooring It Through Hollywood," Garr figures to go with "One Foot in the Grave and the Other on a Banana Peel."

"I'm thinking of putting things together, maybe a one-woman show," says Garr. "I'll see. God knows, I've got stories to tell."

Rehabilitation from a brain aneurism Garr suffered in December 2006 has progressed, and the actress, 61, is back on her feet, joking that the best place to store her wheelchair is at the bottom of the swimming pool "because I don't need it."

Doctors performed a coil embolization, requiring

a hole to be drilled in the side of the actress' head. She spent the months following the procedure relearning speech and movement.

"Tenacity. I learned that at CSUN," she says. "You keep going."

She still has, as she puts it, "a touch of MS (multiple sclerosis)," but Garr faces the disease - and other health-related setbacks - with the same wit, humor and off-the-cuff ribaldry.

"The other day, a guy came to fix my computer, and I told him, 'I've got good news and bad news,' " recounts Garr. "The bad news is I've got to sell my house because I can't work. The good news is I'm walking."

"He said, 'I think the good news is much better than the bad news,' " she continues. "I have to look at it that way."

The remark and the attitude are vintage Garr, according to officials with the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. Since going public with the disease in 2002, Garr has been a frequent speaker for the NMSS and has chaired its Women Against MS education and fundraising arm.

"She is quite an extraordinary woman," says Arney Rosenblat, NMSS associate vice president of public affairs. "There's a tremendous amount of warmth and a lack of pretension about her. People feel that their disease is important because she's there to talk about it."

Happy to oblige, returns Garr, if it means "wiping



this thing off the face of the Goddamned Earth."

"It's a bad, scum-sucking pig of a disease," adds Garr, who has felt the effects of MS since the mid-1980s. "Sometimes I call it MASS."

For Saturday's 10th annual Distinguished Alumni Awards, Garr will join fellow honorees Bill Handel, morning radio host on KFI (640 AM); and Adriano Ocampo Uria, science programmer at NASA.

"We look at people who have reached the pinnacle of success in their careers," says Gray Mounger, CSUN's assistant vice president of alumni relations.

The video tribute will include highlights from Garr's film career as well as a photograph of her performing on a CSUN stage - the university was then called San Fernando Valley State College - in the 1960s.

Any performance photos may well take the actress by surprise, as her most vivid memories of campus life in Northridge are of the roles she didn't get.

"I built flats and sets. I would staple canvas onto frames and paint them," Garr says. "And I wanted to be in the plays."

Garr, who lived at home in Van Nuys during her college years, did get into one musical cabaret, which was all about college life. And she remembers being forced to take a costume design class, which she thought she would hate

but ended up appreciating.

She left school after two years, having already appeared in films such as "A Swingin' Affair" and "Pajama Party." Garr would go on to be a dancer in several Elvis Presley movies and later joined the cast of the variety show "Shindig."

Garr says she intended to return to school, but her professional career dictated otherwise.

"I always wanted to be a college girl. I didn't succeed, but I've succeeded in the business I chose, I guess," Garr says. "And (at CSUN) I learned to handle the disappointment of not getting into those plays. You do something else with the energy and rage. It's an important lesson in life."

Over a career that has spanned five decades and included roles in more than 140 films and TV or variety-

show episodes, Garr has worked for Steven Spielberg ("Close Encounters of the Third Kind"), Mel Brooks ("Young Frankenstein"), Carl Reiner ("Oh, God!") and Francis Ford Coppola ("One From the Heart" and "The Conversation").

She is an Oscar nominee (for playing a desperate actress in "Tootsie") and has hosted "Saturday Night Live" three times.

She'll be seen in the upcoming films "Kabluey" with Lisa Kudrow (whose mother she played on "Friends") and in the dark comedy "Expired," in which she'll be the mother to Samantha Morton's

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meter maid. Garr's character, somewhat ironically, uses a wheelchair.

"It's a good part," says Garr, "and in ('Kabluey') I just act crazy. So I'm not dead yet, contrary to popular belief."

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