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A close-up photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her eye. She has vibrant blue and yellow eyeshadow. Her eye is closed, and her long, dark eyelashes are prominent. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue.

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BEAUTY
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GUIDE 2008



Your face, my place

Star surgeon
Sherrell Aston
can nip 'n' tuck
us any time.
By Kathleen
Baird-Murray

But what about wife Muffie, I find myself wondering, as Dr Sherrell J Aston takes me through his typical daily schedule: a 5.30am session at the gym one day, alternating with a 5.30am run in the park the next; in the operating theatre from 7am until 7pm (with just a protein bar for lunch); to the office until 9pm-ish. And, guess what, he spent last weekend in the office. How does Muffie Potter Aston – the tall, blonde, beautiful philanthropist and one-time vice-president of public relations at Van Cleef & Arpels, not to mention mum to their adorable three-year-old blonde twins, Bracie and Ashleigh – put up with it? He chuckles. We are sitting in his Manhattan office and the room is everything you would expect of a plastic surgeon of his repute: book-lined walls, an intriguing acrylic sculpture by the late American artist Frederick Hart (eternally famous for his Vietnam Veterans' memorial *Three Soldiers*) and framed photographs of the surgeon with the Prince of Wales and Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Occasionally the sound of a New York siren comes as a reminder that we're only separated from the frenetic city outside by a discreet black door with a tiny bronze nameplate that faces out on to Park Avenue. A pile of leather-bound medical and surgical guides, mostly written or edited by him, is piled up to my right. 'Muffie understands,' he says. 'A lot of nights, it's 9.30 before I get home.' At least you miss the bathtime chaos, I say. 'No, but I like that,' he retorts enthusiastically, then adds, 'at the weekends.'

Dr Aston has been described as the 'facelift king of America'. He's been on Oprah Winfrey, America's gold standard in the 'I've-made-it' TV stakes, not once but several times. He's been photographed with his Arab horses, his Ferrari, his Porsche, at his palatial home in Long Island and clad in his trademark Brioni suits. He is on the board of the American Ballet Theatre and is a leading supporter of the Alzheimer's Association. He is about to have a show on the satellite radio station, Sirius, along with other hosts such as Candace Bushnell, Howard Stern and Martha Stewart. The grapevine is heavy with the names of A-list celebrities who have submitted to his scalpel. He is the surgeon director and chairman of the department of plastic surgery at the prestigious Manhattan Eye, Ear and

Throat Hospital (and was fully exonerated in the 2004 scandal when two patients died – one was the author Olivia Goldsmith – after complications with the anaesthetic). He is a professor of plastic surgery at the New York University School of Medicine and Institute of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery and has hosted an annual symposium for the past 25 years, to which up to 1,200 plastic surgeons flock from around the world. With all this to his name, perhaps it's not surprising that one newspaper cites his reputation as being 'frightening'.

Yet with his soft Southern lilt (he says he's 'just a farm boy from Virginia') and quiet allure, he doesn't seem to fit any of the descriptions I've read about in my research. That radio show? It's a 24/7 medical channel, serious yet accessible and certainly not celebrity-gossipy. Facelift king of America? This one he answers with caution: 'If other people think that I have the judgement and the skills to achieve what I want with facelifts, then I am pleased that they think so... but you will never hear *me* say it.' Scary? 'I was a bit surprised by that, so I asked a couple of close friends if there was something I didn't know, and they both said, "Not that I know of, and I would tell ya."' Social? 'Between September and December last year I think I went out only twice.'

Is he like any of those *Nip/Tuck* stereotypes – a Brazilian playboy or a Hollywood celebrity? He is certainly charming, but I sense that it's not the kind of surface gloss someone might put on for public consumption. As if pre-empting my next question, he tells me that, whenever he is being interviewed for an article about plastic surgery, the journalist always feels duty-bound to ask: 'What would you do to my face?' He then tells me that in my case, his answer would be that I don't need anything. I feel like saying, 'Well I am only 39,' but of course I don't. Other surgeons to whom I've put that question in the past have offered me cheek implants, a nose job or fuller lips... but in the quiet world of Dr Aston, it seems the normal rules of Planet Surgery don't apply. He quaintly refers to the fairer sex using the old-fashioned word 'ladies'. He's short and has strawberry-blond hair. I don't think he would have the time or the inclination to be a playboy and besides, Muffie can see whether the light's on in his office from their home on Park and 72nd, so there's not much scope for bunking off. Although he could always put the light on a timer.

I inform him that since my arrival in New York I've counted at least three truly dreadful facelifts, the kind that make it look as if the jowly skin has been hoisted skywards like a sheet of clingfilm and then pulled tightly over the ears. The resulting faces appear overly taut and very uncomfortable, not to mention sad and expressionless. Aston explains that these days there is no longer any reason why people should end up looking like that. He uses the term 'designer' when referring to today's modern facelifts, because they employ a variety of techniques tailored to the particular anatomy of the individual. He explains that a good plastic surgeon will ensure that the underlying layers of the face – the muscles and fascia – are first tightened to create a firm foundation, before the skin is draped over and the excess trimmed off. (Apologies

I don't think he'd
have the time
to be a playboy

Aston does not offer fillers, he's too busy doing surgery

if you're reading this over breakfast.)

As Aston practically invented the modern facelift, he should know what works. His praised FAME (Finger-Assisted Malar Elevation) procedure brought him renown in the

Eighties. It works on the middle part of the face, the cheekbone area, the nasal labial folds (the creases that run from the nose down the sides of the mouth) and sagging jowls. But even he will admit that, while good, FAME is not the solution for everyone. 'If a person with high cheekbones comes to you, the last thing you want to do is overwork that area, or they will end up looking weird,' he points out.

I comment that it's interesting that way ahead of today's celebrity-obsessed culture, he named the technique FAME. He points out it was named by a

colleague, and not by him. But look how we've come to associate surgery with celebrity, I add. This is really a cunning device on my part to lead smoothly into a question about which celebrities he's worked on but, like every reputable plastic surgeon I've ever met, he feels bound by the code of ethics not to say.

Even when asked about Mary Archer, whose Aston-lifted face was on the front page of every newspaper in Britain during her legal action in 2003 against a personal assistant, he gives a cautious answer. 'As coincidence would have it, I was at Claridge's having breakfast when I saw the story in the morning papers. They said she'd had a facelift and that I was the surgeon who had performed it... I was surprised it

was in the papers. Was there a public reaction to it?' I tell him that the report provoked a response because not only is Mary Archer a scientist, but also people see her as always taking the moral high ground whenever her ex-politician

husband is in trouble. What I want to say is that she's not exactly Sharon Osbourne, but I don't. I simply add that there were a lot of women who saw the pictures of her, thought it was great surgery and decided that they would like to have it done, too.

That's the difference between Britain and the US, we conclude. 'Surgery has become totally accepted here [the US] – people don't try and hide it any more,' Aston says. 'If a lady has a facelift, no one thinks any the less of her. And there's no question that people respond better, more favourably, the more attractive people are. Especially if you're in television or film, where it's become a matter of maintaining your position. Otherwise, when you start to look a little haggard or long in the tooth, there will be a younger person ready and waiting to take your job.'

So in a way, I suggest, we've come full circle from when Madame Noël was doing surgery. (Madame Noël was a Parisian surgeon in the early to mid-20th century, who was also a Suffragette. She believed older women should have facelifts because otherwise they would lose their jobs – she argued that it was an economic necessity.) 'Exactly, and it's not restricted to the media. It goes on in every profession. You see it with males and females on Wall Street.' Two of his three sons from an earlier marriage work on Wall Street, the third lives in Los Angeles. They are aged between 27 and 36 and he clearly dotes on all of them.

Does he think that fillers (for example, Restylane) and fixers (such as Botox) have affected the work of a surgeon in any way? He does not offer either, as he's far too busy doing surgery. 'Fillers and fixers are nothing compared with what you can do using surgery,' he explains. 'And as far as Botox is concerned, it's not such a great look when you get your forehead uncreased – there are a lot of people walking around with foreheads that have no lines at all, but their eyebrows have fallen right down over their eyelids.'

Aston also cautions against the overuse of some types of fillers. Which ones? I ask. 'Hyaluronic acid. Semi-permanent ones. Permanent ones. Some of the others. I can't say trade names, but I really think that the overuse of fillers will cause a lot of problems in the future.' Such as? 'Lumps, bumps, changes in skin texture, broken capillaries on the skin's surface, scarring, changes in the colour of the skin. Botox is mixed in a saline solution that disappears as soon as the neurotoxin blocks the muscle activity, so it's safer. When it comes to the fillers, you are injecting a foreign substance into the tissues of the face that's not going to be dispersed so easily.'

Sherrell Aston is 60 years old, and says he wants to live long enough to be able to have three facelifts. Does he think he might ever take any time off from his work, or even retire? 'I think it would be a shame if I were to give up just because somebody else said I ought to retire and do something else,' he says. 'I'm doing that something else right now. I'm doing what I want to be doing. And retirement's not on my radar.' Someone had better tell Muffie. □

Dr Sherrell J Aston, 728 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021 (tel: 001 212 249 6000, draston.com). Kathleen Baird-Murray's first novel Face Value is published by Berkley Books at £7 on 3 June.



Dr Sherrell J Aston
and his wife Muffie