

# Suzanne Somers

*Exuberantly Embracing Life*

**This accomplished actress, author, advocate and entrepreneur relishes the varied experiences her life serves up with an unflinching commitment to moving forward, to being the best person she can be.**

UZANNE SOMERS' first on-screen role was an unintentionally perfect metaphor for her life. Cast as the "mysterious blonde" in the white T-bird in the seminal coming-of-age film *American Graffiti*, Somers cruised in and out of Richard Dreyfuss' consciousness throughout a long June evening. Glamorous, sexy and alluring, Somers conveyed a mystique that the lovesick Dreyfuss was incapable of translating into his familiar, small-town context. In the end, his image of her was a projection of his own fantasies.

In real life, Somers has endured an uncomfortably similar fate. Her role as Chrissy on what has been referred to as the "prototypical jiggle show," *Three's Company*, has followed her doggedly throughout her 20-year-plus career. Despite ever-evolving stages as actor, entertainer, author, lecturer and entrepreneur, both the media and consumers have been mercilessly quick to pigeon-hole her in the "dumb blonde" mode. It has often seemed nearly impossible to perceive her in any other context.

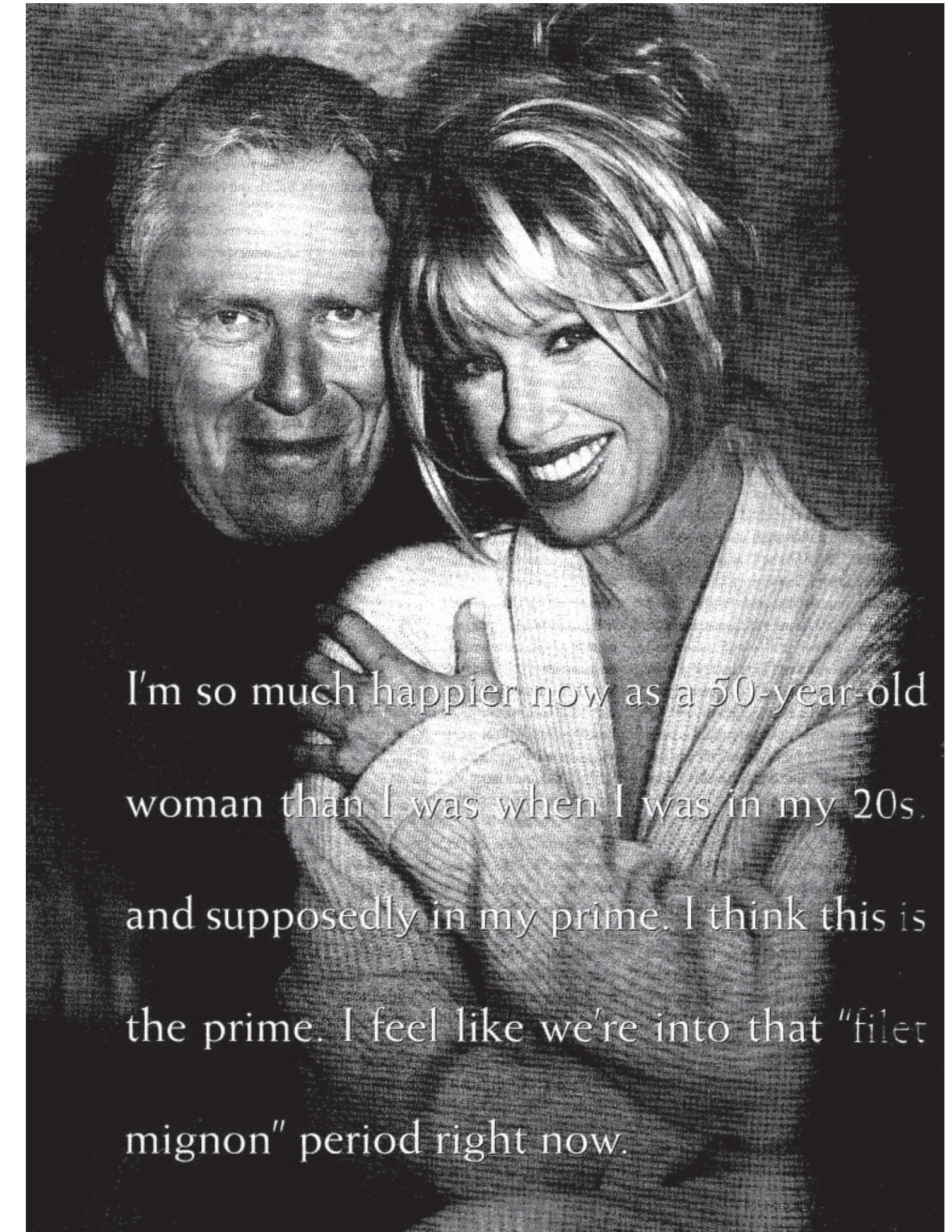
But nothing, as the saying goes, could be further from the truth. Weeks away from the publication of her fifth book, *After The Fall*, Somers is a phenomenally strong woman who makes no apologies for her life. With her loved ones' cooperation and trust, she unflinchingly reveals the story of a blended family torn apart by her firing from *Three's Company* and her subsequent depression and recovery, all delivered in an intimate, no-holds-barred fashion. It is a style that has been the hallmark of her life.

## The Start

A Bay Area (San Bruno) native, Somers was barely out of college musicals when then-unknown director George Lucas put her behind the wheel of the white T-bird. She was paid \$136.72 for

**Suzanne with  
her husband  
Alan Hamil**

BY MARIANNE LUCCHESI



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her night's work; at the time she had no idea who Lucas, Dreyfuss or producer Francis Ford Coppola might be. But the brief glimpses of her golden tresses through the car's window quite literally changed her life.

Too poor to see the film after its release, Somers—who was a single mother at the time—instead spent her last \$20 on a plane ticket to audition for a guest spot on a new sitcom. Having completed her screen test, she had no place to wait for the results. She spied what looked to be a large, unused cafeteria, and settled in to await the news.

"I didn't know anyone, and didn't have any money for lunch," she remembers. "I'm sure I was doing the hot-water-and-ketchup thing to make tomato soup. Then who walked into the NBC Commissary but Johnny Carson and his producer, Freddie De Cordova. I was the only one there, and they talked with me and asked what I was doing. I told them I was waiting to hear about the part, and they wished me good luck."

At the time, Somers had just published her first book, a collection of poems called "Touch Me." Wisely, she sent autographed copies to Carson, De Cordova and their assistant. Two nights later, she made the first of what eventually were over 150 appearances on *The Tonight Show*.

"That was the first time I had ever been on television," she laughs. "I thought they invited me because they loved my poetry. But it turns out they had read on the book's back flap that I was the "mysterious blond in the Thunderbird! It's like what they say about Lana Turner sitting at Schwab's—Suzanne Somers finds fame sitting in the NBC Commissary."

Somers' regular stints on *The Tonight Show* brought her to the attention of veteran producer Fred Silverman, then planning a sitcom about what was, for the time, an unusual living arrangement: two young women and a man sharing an apartment. Silverman saw in Somers a vitality and sweetness that seemed perfect for the role of Chrissy Snow, the curvaceous, not-quite-rocket-scientist blonde roommate.

Thanks to Somers' natural gift for comedy, her obvious physical attributes and the terrific ensemble chemistry that existed with co-stars John Ritter and Joyce DeWitt, the show became the top comedy of the late 70s.

In her five years with the series, Somers helped make it one of the most highly-rated TV sitcoms in history.

### Splitting Up Is Hard To Do

But the series that catapulted Somers to fame was also to be her nemesis, in more than one way. When, after her fifth season, her contract came up for renewal, she asked for pay commensurate with the male sitcom stars of the time. For this heretical request, Somers was summarily fired. Even more daunting, the dumb-blonde image seemed to follow her relentlessly in her attempts to find other roles.

Somers eventually found a more forgiving audience in the theater. She segued to several award-winning performances on stage, where her singing and dancing talents laid the foundation for the nightclub work she has since enjoyed for more than 18 years. She eventually repeated her prime-time success by landing a starring role in the hit sitcom *Step by Step* with Patrick Duffy, as well as her own daytime talk show.

Not content with her stage, TV and film roles, Somers has embraced occupations far beyond the confines of Hollywood. Her 1988 autobiography "Keeping Secrets" was on *The New York Times* Best Seller List for 21 weeks. In it she chronicles her early years as the child of an alcoholic, abusive parent, and the subsequent effects on her life. She has also published "Wednesday's Children," which deals with adult survivors of abuse, and "Eat Great, Lose Weight," highlighting the "Somercizing" sensible path to a healthy life.

### The Advocate's Role

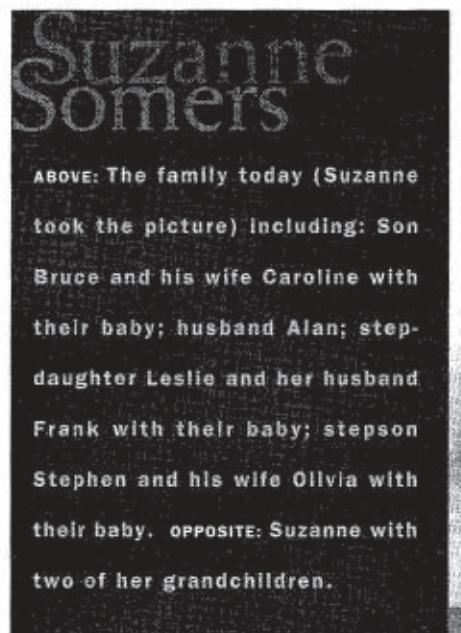
In addition, Somers' sleek form can be glimpsed on numerous cable channels in ads for her ButtMaster and ThighMaster fitness equipment, and she has also introduced her own line of high-end costume jewelry. But perhaps most important to her, she has emerged as a one of the country's most lauded advocates for those who have survived abuse and addictions of various forms. In this incarnation Somers lectures firelessly to arena-sized audiences, bringing a message of survival and hope, and unselfconsciously sharing the details of her own troubled youth.

In 1992 Somers received the Humanitarian Award from the National Council on Alcoholism, as well as the Distinguished Achievement in Public Service Award from the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

She has served two terms as honorary chairperson of the National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA), and was the first lay person to serve on the American Psychiatric Foundation's Board of Directors. She has also been on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Advisory Council to the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Despite a schedule of activities that keeps her on the road several months out of the year, Somers, at 50, has found solace and fulfillment in her primary role as dedicated wife and mother. Married for over 20 years to former Canadian talk-show host Alan Hamel, the two are now grandparents whose blended-family relationship (his two children, her one) is evocative of her character's household in *Step by Step*.

*éternelle* was fortunate to grab a few moments for a phone conversation with Somers when she was in Minnesota preparing for one of her series of one-night stage show appearances. She was business-like, yet open, and—as always—rushing passionately through her busy life.



You're just published your fifth book, "After The Fall." What does this one deal with?

This one is looking back at my life with a hopefully mature perspective. It covers a 20-year period, and I talk about my rise and my fall and rise again. The success, and then the process of picking myself up after losing *Three's*, and starting all over again. I talk about how I had

# Suzanne Somers

FROM PAGE 27

and it's the way I give back. And I don't want to give up writing books, 'cause how could you give that up; you know, it's just something that comes to you. And, well, I can't give up television, because that's my bread and butter, and I don't want to give up the jewelry business or the ThighMaster, because that's our future, and I would never want to give up live performing, because that's my favorite thing to do, even though it's where I make the least money.'

He looked at me and said, 'So, get a grip. You know you don't want to give anything up, so you're going to be working hard!'

I think the lectures are really satisfying, but my little payback personally is doing the live stage shows. I've been doing one-nighters every night for the last few weeks. And it's never a drudge to me. Around 4 o'clock I start the process of getting ready to go out there, and I love it. There no safety net. I like the drama—the unpredictability of it.

Let's talk about your past books.

Obviously your first few were highly personal.

The first one, "Touch Me," was poetry. Then came "Keeping Secrets," which was very personal. It was an autobiography of growing up with an alcoholic father. And then I wrote "Wednesday's Children," which dealt with the effects of abuse on children. I interviewed 50 famous and non-famous people, and had them tell me their stories of what it was like then, and how abuse has affected them today. I included only stories of hope, but that was my only book that wasn't a best-seller. I think abuse is just too heavy a subject, and people don't want to go there.

When you were growing up, did you want to write as much as you wanted to act and perform?

I never knew I could write, but I still wrote—I have volumes. I wrote a diary. I wrote every time I was sad. I would write what my feelings were. It was my own personal therapy, but it was unwitting. I didn't know I was doing that. I would also write when I was angry. I would write letters to people that I would never send. I have written down every feeling I've ever had my whole life, and I guess the books are now

just an extension of that.

What did you hope to accomplish with the books that dealt with the most personal, painful issues?

You first do these books for yourself, for clarity and resolution. My other impetus is always to look at the part I played, and how to make corrections in myself. Then when I finish these, I realize how relatable they are, that they're not unique. My situation is not unique; probably more people than not experience these same things. But again, if I can use my "louder voice" to provide the clarity that I've found in my own life, it may help someone else. I'm a very happy person today—very. I don't know if this comes with maturity, that you get this calm about you. I don't have any demons right now in my life, and it feels really great.

After what you've been through, that must be an enormous relief.

Yes, it is, and I think it's what we all strive for. Cause you can't just exorcise the demons—you've got to do the work to reach a place where you're demonless. It means a lot of amends that have to be made with people in

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your life, and a lot of forgiving of yourself and of others. And you must learn to have love and compassion for yourself, and for others. And an understanding that everything that happens to you is the way it's supposed to be, so you can learn and grow. And if you're lucky you look at it that way, and you do evolve and grow, and make corrections in your person. If you don't, there's a school of thought that says you keep coming back until you get it right.

Was there therapy involved in your own process of self-discovery?

Oh, very much. "Keeping Secrets" is about all the therapy that I had in that period of my life, to help turn it around. I think therapy should be a part of our schooling here!

You've received some impressive awards, you work with the American Psychiatric Foundation Board, etc., but none of these facts seem to penetrate the public's awareness. Why don't we know more about the positive things you're doing?

I don't know. I guess I go about it quietly. It doesn't really matter to me, but strangely I do

have a flock. There are people who automatically buy each of my new books, because they seem to be on the same evolutionary path. And I know when I first started on the lecture circuit in '87, my audiences were 500 to 800 people. Then the next year, they were 800 to 1,500 people. Now I regularly lecture to 3,000, 3,500, 5,000. Next month I'm lecturing to 93,000 women in St. Louis. Last year I lectured to 50,000 women in Arizona at a woman's conference.

And so, there is a flock of primarily women out there who know what I'm doing, and that's all that's really important. We're all kind of on the same track, and I don't have to beat them over the head to say 'I'm not who you think I am.' They know who I am. They've read my books. When I stand up, usually I start to cry before I say the first word, because I can feel all the emotion in the room—they've all read the books, and they're with me. They've all been there, on the same track. And even though I come to them as a celebrity, I come to them as one of them. I've lived the same life as they have, and we relate on that level.

What would you want people to know

about you most of all?

I don't think you can plan life. I think you just keep moving forward, trying to be the best person you can be. That's really my goal. The more pleased I become with myself, the happier I become. I'm so much happier now as a 50-year-old woman than I was when I was in my 20s, and supposedly in my prime. I think this is the prime. I feel like we're into that "filet mignon" period right now. The picture has cleared up, the wisdom is there, the respect has come, my kids are in good shape, my marriage is in good shape. I feel proud of myself on many levels, and the area that I'm most pleased with is that I chose not to be a victim of what happened to me. And I don't blame people for anything.

So you're comfortable with the aging process, and being a grandmother, and all those things?

Oh yeah. This is as good as it gets. I don't know what the next decade will bring, but I sure love this one.

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**Marianne Lucchesi**, managing editor of *éternelle*, profiles the women of substance featured in each issue.