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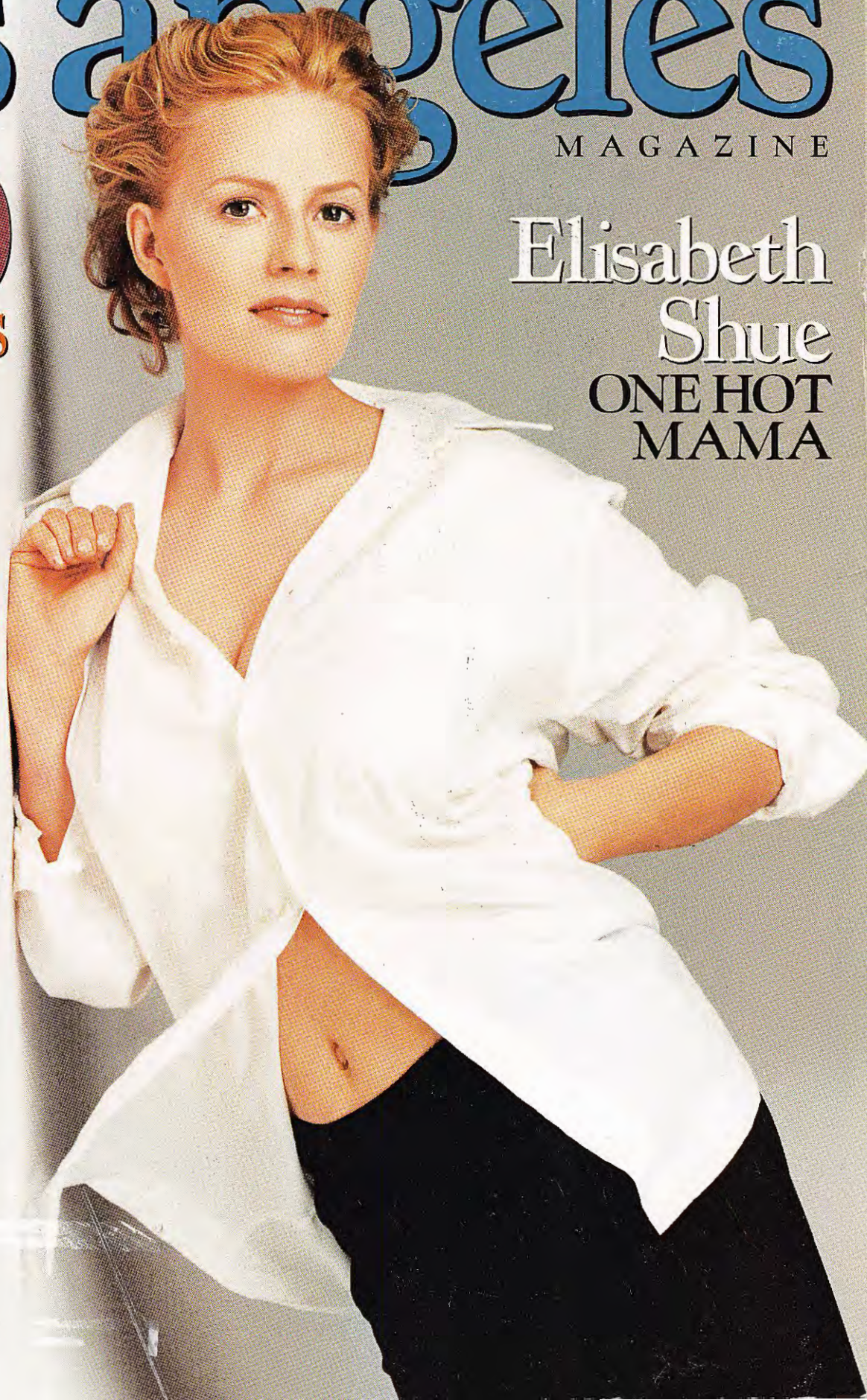
los angeles MAGAZINE

200 REASONS NEVER TO LEAVE THE CITY

From Kids' Stuff to Couture, Psychic to Plastic Surgeon

Elisabeth Shue ONE HOT MAMA



PLUS

Ivy Leaguers Take Over Hollywood

The Queen of Bel-Air

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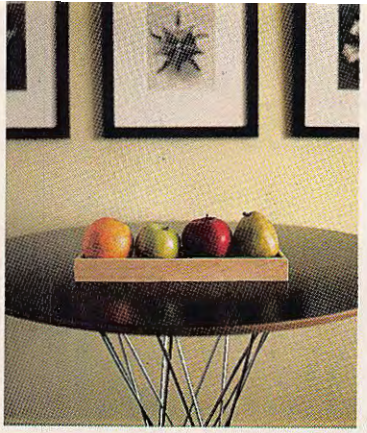

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: HEATHER CONLEY; GREY CRAWFORD; ANGELA WYANT; LISA ROMEREIN

Presiding over the most lavish house this side of VERSAILLES, IRIS CANTOR—widow, philanthropist, Rodin collector nonpareil—leads a rarefied life. But she's nicer than Marie Antoinette... AND A LOT TOUGHER

the belle of bel-air

THE EPITHET *La Belle Vie* HOVERS ABOVE THE GATE OF THE LIMESTONE LOUIS XVI CHATEAU, THE GRANDEST HOUSE EVER BUILT IN LOS ANGELES, BUT *The Beautiful Life* IS A BIT OF A MISNOMER, ACCORDING TO THE CHATELAINE OF THIS $60 MILLION PILE IN BEL-AIR. "It's been terrible," she says. "Everyone here goes to bed early, and my friends in New York... Well, New York is three hours ahead, so I have no one to talk to at night.

"But all of a sudden," she continues, "things got better today." Yes, today, while she was driving home. "I feel like a different person," she exclaims, lifting her immaculately manicured hands above her blond mane as if surrendering to her emotions. "Don't ask me why."

I am having lunch with Iris Cantor at her new digs, which has stolen the reins from Aaron Spelling's place (not to mention David Geffen's) as the costliest house in town since its completion a year ago. Cantor recounts—in between sips of white wine and emphatic buzzing for Max her French chef, Jeanie her secretary and Gladys our server, just three of La Belle Vie's staff of 16—how she was hit hard by widowhood. Across the room, her late husband, the bonds-broker-philanthropist-patron-of-the-arts B. Gerald Cantor ("Bernie" to my hostess), smiles approvingly from a huge oil portrait that looms behind a massive mahogany desk.

Her husband's death two years ago at 79 and the circumstances surrounding it notwithstanding, Cantor's life has been the stuff of distaff dreams. She was born some unguessable time ago in Brooklyn, New York, the eldest daughter of lumberyard owner Al Bazel and his wife Faye. Her parents were never rich, but they had enough to raise three daughters comfortably in a certain amount of style. "I remember going shoe shopping with my mother at the

IRIS CANTOR IN HER BOUDOIR (above); Louis XVI *bergères* and sculptures by Wilhelm Lehmbruck, on table, and Auguste Rodin in the Grand Salon (opposite).

BY KHOI NGUYEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOMINIQUE VORILLON

Paradise Bootery on Broadway," says Cantor. "At the time, she was buying these Cuban-looking high heels—like what Carmen Miranda used to wear—and I said to her, 'But how do you walk on those things?' And she said, '*Eeeezee! Eeeezee!*' Everything for her was easy."

Young Iris attended nearby Erasmus Hall, the famous public high school that has since produced such entertainment legends as Barbra Streisand and Neil Diamond. Cantor's introduction to showbiz, however, came after school, in the evenings, when her mother took her to the Yiddish theater on Manhattan's Lower East Side. "After the shows, we would go to the Cafe Royale on Second Avenue, where she knew practically everyone—all the actors," says Cantor. "We walked in, and people stopped whatever they were doing to look at her. My mother was *very* glamorous. She was a very, very attractive woman."

FAST-FORWARD TO 1977. Iris Cantor had blossomed into a woman whose good looks rivaled those of her revered mother. By then, she had abandoned the bourgeoisie of Brooklyn for the high life of Manhattan, had endured a stint as a stockbroker on Wall Street, had modeled for a number of Seventh Avenue fashion houses and had met and spent more than 10 "friendly" years with Bernie. The founder of the Cantor Fitzgerald bond-trading firm had pulled himself up by the bootstraps and out of the Bronx to amass a Croesus-like fortune (some $500 million) as well as the world's largest private collection of Rodin sculptures (some 750 works in total). He had spotted Iris's image in a framed picture displayed at a mutual friend's house in the mid 1960s and secretly became determined to make her Mrs. Cantor. When they finally married, it was his second, her third.

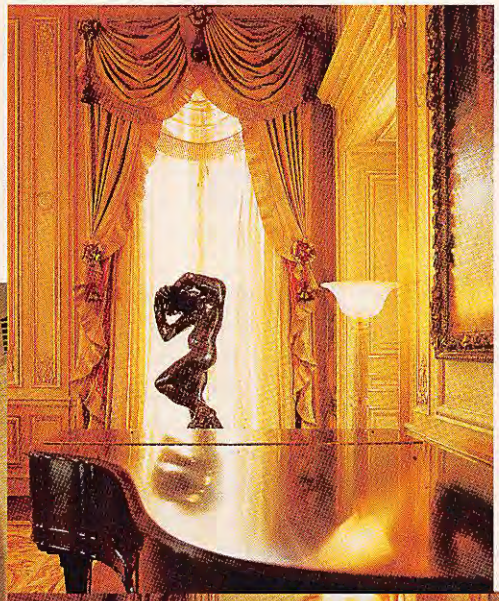
"It's hard to describe Bernie," Cantor says of her late husband, whose famous teddy bear charm belied his powerful intellect and tycoonlike manner in the boardroom. "He was very attractive to me, so brilliant, and we shared everything."

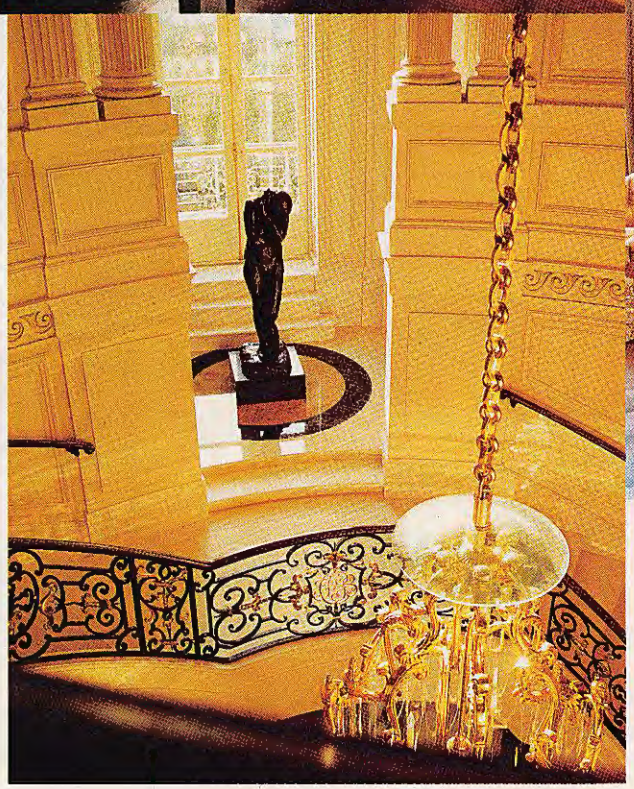
Indeed, the ensuing two decades saw Iris sharing all aspects of Bernie's life—most notably his wealth. "To be with Bernie, you had to be involved with all of his passions," says Cantor. "I made it a point to learn about Rodin and to soften up the art collection by adding paintings to it." To date, aside from monumental gifts to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (where the Cantors endowed their own wing) and the Brooklyn Museum, Cantor has given prodigiously to an array of worthy causes, including UCLA Medical Center, where she continues to fund the Iris Cantor Center for Breast Imaging.

In 1993, tired of the gray postmodern bunker on Tower Road in Beverly Hills that they had bought from Gene Hackman, the Cantors

MAKEUP: COLLIER STRONG FOR CLOUTIER/STILA

THE GRAND STAIRCASE (opposite); the family dining room (below); Rodin's *Meditation* in a corner of the Grand Salon (right).





RODIN'S *EVE* IN ITS PLACE OF HONOR on the entrance hall landing (left); a circa 1800 French bronze clock atop an Italian marble mantle in the Grand Salon (above).

"What do you mean you can't do a French house?" CANTOR demanded. "I told them, 'Just go do the research and COME UP WITH A PLAN!' "

set out in search of something more to their taste. "Bernie and I first lived together in a condo in Beverly Hills," says Cantor. "Then we bought the Tower Road house just as a temporary place. We ended up living there for 12 years, although I'd always wanted a French house. You know, a *limestone* house." The couple found a lot north of Bel-Air's east gate, where construction on a structure close to what the Cantors had in mind was already in progress. " 'Wait a minute!' I said when I saw what was going on," she recalls. "Bernie was sitting on the landing of the staircase, which was only a wood frame then, and I was walking on the grounds. I yelled up at him, 'Hey, don't you think it could be built up a little more?' Well, Bernie agreed. He wanted the house to be his gift to me." The couple then summoned their in-house design counsel, a group of Chinese architects who had been trained in the Bauhaus school. "What do you mean you can't do a French house?" Cantor demanded when they explained that they felt comfortable conceiving modern buildings only. "I told them, 'Just go do the research and come up with a plan!' "

Four years later, as La Belle Vie slowly came to life, Bernie died after a lifelong battle with diabetes. Equally tragic was the attempted boardroom coup that occurred at Cantor Fitzgerald shortly before its founder's passing. Says Cantor, "Bernie's so-called protégé, Howard Lutnick—who's ever heard of him, right?—got the crazy idea that I was going to replace him once Bernie died and declared Bernie incompetent as he lay dying. *Deee-spicable!* I fought back." Cantor has since been embroiled in sulfurous suits and countersuits against the new guard at Cantor Fitzgerald, all of which were designed to wrest as much control as possible over Bernie's firm. The corporate feud, still being played out in courtrooms and on the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, has been a key factor in making Cantor's last two years *anni horribili*.

Last July, despite the brouhaha, Cantor finally moved into the house Bernie built for her. A colossus of Texan limestone, Italian marbles, polished hardwood and elaborately handcrafted iron and gilt-bronze fittings, La Belle Vie encompasses a not-so-modest 34,000 square feet. There are salons and more salons, a library, 6 bedroom suites, 21 bathrooms, a 10-car garage, a wine cellar stocked with $300,000 worth of bordeaux, more than three dozen sculptures by Rodin, Jules Dalou, Giacomo Manzú and Gaston Lachaise, 27 paintings by such fin-de-siècle and early-20th-century masters as Alfred Sisley, Kees van Dongen, Roger de la Fresnaye and Emil Nolde and enough 18th-century French and Continental-style furniture to resemble something of a cross between Paris's Hotel Ritz and the Musée d'Orsay. Neighbors Nancy Reagan and Betsy Bloomingdale have already been over to ooh and aah, and guests at Cantor's infrequent dinner parties have all been suitably impressed.

The pièce de résistance, however, is none other than the lady of the house herself. Cantor leads me up the enormous stairway that swirls from the multicolored marble entrance toward La Belle Vie's private quarters. "I used to imagine myself walking down a staircase like this," Cantor whispers as she mounts the steps, giving me the grand tour. "This is my dream house." **LA**

RODIN'S *THREE SHADES* IN THE REAR GARDEN (top); an upstairs guest bedroom (right); Rodin's monumental sculptures *The Cathedral*, left, and *Head of Pierre de Wiessant* and an 18th-century French marquetry commode in a downstairs gallery (opposite).