

Interview: Memories From Eva Marie Saint, ‘North by Northwest’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on March 29, 2010 - 9:02am

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CHICAGO – The film buff’s essential network, Turner Classic Movies, is having a film festival next month in Hollywood from April 22nd to the 25th, and as promotion for that festival, Eva Marie Saint will introduce “North by Northwest” in Chicago.

Chicago is part of the “Road to Hollywood” series that TCM is doing in conjunction with the April TCM Film Festival. Tuesday, March 30th, Eva Marie Saint and TCM host Robert Osborne will introduce North by Northwest at the historic Music Box Theater. The event is sold out.

Eva Marie Saint was born on the 4th of July in Newark, New Jersey. She did extensive work in early TV and radio before scoring on Broadway in “The Trip to Bountiful” in 1953. At the same time she was training at the famed Actor’s Studio, and was cast in her first film, “On the Waterfront.” by Studio founder and director Elia Kazan. Her performance won her the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress.

Saint went on to co-star with Cary Grant (North by Northwest), Paul Newman (“Exodus”), Warren Beatty (“All Fall Down”) and James Garner (“36 Hours”). Younger audiences remember her as Martha Kent in “Superman Returns.”



Cliffhanger: Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint in Alfred Hitchcock’s ‘North by Northwest’
Photo Credit: Warner Home Video

HollywoodChicago.com spoke with Eva Marie Saint recently, in a free-spirited and rollicking interview on her most excellent career.

HollywoodChicago.com: Now that so many years have past, what do you really think of Alfred Hitchcock’s obsession with the certain cool

blonde look and the fact he made you cut and style your hair to his standards before doing North by Northwest?

Eva Marie Saint: [Laughs] First of all, he didn't make me do anything. We had a conference about that and my hair was not that long, I never had long hair. He had an eye for what he wanted and when he talked he was helping me create the exterior of the sexy spy lady, and all of that helps create it for me from within. I knew what I wanted to do and it helped that he took an interest in it. And as far as what I wanted, I was born on July 4th and I'm very independent. [laughs]

HC: I do Chicago Film Tours, and of course we pass the Ambassador East [location site for North by Northwest in 1958] and we play your clips, and one of the fast facts I tell people is that you had to cut your waist length hair for North by Northwest.

EMS: I don't care, say whatever you want. If it makes a better story, say it. [laughs]

HC: You pushed many of the censorship standards in 'North by Northwest' with the spicy dialogue between you and Cary Grant.

EMS: But we didn't take anything off, did we? You didn't see us naked in bed and I still thing it's as sexy as anything you see now.

HC: Did Hitchcock and screenwriter Ernest Lehman do that intentionally or were the standards finally starting to relax around the time of the filming?

EMS: I have no idea. When I did finally did see the final film at the premiere, and at the very end, when the train goes into the tunnel, I said to my husband, 'that's a little Freudian, isn't it?' And my husband whispered back, 'You got it honey, you got it!' [laughs] A lot was left to the imagination, which made it even more sexy. I'm still talking about it 50 years later.

HC: There you go. What did Cary Grant think of the Method Actor in those days, especially considering that you had co-starred with Marlon Brando?

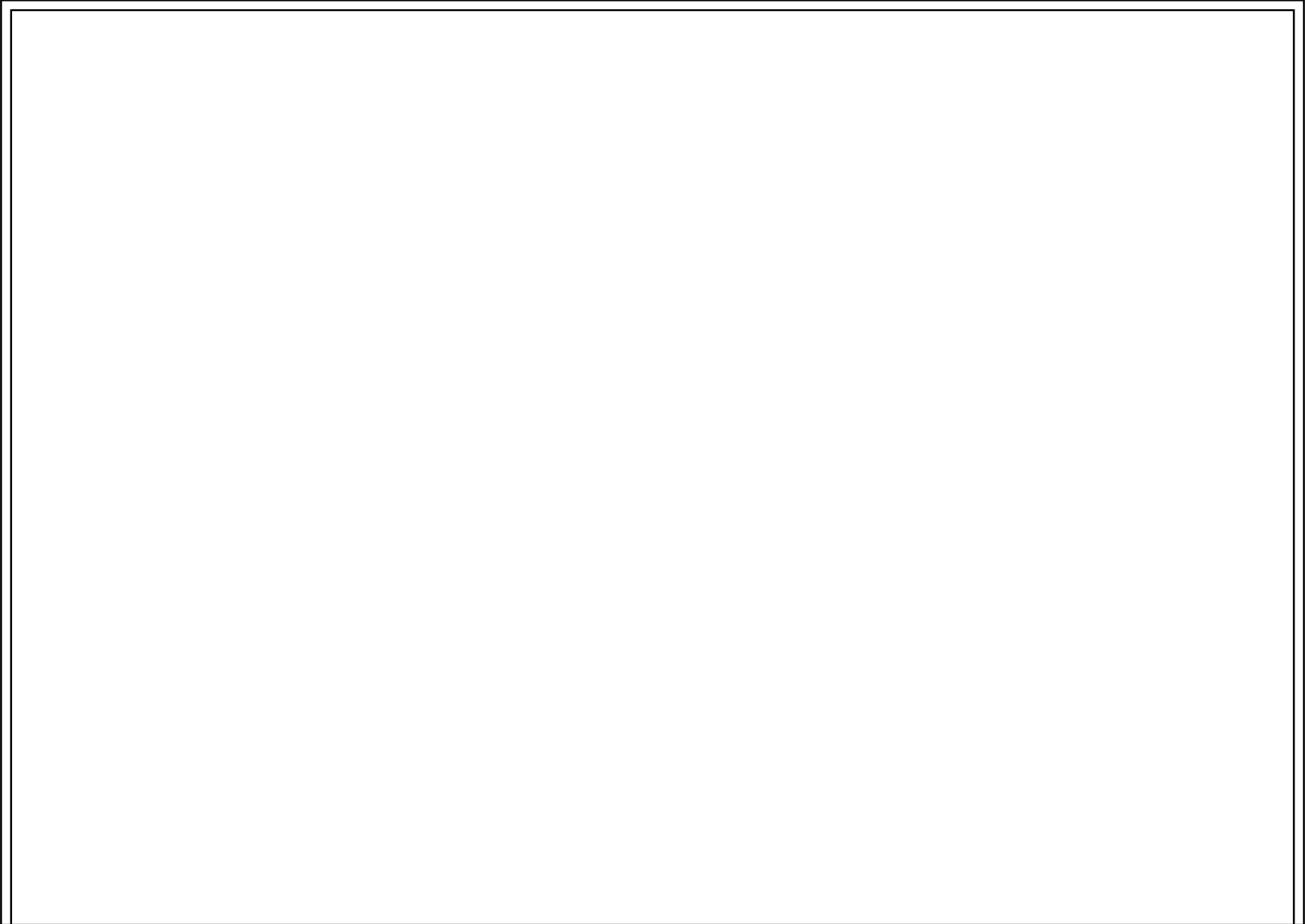
EMS: We never talked about it. We got on the set, we met, he gave me a hug and a kiss, and said 'Eva Marie, we're going to have such fun, because you don't have to cry in this film.' That was because I had done all these dramas. He was saying let's just have a good time.

HC: Didn't Hitchcock say 'let's get you out from behind the kitchen sink?'

EMS: Yes he did. He wanted me to promise to stop going from 'sink-to-sink' dramatic films, which meant the women in the film stared at each other across the sinks from their apartments. I didn't make that promise. I told Hitch when I find a wonderful role that I want to do, I'm going to do it.

HC: Besides filming some scenes of North by Northwest in Chicago over 50 years ago and coming back here for 'Nothing in Common' in 1986, what other connections do you have to Chicago, either in performance or experiences with the city?

EMS: In 1979, at the Blackstone Theater, I performed in the play 'First Monday in October,' about the first female Supreme Court Justice, with Henry Fonda. We opened March 29th, and unfortunately our last performance was April 7th, because Hank became ill, and we never finished the month-long run. We had such wonderful audiences in Chicago, which made the cancellation even sadder. It was the best of all worlds, performing in Chicago, with Hank in this wonderful play.





Contender: Eva Marie Saint in her Oscar Winning Role with Marlon Brando in 'On the Waterfront'
Photo Credit: Sony Video

HC: There were so many issues spinning around the film "On the Waterfront." Marlon Brando's presence, Elia Kazan's controversial interactions with the House Un-American Activities Committee and the on-location grittiness, how were you able to maintain your sanity in your movie debut while filming was going on?

EMS: My sanity! [laughs] It was 1953, and during the evening I was in a play with Lillian Gish called 'Trip to Bountiful.' So in the day I would take the subway to the location. After the filming day, I would go home to 26 W. 9th Street, cook dinner for my dear husband and then go to the theater. That was my day. I did what I had to do and after the play closed I was able to then complete the scenes at night.

HC: The great Lillian Gish.

EMS: Oh, yes. Lillian never looked back. Lillian worked until she was elderly, even doing a Bob Altman movie [The Wedding]. You never heard her say, 'the good old days.' And that is what I learned from her. Her backbone was steel but at the same time she had a delicate vulnerability. To be an actress, those are the two things you have to be, strong and vulnerable.

HC: Since the Oscars just finished, you had a memorable moment when you won your Oscar for 1954's "On the Waterfront." What do you remember about that night and how did you react when Frank Sinatra called your name?

EMS: Was it Frank? [it was] Let's Google it. [laughs] It was the transcontinental broadcast that year, the Oscar show originated from Hollywood, but the cast of the film was in New York City. We were in a theater there, Kazan and the rest of us. We didn't think we had a chance, because it wasn't a typical Hollywood film at the time.

All of sudden a few people started winning for Waterfront, and I started getting edgy because I was very pregnant. My husband said, 'if you hear your name called, wait ten seconds before you rush up to accept the Oscar.' I told him it wasn't going to happen. All of a sudden, I heard my name called. I couldn't get up, because my husband had his thumb on my thigh, to prevent me from getting up [laughs]. I just spent about ten seconds just smiling with my mouth open.

Of course, once I got up there I said, 'Thank you, I'm so excited I may have the baby right here.' The interesting thing to me is that in those days all you were suppose to do and all you had to do was say, 'Thank you.' You didn't have to be clever or have dialog with another actor. So that's why I liked my speech [laughs]



With Martin Landau at the 50th Anniversary DVD Release Celebration of North by Northwest, Last November in Hollywood
Photo credit: Jason Merritt/Getty Images

HC: You deserved the Oscar. On the Waterfront is one of the finest films in American cinema history.

EMS: Because of the TCM Network we continue to see these films. I get fan mail from younger people, 20, 21 years old. They tell me they're in film school, they saw Waterfront or North by Northwest on TCM and it was incredible. It keeps the films alive for these younger people.

HC: Since you worked with directors as diverse as Hitch, Elia Kazan, Otto Preminger, Vincente Minnelli, John Frankenheimer, George Seaton and Norman Jewison, which director did you have the best creative collaboration and why?

EMS: Kazan. Because I was studying at the Actor's Studio, which he was attending. I was studying with Lee Strasberg. But the way he worked, so quietly he worked. He would never give you direction to you in front of other actors, he would just come up and whisper a few things. I learned a lot from him.

Since Waterfront was my debut film I was getting to know the crew by name on the set and was going around trying to be friendly. Kazan took me aside and said 'Eva Marie, I can see that you being friendly around the set, but don't give it away.' When I asked him what he meant he said, 'you can't be that friendly and give so much of yourself. Save it for the close-ups.'

He also said, 'think of yourself as an hourglass, when you get up in the morning you have only so much sand in that hourglass, learn how to manipulate that sand.' To this day, even at my age, that advice is still a part of me. I watch that sand go through me so I don't overdo, so what I do I can do well.

HC: That's funny, I've always thought of you as an hourglass too, but in a very different way.

EMS: [Laughs] That just goes with your sexy voice. [laughs] I got it!



With Warren Beatty in 'All Fall Down'
Photo credit: © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

HC: Was there a director that you wish you had a chance to work with and why?

EMS: I really wanted to work with Woody Allen. I love his films. But I did work with the finest. There was a film I did with Johnny Frankenheimer called 'All Fall Down' [1962], co-starring Warren Beatty and Brandon De Wilde, I love that movie. It was sort of an art film, but so many people come up to me and say, 'Eva Marie, I just saw....' and I say, 'I know, All Fall Down.' They would ask how I'd know, I could just hear it in their voice. [laughs]

HC: Do you think the production code standards that finally collapses in the late 1960s a good thing creatively for the industry or do you think it allowed for cheaper exploitation in use of more gratuitous language and nudity?

EMS: Any film that has gratuitous bathroom talk, I think is horrible. I don't want to sound prudish, but I want to make and see the type of movies that I can watch with my children and grandchildren. I turned down excessively violent movies as well, I didn't want to be a part of it. Maybe because my Dad was a Quaker, I don't know. I can't watch violence in a film, even though I know it's make believe, or a film where every other word is sh*t. Also when everyone is in bed naked and you know they're not doing it, it drives me crazy.

HC: But was it inevitable that the production code would collapse as you bridged the two eras?

EMS: I never thought about it. A lot of things have collapsed in this life, but I think of Lillian Gish, and I don't want to be cranky [laughs].

HC: Is there any other era in motion picture history that you would have like to have worked in and why?

EMS: No, I wouldn't have liked the silent films. Lillian would talk about that, because she was the only one left. [laughs] I loved living through my era to now. It's just harder to make choices for roles to keep up. Don't look back.

"North by Northwest," part of the "Road to Hollywood" sponsored by Turner Classic Movies, is sold out at the Music Box Theatre in Chicago on March 30th. The TCM Film Festival is in Hollywood, California, from April 22th-25th.



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