



## THE ORIGINAL

# DIVAS

A dramatic anthology series details the bitter feud between Hollywood leading ladies

**FEUD: BETTE AND JOAN** Sundays from March 12 at 8.30pm on **showcase** [114] available in the **DRAMA** pack

Ryan Murphy was 10 years old when he wrote a fan letter to screen icon Bette Davis. She wrote back and their correspondence continued, including a four-hour interview at her home after he became a journalist in his 20s.

Now, the writer, director and producer behind hit shows including *Nip/Tuck*, *Glee*, *American Horror Story* and *Scream Queens* has a new anthology series, *Feud*. The first season has been devoted to the real-life infamous grudge between Bette Davis (Susan Sarandon) and Joan Crawford (Jessica Lange).

Over eight episodes the story flashes forward and back to pivotal moments while focusing on their only on-screen collaboration, in the 1962 thriller film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*

### PASSION PROJECT

"I wasn't interested in doing anything that was campy," Murphy explains of the series' premise. "I was interested in something deeper with more emotion and pain because I think what happened to both women was very painful."

Having formed a relationship with Davis, Murphy admits he was conscious of not overplaying the character.

"I got to know Bette Davis through the years and while she put on this larger-than-life camp image in public, in person she was very emotional and real, and that's what interested me."

He adds, "What I love about the series is that even though it's set in 1962, the themes and issues in the show are so modern because women are still dealing with sexism, ageism and misogyny 50 years later."

### AN EPIC RIVALRY

While the two movie icons had been rivals since their heydays in the '30s and '40s, their attempt at burying the hatchet and salvaging their careers in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* was a miserable – yet memorable – failure.

The studio planted newspaper items to deliberately fan the flames of their rivalry and create buzz around the film.

Meanwhile, Davis made fun of Crawford's obsession with her looks and use of falsies in her bra, while Crawford complained to the press about Davis kicking her in the head during filming and having body odour!



Above from top: the remarkable transformation from actresses Sarandon (left) and Lange into Davis and Crawford; series creator Murphy; Lange; Sarandon. Opposite: Davis (left) on set in 1962 with Crawford

### BIG SHOES TO FILL

Susan Sarandon, who won an Oscar for the 1995 drama *Dead Man Walking*, says she was initially hesitant to take on 11-time Oscar-nominated actress Davis, who won two Oscars during her 50-year career but is best-remembered for the 1950 classic *All About Eve*.

"The good news and bad news with playing someone well-known is that there are so many pieces of film and television interviews, and recordings to study, but I came out of watching that and I was terrified," says the *Thelma & Louise* star.

"I read everything about her I could get my hands on and I got a dialect coach and he made recordings for me to listen to every day and every night. In the end I just jumped in and hoped to channel Bette in some way."

Jessica Lange, a two-time Oscar winner herself (for the 1982 comedy *Tootsie* and the 1995 drama *Blue Sky*), laments that she never got to meet Crawford, who died of a heart attack in 1977. "But I did meet Bette Davis once," recalls the actress, who has also worked with Murphy on four seasons of *American Horror Story*.

"We did an event together when I was starting out in my 20s and I remember her saying to me, 'You better court the press, honey' – and she was right!"

### AN ALL-STAR LINE-UP

Murphy surrounded his leading ladies with a stellar cast, including Kathy Bates as blonde bombshell Joan Blondell, Sarah Paulson as actress Geraldine Page, Stanley Tucci as studio boss Jack Warner and Australian actress Judy Davis as gossip columnist Hedda Hopper.

He also lured Catherine Zeta-Jones out of a long acting hiatus to portray Olivia de Havilland – one of Davis's close friends – known for *Gone with the Wind*.

Although de Havilland is still alive (and turned 100 last year), Zeta-Jones didn't attempt to meet her. Instead she relied on her father-in-law (who is also 100), actor Kirk Douglas, for research.

"Kirk helped me understand who she was. I feel she's not the sweet Melly from *Gone with the Wind* that she is to her fans."

Zeta-Jones explains, "She was a tough, ball-breaking woman of her time. She went up against the studio, which is rare today, let alone then." ■

### IF YOU LOVE THIS, WATCH...

*What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*

Sunday March 5 at 8.30pm on FOX Classics [113] part of the ENTERTAINMENT pack

WORDS: JENNY COONEY CARRILLO. PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; 20TH CENTURY FOX FILM CORPORATION