

Interview: Piper Laurie Reflects on ‘Carrie,’ ‘The Hustler,’ Fumio Yamaguchi

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CHICAGO – Few character actresses have proven to be as effortlessly versatile as Piper Laurie. Her Oscar-nominated turns as Paul Newman’s alcoholic lover in Robert Rossen’s 1961 classic “The Hustler” and Marlee Matlin’s estranged but loving mother in Randa Haines’s 1986 drama “Children of a Lesser God” offer a mere sample of her remarkable range and magnetic screen presence.

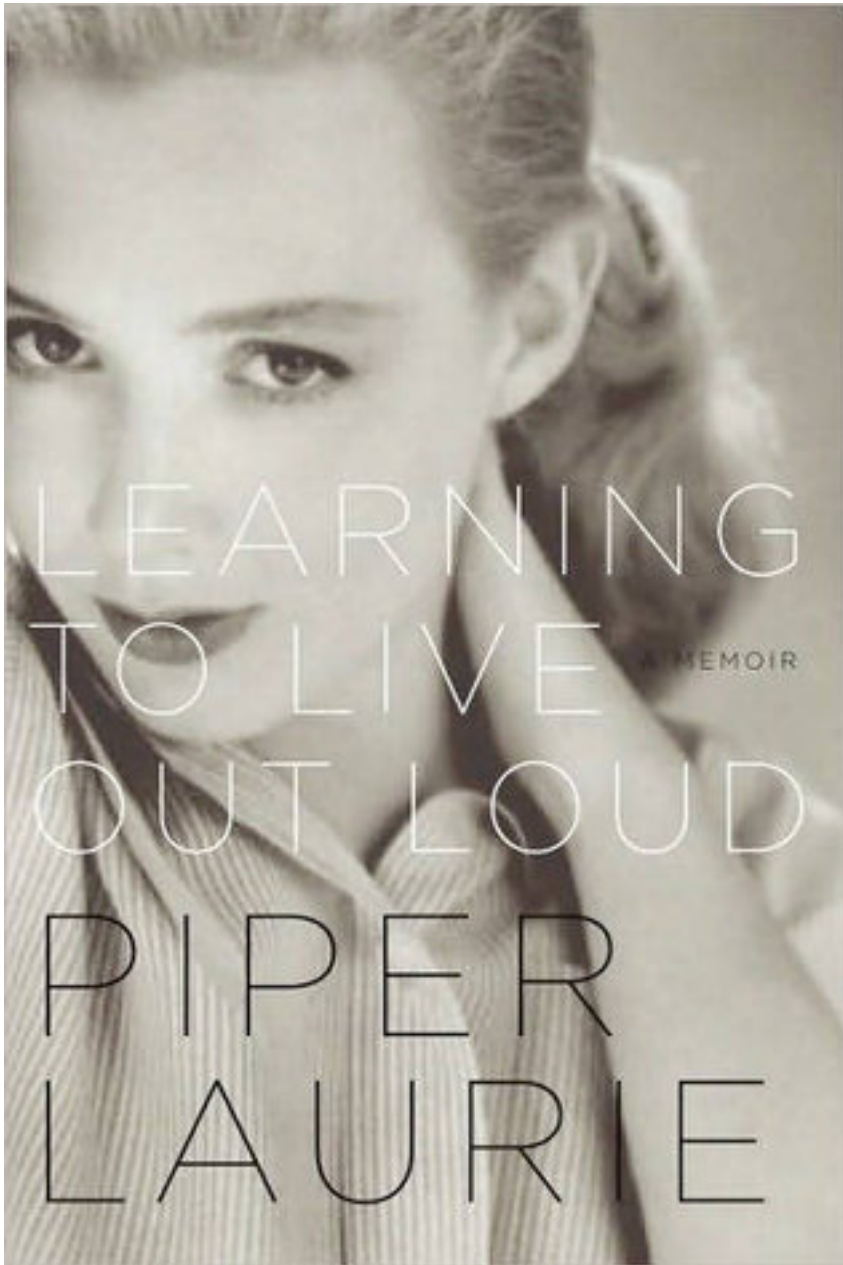
Yet her role that remains immortalized in the minds of moviegoers is Margaret White, the psychotic mother of the titular telekinetic teen in Brian De Palma’s marvelously effective 1976 thriller “Carrie.” Chicagoans will have the opportunity to meet the legendary actress when she attends Camp Midnight’s presentation of “A Very Carrie Christmas” at 2 p.m. Friday, Dec. 4 at the Music Box Theatre.

The event includes pre-show entertainment from Hell in a Handbag Productions, as well as an interactive audience guide and running commentary from Dick O’Day and David Cerda accompanying a screening of the film. Laurie will participate in post-film discussion and will be signing copies of her fascinating new memoir, “Learning to Live Out Loud,” which will be available for purchase at the theater.

HollywoodChicago.com spoke with Laurie about some of the most pivotal moments of her career, including her early days in Playhouse 90, her spellbinding unrehearsed monologue in “Carrie,” and her jaw-dropping portrayal of Fumio Yamaguchi in “Twin Peaks.”

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you come up with the title for your memoir?

Piper Laurie: I had a severe anxiety disorder during my early childhood, and was rarely able to say any words. Even as I grew up, I was still burdened with that. I never knew when it would strike. My whole life experience has been about growing away from that and being able to communicate, which I found much easier to do using other people’s words as an actress. So I decided at this stage in life that since I’d lived my life with so many secrets, I just didn’t want to keep them cooped up anymore. It was time to communicate in the ultimate way.



Piper Laurie will be signing copies of her new memoir *Learning to Live Out Loud* at the Music Box on Dec. 4.

Photo credit: Crown Archetype

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you have much theater experience prior to your film career?

Laurie: Yes, I did my first play when I was eleven. It was a professional production of “Guest in the House.” I played a little girl and I had a lot of dialogue in lots of scenes. The chore of being where I was supposed to be at a certain moment was exciting.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the experience like on the set of your first film, “Louisa” (1950)?

Laurie: I had been studying very hard at a very good acting class for about three years before I auditioned and screen tested at Universal. I considered myself a serious actress even though I was just eighteen when I officially started the contract and made the movie “Louisa.” The technical aspects were not that difficult, and people were kind and showed me what to do. I had all those great old timers—Charles Coburn and Edmund Gwenn and Spring Byington—to show me the ropes and help me out.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was it a challenging transition to act before film cameras? Did you have to reign in your emotions?

Laurie: Oh no, that wasn’t a problem. As a matter of fact, the sound people were always at me to speak up louder.

HollywoodChicago.com: What were your thoughts regarding your studio-assigned name, “Piper Laurie,” which replaced your real name, Rosetta Jacobs?

Laurie: I wish it had never been changed. In those years, I never thought of my name as sounding Jewish. It’s been pointed out to me lately that many people did, and that’s why it was necessary to change my name. I had no inkling of that. I thought they changed it because it wasn’t short and easy to remember like Lana and Rita and Carrie. I didn’t like it. I thought it was a thing, not a name, but I went along with it as I did with most things, and finally after many years, Rosetta Jacobs and Piper Laurie were integrated. So I answer and feel at home with either of those names.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the first role you had that truly stretched you as an actress?

Laurie: It was after I broke my contract with Universal and I did a live Playhouse 90 production, the original [1958] “Days of Wine and Roses.” It was very different from the [1962] movie. Even Lee Remick said so. [laughs] She loved what I had done and felt embarrassed by what she had done. I thought she was very nice in [the big screen version]. But the element of playing live was very stimulating. It gives life to what you’re doing and danger to what you’re doing. Cliff Robertson played my husband in the show, and though I’m a great Jack Lemmon fan, I just thought that our show was better. I think they tried to branch out too much with the movie and make it something that it really wasn’t.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was acting in Playhouse 90 similar to theater?

Laurie: It was similar, but it was more of a life or death event because in theater, you could always do another performance and improve or fix it. But this was one time, and in those days, they were real events. We didn’t have many shows on, and it seemed like everyone in the world

was watching you.



Piper Laurie and Paul Newman star in Robert Rossen's 1961 classic The Hustler.

Photo credit: Twentieth Century Fox

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your initial reaction to the script of “The Hustler”?

Laurie: I wanted to do it before I had even gotten to the part in the script where my character came in. The words painted a picture that was so vivid in my imagination. It drew me in so quickly and completely, as the movie does. I didn't have that in my mind while I was acting. I was very subjective in my relationship with Paul [Newman], so I had no idea where the camera was or what was going on. When I saw the finished movie, it was so different from what I imagined the first time I read the script that I was shocked and I hated the movie. It took me years before I could see it and realize how really wonderful it was.

HollywoodChicago.com: I could imagine your character of Sarah Packard being fragile and weak in the hands of another actress, but you brought her so much strength. Was it a challenge to bring out that strength, or was it in the script?

Laurie: I think it was in the script. It was just implicit. I could never really put my finger on who she was. Even now, I don't think I could describe who she was. I think I just instinctively understood it.

HollywoodChicago.com: In her last scene, Sarah writes three words on a mirror. What did those words signify to you?

Laurie: Just self-hatred, which is why she slept with [Bert Gordon].

HollywoodChicago.com: Did the time you spent at Greyhound bus terminals help prepare you for the role?

Laurie: Yeah I'd like to think it did, but at the time, I'm sure I could've played it without that. A lot of the research I did was not necessarily necessary. [laughs] I really enjoyed all the research that I did. What it did was make me love the work more. You get to see life in a way that you wouldn't otherwise, so just as a human being, it's educating. Whether or not it's actually useful in the performance, I don't know.

HollywoodChicago.com: In the excellent DVD edition of “Carrie,” you mention how your interpretation of the script as satire initially helped you ease into the role of Margaret White. Was satire in your mind while onset?

Laurie: I just tried to get that out of my head. Once De Palma revealed that he didn't want a satirical approach and said, “You're going to get a laugh if you do that,” I realized that he didn't want laughs, at least not in our conscious performing. I just fully embraced the reality of what I was playing. I must say that I enjoyed having the childlike freedom to play act and be the evil witch. It was very freeing and fun to do.



Piper Laurie and Sissy Spacek star in Brian De Palma's 1976 thriller *Carrie*.

Photo credit: United Artists

HollywoodChicago.com: Why did you decide to perform your climactic monologue without a rehearsal?

Laurie: It was a little scary for me to play it the way I thought it should be played. I could've done it a different way, but I just thought that the revelation of Margaret's secret sexual experience should be as raw and real as possible. I didn't want to wear myself out rehearsing that. While Brian didn't know exactly what I was going to do, I did ask him if he'd mind if we didn't rehearse it. So I just got into position, Mario Tosi lit it and I played it. Brian was almost in tears when he came in and said, "Oh Piper, I'm so sorry, could you please do it one more time?" And I did, and it was just as full and operatic as the first time. I have no idea which take they used.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did the instincts you developed in "Playhouse 90" and "Studio One" serve as an asset during this scene?

Laurie: Yes, you remind me that if it hadn't been for the live television experience, I probably wouldn't have had the guts to do that last scene in "Carrie" the way that I did. I also did a John Guare play workshop one summer and he kept rewriting speeches for us. There would be no time to rehearse and little time to memorize. Sometimes he would hand you something a few minutes before you went onstage. I had a monologue to do once that was so explicit and so raw and I had no rehearsal time. I just went out and did it. I think the audience gasped right in the middle of it. All those things helped.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you feel the film has aged well? No remake has been able to erase it from moviegoers' memories.

Laurie: I haven't seen the remakes. I think, in a way, that "Carrie" is very sweet. It's very gentle compared to the savage kind of violent movies that we have now. It's become more accessible for more people. I know that when it first came out, many of the Academy members wouldn't go to see a so-called horror movie. I don't really think that it is a horror movie, and I never did. It's a movie with surprises in it, and when they have to deal with violence, it's very gentle in a way, such as the scene [where John Travolta retrieves] the pig's blood. Today you'd show a shot of him killing a pig. I think Brian is an artist and he did many lovely things in that movie. It was visually exquisite. And I love the innocent humor, the life of the teenage kids and the sensuality of the young people. The opening scene of the girls in the shower was beautiful without being overt.

HollywoodChicago.com: After the success of "Carrie," did you feel typecast?

Laurie: Yes, I really was offended. The movie I did right after that was a romantic one with Mel Gibson [1978's "Tim"], but occasionally I would be given a part requiring that same sort of raw anger as if they thought that's who I was. When I did an Agatha Christie movie [1988's "Appointment With Death"], I played a bullying mother. That's not who I am. That was a one-time thing that I did with great gusto and fun. It irritates me when people want me to do that again.

HollywoodChicago.com: Another memorable thriller you made was Dario Argento's 1993 film, "Trauma."

Laurie: You know, I haven't seen that since I made it. I had a lot of fun on that film when we shot it because it was so silly. [laughs] I felt silly acting in my black wig and I had some sort of funny accent. It was over the top and I just had fun laughing in between takes.

HollywoodChicago.com: Speaking of laughter, I'm amazed you were able to keep a straight face on the set of "Twin Peaks" during its second season. How did you first become involved in the show?

Laurie: I don't think [David Lynch] knew what he wanted me to do in "Twin Peaks" because the part wasn't really written. It was just a couple lines in the pilot that was suddenly a success and went into series. Contractually I had to be in the series, which wasn't what I had intended. I just wanted to work with Lynch once because I thought it would be interesting. So it wasn't until after we did the pilot that he and Mark Frost began to write things for me.



Piper Laurie was disguised as Japanese actor Fumio Yamaguchi during the second season of Twin Peaks.

Photo credit: Lynch/Frost Productions

HollywoodChicago.com: After your character Catherine appears to have been killed in season one, she returns disguised as a businessman, Mr. Tojamura, but Lynch had the idea of having you return to the set disguised as a mysterious foreign actor. What was your inspiration for the role of Japanese actor “Fumio Yamaguchi”?

Laurie: I just thought it was less predictable than a Frenchman or a Mexican. My French accent would’ve been transparently fake and I thought it would be easier to disguise my speech with the Japanese. I assumed I’d have the help of my voice being electronically altered. At the last minute, I realized that they had no plans to do that, so I just jumped in and did what I could. Successful directors would come in as the guest directors for each week, and nothing was told to them [about me] because that was important to David for some reason. I would love to ask him why. He didn’t want anyone to know—not my family, not the cast or crew. So I respected that as much as I could until my sister started having asthma attacks because she thought I had been fired.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there a moment when you revealed your identity to everyone onset or was their realization gradual?

Laurie: It was gradual. They were all told to be very respectful of this famous Japanese actor who only worked with Kurosawa, which made them keep their distance. I claimed that I didn’t speak English, so [my assistant] Derick [Shimatsu] would stay by my side and we’d mumble things back and forth. If the director would tell me what to do, I pretended that I didn’t understand and Derick tried to explain it to me. He would speak real Japanese and I would speak fake Japanese back to him. Then Derick would go talk to the director, who was beside himself and turning all sorts of colors. [laughs] After a week or two, the rest of the cast began to get a little closer and tried to get a good look at me. They could see it was very heavy makeup and they knew that something was up. Peggy Lipton thought I was Isabella Rossellini. Jack Nance, who played my husband, didn’t know who I was. It was so obvious, and he was so close to me in every scene. I was sure he knew but he didn’t. On the first day of the shoot, he went, “Oh, that new actor—boy is he weird.”

HollywoodChicago.com: What was working with Jack Nance like?

Laurie: Now talk about weird. [Nance] was really strange. He had a different drummer. His rhythm was just different from anyone else’s. The first inkling he had that Fumio Yamaguchi was me was when he read the script where I revealed myself. And we had so many scenes together. [laughs] There was one take where we were leaning against a bar and talking very closely. I’d love to see it again because we were both pretty funny.

HollywoodChicago.com: How does a script grab your attention?

Laurie: If it's [about] a fresh subject. As years go on, you get less and less offers because no one writes things for older people. When was the last time you saw a story about an older person who was in love? When people get old, they have lots of feelings and thoughts and experiences other than what we get to see most of the time. I like when I can turn the pages of a script and not anticipate what's going to happen on the next one.

HollywoodChicago.com: That certainly can be said about your recent indie film, “Hesher.”

Laurie: Yes! [laughs] I thought my character in that film was funny and interesting, not a cliché and not on the nose. You really didn't know what was going to happen next. Also, I'm a great admirer of Joseph Gordon-Levitt, so that was enough.



Piper Laurie attends La Bete at New York City's Music Box Theatre in October 2010.

Photo credit: Getty Images

HollywoodChicago.com: Has directing always been an aspiration of yours as well?

Laurie: Yes. When I was eleven, I wrote and directed a play and brought the kids home from school to rehearse. I never had any trouble communicating to them. I knew what I wanted. The words flowed out of me and then I'd clam up when rehearsals were over. We put it on in my fifth grade homeroom class and it was a great success. The teacher across the hall heard about it, invited her class over and we put it on again. Then the principal asked us to put it on in the auditorium for the whole school. When they asked me to play the lead in “Hansel and Gretel,” I said, “No, I'd rather direct.” [laughs] I don't know what got into me, but they let me do it and I directed it. Yet aside from coaching people if they needed help with a scene they were working on, I hadn't officially directed anybody until Jim Brochu asked me to do the play “Zero Hour.”

HollywoodChicago.com: You also directed a short film called “Property” in 2006 with Seymour Cassel.

Laurie: Yes, yes. It's part of what I hope will be a trilogy of James Lasdun short stories. I'm very proud of it. I've got two more scripts and I hope to get them done. The film had a screening [at the Port Townsend Film Festival] in Washington where I was honored. Robert Osborne interviewed me onstage in between screenings of “The Hustler” and “Carrie.” They asked me if they could play the movie that I had written and directed, and it won the audience award.

HollywoodChicago.com: What has it been like reflecting on your career during the three years you wrote this memoir?

Laurie: It’s very interesting. I have to keep reminding myself that I chose to let the world know my secrets, and that’s good. This is who I am and I’ve had a really interesting life. It’s out there and I love the process of the writing. Fortunately, I have a good memory and I surprised myself about the details that I remembered.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve had to reinvent yourself so many times throughout the years. Will your next step be reinventing yourself into “Rosetta Jacobs”?

Laurie: No, no, I think I’m in the process now of being, “The Writer.” [laughs]

Music Box Theatre and Camp Midnight presents ‘Carrie,’ starring Sissy Spacek, Piper Laurie, Amy Irving, William Katt, Betty Buckley, Nancy Allen and John Travolta. It was written by Lawrence D. Cohen and directed by Brian De Palma. It will screen Dec. 4 at the Music Box, followed by a discussion with Laurie and film critic Richard Knight, Jr.



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