

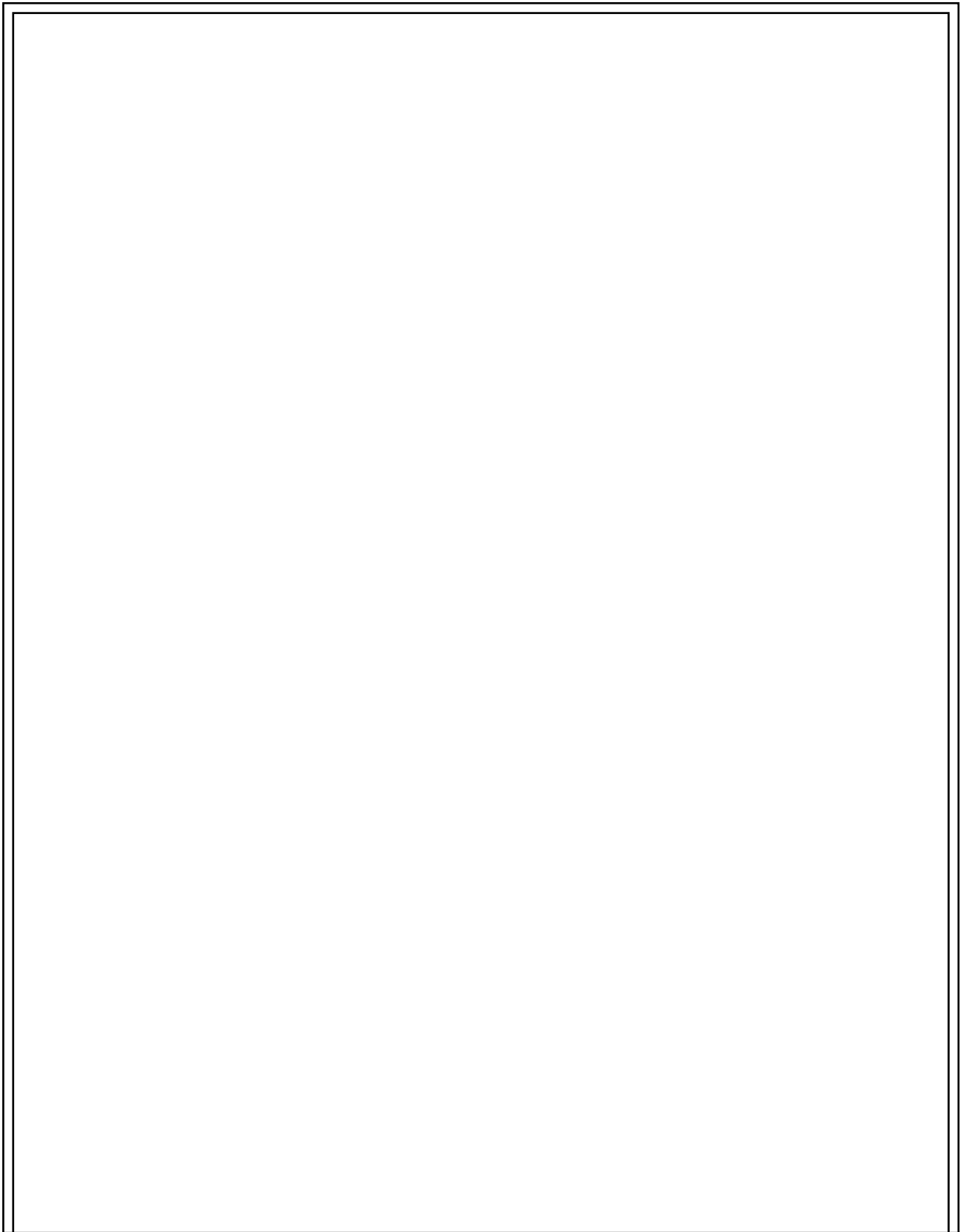
Tony Curtis, the American Prince of Hollywood, is Dead at 85

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on September 30, 2010 - 11:10am

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CHICAGO – Tony Curtis was the Prince of Hollywood, he was the original Fantastic Mr. Fox. He took his pretty boy good looks and carved a career that included the classic films “Some Like it Hot,” “Sweet Smell of Success” and “The Defiant Ones.” Tony Curtis died at his Las Vegas home yesterday at the age of 85.

I had the privilege of interviewing Tony Curtis twice for HollywoodChicago.com in the last couple of years. We spoke of his early days as an actor, his relationship with director Billy Wilder and the various ups and downs in his adventurous life. Between the outline of that life I will add some direct quotes given to me by the man.





Tony Curtis poses for HollywoodChicago.com on Dec. 3, 2009.
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Born Bernard Schwartz in the Bronx, New York, in 1925, Curtis grew up poor as the son of immigrant parents. His early life had its share of challenges, as he and his brother were briefly taken away from his parents by the state, and his beloved brother passed away when Curtis was only 13.

After a stint with the Marines, Curtis used the G.I. Bill to take acting lessons at the New York Dramatic Workshop. During one of his many small stage appearances, he caught the eye of Joyce Selznick, niece of the legendary David O. Selznick, who offered the new dubbed Tony Curtis a seven-year contract at Universal.

In the interview from last December, Curtis talked about his first trip to Chicago, working at the Yiddish Theater on Ogden and Kedzie.

"I had to temporarily change my name to Bernie White in the program," he explained, "because my real last name of Schwartz, was too close to 'schvartze,' the Yiddish word meaning black."

His first role in Hollywood was a two minute scene, dancing with Yvonne De Carlo, in the noir thriller, "Criss Cross" (1949), which led to a western with Jimmy Stewart called "Winchester '73" (1950). While working steadily in the 1950s, Curtis was constantly searching for meatier roles, beyond his amazing good looks.

He hit the jackpot playing oily press agent Sidney Falco in "Sweet Smell of Success" (1957), and followed that classic with "The Defiant Ones" (1958), opposite Sidney Poitier. He followed that with the movie called one of the funniest ever, "Some Like it Hot" (1959), in which he

and Jack Lemmon dressed up as women to flee the Chicago mob.

Tony Curtis described that period in the first HollywoodChicago interview: “I had no idea what classics meant. I was living amongst them and I didn’t know that maybe one of my movies might be,” he recalled. “I’m not being modest now, I’m just saying emotion and morality roll around in the atmosphere and maybe these films catch up to them. Some of them are popular now and maybe they’ll survive, maybe they won’t. The point primarily is to find something that defies what you imagined a normal convention to be.”



Tony Curtis (left) and Burt Lancaster in the great 'Sweet Smell of Success'
Photo credit: Turner Classic Movies

On his relationship with Billy Wilder, director of *Some Like it Hot*: “Billy Wilder was a European, German, Jewish fellow. Tough as nails. You knew when you stepped into his company, be careful. You are liable to step on a barb.”

His convention busting continued into the 1960s, with his role opposite Kirk Douglas in “*Spartacus*” (1960), directed by the legendary Stanley Kubrick.

“Stanley Kubrick back then was a kick in the ass, and so was I,” Curtis told me in our second interview, “We were both from New York City. He had an accent like I did, but nobody cared because he wasn’t there for his accent. He was there for the ideas.”

While his later career wasn’t as showy as his earlier films, he did some memorable turns in “*The Boston Strangler*” (1968) and “*The Last Tycoon*” (1976). Continuing to defy convention, he played a Senator Joseph McCarthy-type character in “*Insignificance*” (1985).

“In putting that part together, I had no difficulty in understanding The Senator and what was going on with his character. I had to become a good detective, because in searching that out I was able to find out what The Senator was like. And he was one mean motherf*cker,” Curtis recalled in the first interview.

After some fairly significant TV series, “*The Persuaders!*” (1971), “*McCoy*” (1975) and “*Vega\$*” (1978), Curtis worked steadily until the end of his life, appearing in smaller roles in films and making TV guest shots, including doing drag again in an episode of “*Suddenly Susan*” with Brooke Shields.

Tony Curtis was married five times, most notably to actress Janet Leigh, and one of his daughters from that marriage is the actress Jamie Lee Curtis. He is survived by his current wife, Jill Vandenberg.

He spent most of his twilight years with painting, another love. One of his surrealist works went on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2007. In the first interview, he said, “Painting is as important to me as speaking, the images captured here with a camera or as playing a part in a movie. It’s part of my energy.”

He also wrote a number of books, including a tome on the making of *Some Like it Hot* and his own “*American Prince, A Memoir*” in 2007. In that book he describe the many dalliances he had with actresses over the years, including Yvonne De Carlo, Marilyn Monroe and Natalie Wood.

“Since I don’t do movies now,” Curtis said in our final interview, “I write and paint. I’m also thinking of becoming an amateur gynecologist.” My reply to him, of course, “from what I hear, I would say you are a professional.”

Tony Curtis roared with laughter. He was a gentleman, a scoundrel and a Hollywood legend. But he never wasted a second in his long and illustrious life.

Source material for this article came from [imdb.com](#) [16].
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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [20]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [19]

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