

IN 1955, Brigitte Bardot, a starlet scarcely known outside France and no big deal within, was romping in the surf at St-Tropez making the film that was to launch her as a legend in all languages — BB, the golden-bodied, wide-eyed, pouting harbinger and plaything of the age of pleasure and promise.

Later this week, Bardot will be 55. She will mark the occasion (and the day of St Francis of Assisi) at the weekend with a "World Festival of Animals" in Paris, which includes a stand for the adoption of stray animals. She will then launch herself into a new round of intense and single-minded crusading for all creatures great and small.

Throughout her career, and indeed her 16 years of retirement, Brigitte Bardot has been represented frequently as some sort of waif and stray herself — in spite of her status as an adored "sex goddess", "the most desirable woman in the world" or "the married man's impossible dream". Her image remained somehow childlike, sad and hungry for love. The sex kitten was not just vulnerable, but at times suicidal, lusted after by men, but feared by jealous wives who showered her with hate mail. Simone de Beauvoir, an admirer of Bardot as a herald of women's freedom, also perceived her in animal terms, writing, "In the game of love she is both hunter and prey. The male is an object to her just as she is to him."

The Peter Pan aspect is also an inextricable part of the legend; Bardot's first husband, and to some extent Sven-gali, Roger Vadim, calls her an eternal child.

But this has been the year in which BB's new image and her ardent campaigns have gained a measure of political and popular credibility.

Bardot has reinvented herself: no more a pathetic, ageing kitten, more a seasoned tigress, even something of a grande dame, who can pile up her mane of streaked hair, don a tailored suit and — face and nails painted like some oriental empress — descend on the French senate to attend a debate on animal welfare, or call at the Hôtel de Ville to visit Jacques Chirac, the Mayor of Paris, who has helped her with next weekend's event. Or, in her own words, harass the President of Rwanda to hunt down the murderer of her heroine, Dian Fossey.

The animal welfare foundation that Bardot established three years ago with £300,000 raised by selling the memorabilia from her film days grows in strength daily; she has tasted political life by fielding a list of (unsuccessful) candidates for the European elections. Most important, perhaps, she has taken up a very different kind of filming, using some of her old skills to press her case: her television series, *SOS Animaux*, made for the French private television channel, TF1, with Jean-Louis Remilleux and Roland Coutras, has had international impact. The first programme, about elephants, was part of a determined campaign against the ivory trade and soon after it was shown in May, EEC countries agreed to ban ivory

importation. The subject has scarcely been out of the news since.

Bardot stsses at every turn that she has reappeared on the screen only for the cause. "I never liked the cinema," she says, "I call it 'a métier of idiots'". Witengaging honesty she also admits: "It's no fun to go in front of the cameras at 40 and show how I look now. It is not a turn. I am not an actress going back, am myself and I do it only to sound a note of alarm."

For the same reasons, perhaps, although she uses her name and image cleverly, she dodges the press and would prefer not to face an interviewer to be yet again described and dissected.

On the phone, the disembodied voice is rich and husky with a sense of friendly urgency; it could belong to a very young or very old woman. She will answer questions only about her work with animal, and this she does with all the naïveté and directness of a child or a minor prophet of doom.

"Things are getting worse and worse," she says. "It is a painful, terribly sad story. When I think of what animals suffer, I cry and cry. I cry so much. I cannot understand why a civilised society can allow such cruelty." She will take no satisfaction in any achievements or response because there is always so much more to do.

"We have had some success with the elephants, but there are still poachers and even if France or Britain people do not buy ivory, there is always Japan and China."

In spite of the tears, there is much more than sentimentality behind her campaigns. "After I stopped making movies I took two years to reflect and unwind. Since then I have devoted my life to animals — but I had to learn a great deal and I have studied hard." Among her mentors is Jacques Cousteau, who calls her affectionately "a desperado".

An astrologer once predicted that Bardot had it in her to be the Mother Teresa of animals, and he may have been right.

Bardot became so reclusive after her film career, hiding away at La Madrague, her St-Tropez house, with an assortment of dogs and boyfriends that people started to call her "Brigitte Garbo". Her lovers were still snapped coming and going and she was glimpsed by the camera as the ageing, but still love-hungry gamine gypsy with the tumbling hair and washed-out jeans.

She gave up because she always said she would do so at 40 — she never really cared much for filming — and because she had no desire to see herself grow old on film. "It is terrible, obscene to

think that one will one day look like an old map of France," she has said.

Bravely, she stuck to her decision and left the myth more or less intact. But her passing years, unrecorded on celluloid, have been marked by the press like milestones for a generation: Bardot at 30, 40, 45, 50 and now 55. The hedonistic, hoydenish memory she left fades slowly and a little painfully.

Her growing commitment to the cause of animals — their rights, welfare and conservation — was at first dismissed as an extension of childish love of furry pets. Pictures of her in 1977 with baby seals in the Arctic were deemed cute, but when she persisted with less cuddlesome species, she began to be regarded as part crank, part melodramatic *pasionaria*, overcompensating for her failure to come to terms with the human race, especially the male of the species.

Her son Nicolas, born of her brief marriage to actor Jacques Charrier, is now approaching 30. Bardot's lack of maternal interest in him when he was small shocked some people. She has always maintained that had he been a girl she would have brought the child up herself, but "it was better for a boy to be close to his father". Mother and son later became good friends, but see each other rarely because he lives in Oslo with his beautiful blonde wife Annelina and their three-year-old daughter, Michelle. The rôle of *grandmère* does not, however, seem to appeal to Bardot any more than that of mother. "I love a Norwegian and my mother loves baby seals," Nicolas has been quoted as saying good-humouredly.

Her private life is guarded by her own discretion and the high fences around her properties — La Madrague and at Bazoches, not far from Paris, where she now spends most of the time. She lives alone, with the help of caretakers and a few close friends who come and go. But the solitude is dispersed by the menage-

'In the game of love, she



The husbands: (from left) Svengali Roger Vadim, f