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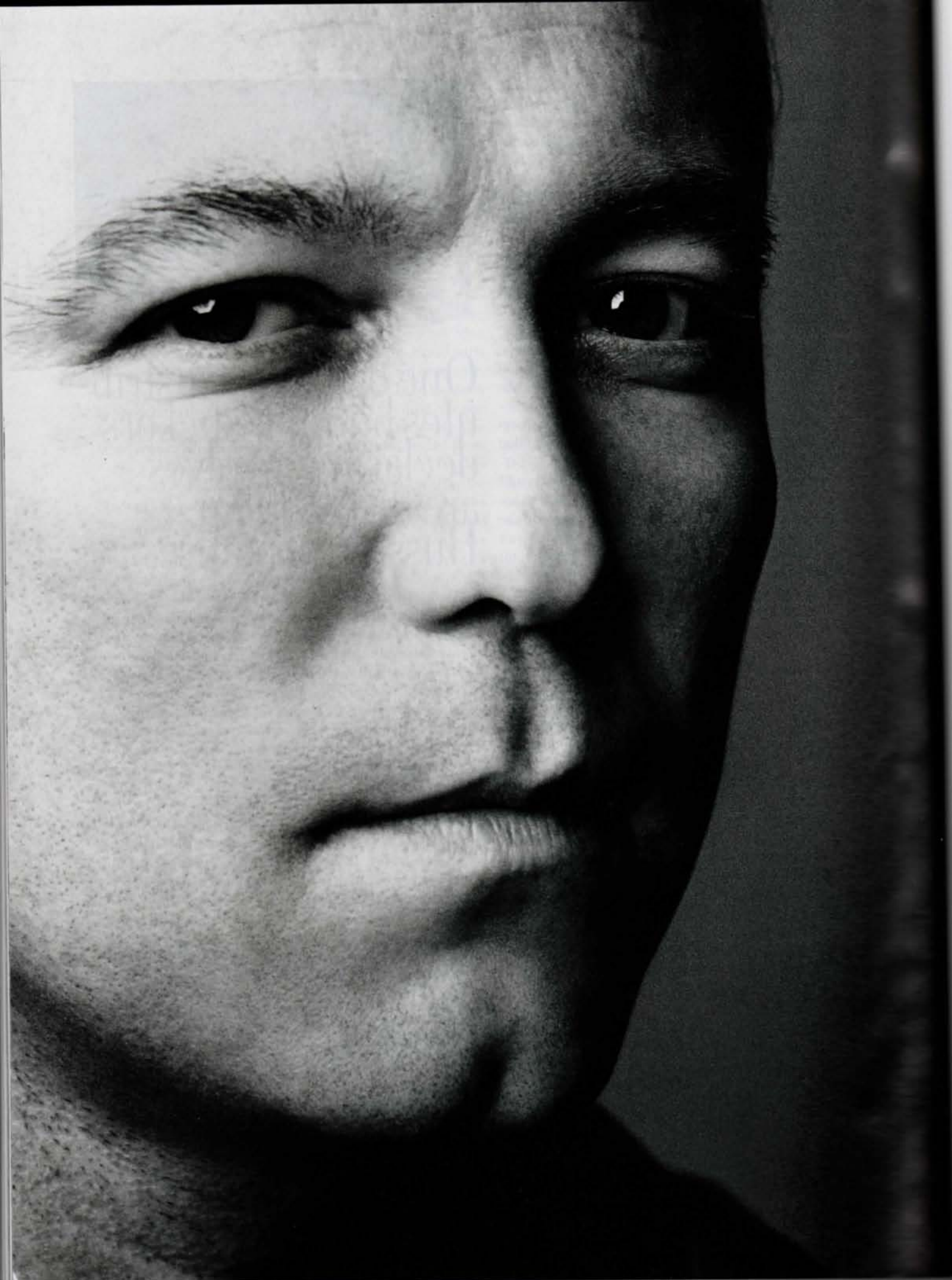
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Blades Runner

As a movie star and a salsa singer, Ruben Blades has stared down the impossible. Now he's facing an even bigger challenge: to become president of his native Panama.

By Guy Garcia. Photographed by Firooz Zahedi

Ruben Blades is a master at conjuring conflicting emotions: As an actor, he can do slapstick comedy or inject the threat of violence into a whispered line of dialogue; as a musician, he can croon with smoldering desire or explode into a maraca-shaking frenzy. And as a politician, he can ignite democratic passions or provoke charges of irresponsible dilettantism.

So the anticipation is almost palpable on a balmy tropical night in Panama City as Blades rises to the podium at a forum for the local women's chapter of his *Papa Egoro* (or Mother Earth) party, which he founded two years ago. But as he begins his speech, Blades is unusually subdued. Warning his listeners that much remains to be done if they expect to win the national elections in May, he seems more like a cautious diplomat than a candidate known for his fiery personality and do-or-die sense of commitment. "We have to plant our feet on the ground and dream in the clouds," Blades says in measured, sober tones. "We will continue to work for a better country. But I can't do it alone. We all have to give—and give more."

Such a prudent pep talk is hardly what one would expect from a man about to accept his party's nomination to run for president. But if the crowd is let down by the low-key oratory, they don't show it. Breaking out in ardent applause, the women act like starstruck teenagers as they rush forward to shake Blades' hand or ask for an autograph.

After all, even before he founded *Papa Egoro* and joined the free-for-all that is Panamanian politics, Blades was an international media darling with a knack for appealing to disparate audiences. Women are attracted to his old-world manners and romantic poet's temperament. Men respect his disarming ability to come across, despite his wealth and fame, as a regular guy. To salsa fans, he is a leader of the *Nueva Canción* (New Song) movement, a potent mix of

poetry, politics, and steamy rhythms that gave a socially conscious tilt to Latin music. To filmgoers, he is a versatile actor who has worked with Robert Redford, Spike Lee, Jack Nicholson, and Whoopi Goldberg. To others still, he is the strangely familiar face of the Pan-American man—a multilingual, multicultural blend of Anglo, Latin, and Caribbean genes who accepts both the Spanish and English pronunciations of his surname and whose heart pumps to the polyglot beat of Panama City, Los Angeles, and New York.

Now, 20 years after he left Panama to pursue his muse, Blades has returned in his newest incarnation—as a populist politician bearing a hopeful message of change. Taking a stand that some regard as refreshingly realistic and others dismiss as naive, Blades sees his mission as one that calls for dampening people's expectations as much as raising them. "I have a tremendous responsibility," he says. "At a time when it's wonderful to have faith in something, I have the thankless task of bringing everybody back to reality. I can't lie to the people. We have a dream. Let's not turn it into a nightmare."

The nightmare Blades fears is to find himself leading a movement that fails to deliver on its promises. "The problem is that sometimes people think I am capable of parting the waters on command, which I am not," he explains. "And at other times people forget how serious it is to represent the public's feelings of outrage and hope. It's a delicate point, and I've got to be very careful."

He has found himself in an extremely difficult political paradox: In order to bring about reform, Blades must first become Panama's president, but he won't officially put his name on the ballot until he's convinced he can institute reform. His solution has been to push forward in the hope that the people will follow, but not push so hard that he ends up

getting elected without a mandate for change. So far, the strategy seems to be working: Polls have consistently put Blades at the front of the pack of 18 potential candidates, with about 20 percent of the vote. "Two years ago Papa Egoro was a laughingstock," Blades says with apparent satisfaction. "Just a bunch of artists and bohemians," they said. Now they have to face the fact that we are on the forefront of change in Panama."

Still, Blades harbors no illusions about the enormity of the task he has taken on. Four years after the U.S. invasion that ousted General Manuel Antonio Noriega, Panama is a nation in search of its soul. While it is better off than some other Central American nations, at least 50 percent of the population lives in poverty. In Panama City's bustling downtown, glittering office towers built with laundered drug money from Colombia and Peru loom over the waterfront while just a few miles away, in the slums of Chorillo, the families of the marginal majority struggle to get by on a few hundred dollars a year. The country's infrastructure, wasted by years of mismanagement and neglect, is disintegrating. Even in Panama City's wealthier districts, regular water shortages have become an unfortunate fact of life.

And looming on the horizon, like a blind date with destiny, is the deadline of noon on December 31, 1999, when the U.S. will complete its military pullout and hand over the Panama Canal. It is a moment that Panamanians anticipate with both optimism and dread, reflecting a painful rift in the national psyche that goes beyond the \$260 million a year that the U.S. will no longer be pumping into the economy. And while most Panamanian politicians feel compelled to tout the virtues of sovereignty, 70 percent of the population would like to keep some sort of link with the U.S. "People are afraid," a Panama City cabdriver tells me. "They think there might be a civil war."

While no one really expects a repeat of the bloody riots that marred the 1989 elections, there is a general unease in the air, a vague apprehension that anything might—and can—happen. "All the parties are talking to Ruben Blades because he's a phenomenon," observes a foreign diplomat familiar with Panamanian politics. "Up to 50 percent of the electorate is not affiliated with any of the existing parties—that's a tremendous unallied force. Right now Blades is the embodiment of change, and he's got a real chance."

"I know I can win the election," Blades agrees. "But the real issue here is: What are we going to do? How can you be responsible to the hopes of the people? How do you govern?"

To begin to answer these questions, Blades has spent a good part of the past two years shuttling between Panama

and his Spanish-style home in Santa Monica, CA, where he lives with his wife of seven years, American actress Lisa Blades. His days in Panama are hectic marathons of meetings and strategy sessions with supporters, potential backers, and a tight-knit group of advisers. He has also made an unprecedented effort to consult with his countrymen. Last year Papa Egoro volunteers conducted a nationwide survey to determine the issues that were uppermost in the minds of the Panamanian people. The results are being used to help formulate the party platform, which calls for a liberal-centrist mix of reforms, including a national economic-development plan and programs to bolster public housing, education, and ecotourism. The survey also confirmed something that Blades had long suspected: The populace's faith in its democratically elected leaders, including incumbent president Guillermo Endara, has sunk to an all-time low.

"There's a lot of anger, resentment, and despair," Blades says. "After Noriega, everyone's hopes were so high. But we've all been taken for a ride. The politicians are lying most of the time; there's so much corruption. They say you can't steal first base. Well, people here feel that these guys stole first base."

So Blades has stepped up to the plate, using his considerable charisma to build a party that he hopes ultimately will become strong enough to thrive with or without him. "The dimension of change we are trying to create is mind-boggling," he says. "We are trying to change the attitudes of a whole country, and it's exciting as hell."

Two days later, on a typically torrid afternoon, Blades takes a three-hour walking tour of the working-class neighborhood where he grew up. Casually dressed in a sports shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes, he looks much like any other Panamanian man out for an afternoon stroll. Yet as he ambles down the residential streets, Blades is recognized again and again, leaving a trail of admirers. Drivers of several cars pull over to wave to him, causing a small traffic jam; pedestrians cross the street to shake his hand, crying, "You've got my vote, Señor Presidente!"

Pausing on a corner in the district of Carrasquilla, Blades points to a lot bordered by a low hedge. "That's where we used to live," he says. "I used to sit on the front steps of our house and dream of being a musician." Music, in fact, runs in Blades' veins. His father, Rubén, played bongos, and his mother, Anoland, was a Cuban-born singer and pianist. But it was the rock-'n'-roll sounds of the Beatles and Frankie Lyman that inspired Blades to become a professional musician. Young Ruben was still a teenager when he started singing with a local band called the Saints, covering such rock and pop staples as "And I Love Her,"



Blades accepting the nomination for president at his party's convention last November.

"Strangers in the Night," and "Last Train to Clarksville."

To please his parents, Blades enrolled in law school at the University of Panama and passed the bar, but he never gave up on his dream of making music. In 1966 he recorded his first album as a singer and percussionist with a group called Los Slavajes del Ritmo (the Rhythm Savages). He left Panama in the mid-'70s to try his luck in New York, where he landed a job at Fania Records, a leading Latin label. Four years later Blades and trombonist Willie Colon recorded *Siembra* (Seed), which went on to become one of the biggest-selling and most influential salsa albums of all time.

Meanwhile, Blades began to experiment with the basic salsa sound, adding synthesizers and dollops of doo-wop and rock to the standard tropical mix. His lyrics were equally audacious; instead of the timeworn theme of unrequited love, he wrote vivid tone poems about gangsters, alienated lovers, and murdered priests in language that echoed the magical realism of his friend Gabriel García Márquez.

Not everyone appreciated Blades' talent for trenchant social commentary. In 1980, *Tiburón* (Shark), an allegory for superpower interventionism, was banned by Miami radio stations, and Blades had to wear a bulletproof vest while performing there. "Decisiones," from his 1984 album *Buscando America* (Searching for America), was banned by Panama's censors for allegedly promoting abortion. During the '80s he continued to expand the boundaries of salsa, collaborating in Spanish and English with such pop and rock innovators as Linda Ronstadt, Lou Reed, and Elvis Costello.

Blades added actor to his résumé after starring in the 1985 film *Crossover Dreams*, in which he played a Latino boxer and aspiring singer who craves success in the U.S. Since then he has appeared in such films as *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *Mo' Better Blues*, and *The Two Jakes*; his latest movie, *The Color of Night*, is an erotic thriller due to be released next month. Richard Rush, who directed the film, believes that the same qualities that make him a good actor will serve him well as Panama's president. "He's extremely intuitive and bright," says Rush. "He totally immerses himself in the moment. He becomes the character. And that's why it works in every take—because he won't lie. It has to do with truth."

As an actor and songwriter, Blades has worked tirelessly to shatter cultural stereotypes and champion the ordinary man, contributing his time to Amnesty International and other humanitarian causes. He credits his grandmother Emma with instilling in him the confidence to stand up for his convictions. "She was a fighter for women's rights during the '40s and '50s," he says. "She taught me that it was okay to be a lot of different things."

Often simultaneously. While most people would have their hands full with one high-profile profession, Blades thrives on the adrenaline rush of juggling all his vocations. When one looks back over all the battles Blades has fought, it seems suddenly clear that his entire life has been a rehearsal for this moment: The same stubborn iconoclasm that propelled him to topple sacred cows in music and film is now propelling him to help his country.

"I decided a long time ago to do this," he says emphatically. "Frankly, I wish I didn't have to. I have time. I'm 45, and I can wait. But I don't think the country has > 363



In concert.

Blades, center, in "Disorganized Crime."



at an economic conference in Panama City last August.



With Christopher Walken, left, in "The Milagro Beanfield War."



Blades, center, in "The Super."

With Jack Nicholson, right, in "The Two Jakes."



With Bruce Willis, right, in "The Color of Night."

CRY WOLF

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branded as fanatical."

One cold day we go for a walk in Yellowstone, through sage-covered hills and rhyolite rock, through wolf country—Hellroaring Creek, Amethyst Mountain, the Mirror Plateau. Stopping, Askins lays back her head and howls. Coyotes answer from all directions. "I feel very hopeful, like we've crossed a threshold, that the process is under way," she says.

Still, she is upset that some of her supporters are already uncorking the Champagne, celebrating a victory that is not yet certain. She's already fielded calls from movie producers and TV crews who want to be there when the gates are opened, the first wolves released. "My message to them is 'Come now.' These are the critical days," she says, for a myriad things could happen to delay reintroduction, from political strong-arming to expensive legal appeals. "There is no question in my

mind that there will be extremely powerful constituents who will still try to stop or sabotage the reintroduction."

People's characters are formed largely by the place they live and work, and Yellowstone has had a profound effect on Askins, both on a subliminal and a more physical level. "I feel very deeply that you must take a stand somewhere," she says. "In some ways what I've done is a very modest stand, but it's one that is very important to this place, which is so much a part of me. And as for the species, the more intimate I have become with these animals the more painful the compromise of dealing with their captivity. From this experience, ironically because it's a bitter-sweet one, comes the force of my commitment to fight for them in the wild."

Looking out over the sun-dappled hills, she peers into the near distance, straining for signs of wildlife. "We exterminated the wolf to take control. I think people are beginning to see we've taken too much control." ■

BLADES RUNNER

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time. We have to make a country for everyone and really face racism and face corruption and face evil."

Though his popularity appears to be growing in Panama, not all his countrymen are convinced that Blades is the man for the job. His opponents have accused him of being everything from a communist to a CIA puppet. "They said I was taking money from the communists and the U.S. embassy—at the same time," he says, shaking his head. "It's ridiculous, of course, but that's

"I'm not going to break into song at a cabinet meeting," he says, "but I won't give up my music."



how desperate these people are." More damaging, however, is the perception held by some that Blades is a part-time politician who hasn't spent enough time in Panama—in fact, Blades still lives in

the U.S.—to really understand its problems. Others contend that he simply lacks the experience for the job.

For his part, Blades is keeping his options open, which means, among

other things, working on a new album with Willie Colon. The record will mark a return to the dynamic salsa style they forged together on *Siembra*. "Willie's words were, 'Let's make it swing,'" says Blades. "We want it to be fun." The collaboration, which will feature singing by both Blades and Colon, is all the more remarkable given the fact that the pair have been feuding for years. On the enduring rift between them, Blades will only say, "We are very different people. But the way I'm looking at it is that it's good for the music. So we're > 369

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BLADES RUNNER

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trying not to irritate each other, without much success sometimes."

While he acknowledges that becoming president of Panama will surely force him to curtail his acting, he sees no reason to give up his singing. "I'm not going to break into song at a cabinet meeting," he says, "but I won't give up my music. A writer can become president and continue to write, a painter can continue to paint, but a singer can't continue to sing. Why not? So if I feel like sitting down and playing the guitar or recording an album, I'm going to."

It is precisely this sort of willfulness, this almost instinctive gift for self-reinvention, that has vexed and confounded Blades' critics throughout his long career. When he temporarily retired from music to earn a degree in international law from Harvard, his detractors said that salsa

singers had no business at a bastion of the capitalist world. And when he set his sights on Hollywood, they said no one would hire a Panamanian actor to star in American movies. Now the naysayers contend that, by seeking Panama's highest office, Blades has finally gotten in over his head, that he is spreading himself too thin, aiming too high, too late. They may have underestimated him yet again.

Whatever the outcome of the election, one can be sure that Blades will continue to challenge easy assumptions by testing the limits of the possible, personally and otherwise. With that in mind, it's hardly a surprise that he thinks his best years are ahead of him. "After 50, everything will be much better," he says. "That's when I'll have time to travel and enjoy my friends and family. That's when I'm really going to enjoy life, but not until after I do what I have to do." ■

JEAN-PAUL GOUDE

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end, Goude concludes, "it's all about sex, really. It's all about attracting your mate, and there's nothing wrong with that—it's a very human reflex."

In New York, Goude has lived in a penthouse on Union Square for 15 years. What was once a shack covered in tar and filled with pop art by its owner, Jack Klein, has been transformed over the years into a gleaming, compact workstation where efficiency is the decorative motif. "It's like a big room in a wonderful hotel," says Goude of his New York command post. His Paris residence, a townhouse he bought three years ago, is also perched high above the city. It is tucked away in the 19th arrondissement on a winding cobblestoned street with postcard views of Paris monuments. There, with the help of architect Andrée Putman, Goude has created a seamless setting of order and refinement. Although the space is "almost austere," says Putman, this is offset by the constant

activity going on throughout the house. For Goude, who says, "I like clean lines so I can be informal in a formal setting," the house functions well. Putman chose the mahogany paneling that conceals shelving and closets throughout the house. She says she put enormous care into the bathroom, an important sanctuary for Goude, who feels it is the laboratory where one prepares oneself before facing the world each day. The bedroom is an equally intimate space for Goude, "a *chambre d'amour*—not only for sleeping," he says. The unassuming, ivy-covered exterior looks very much the way Goude wanted it to—"a bourgeois house with perhaps a doctor or lawyer living there." Although this illusion holds from the outside, once beyond the front door you understand that the man who says he makes commercials for a living is part madcap visionary, part media wizard. Jean-Paul Goude has a touch of the poet; he puts a new spin on the notion of living by your wits. ■

THE ART OF AVEDON



©Richard Avedon, *Dovima with Elephants*, 1955

Richard Avedon's photographs first appeared in Harper's Bazaar. Fifty years later, they appear at the Whitney. Harper's Bazaar has helped make possible "Richard Avedon: Evidence 1944-1994". A major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, on view from March 24 through June 26, 1994.

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