

Interviews: Actresses Millie Perkins, Diane Baker of ‘The Diary of Anne Frank’

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- [Diane Baker](#) [2]
- [Elvis Presley](#) [3]
- [George Stevens](#) [4]
- [Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Interview](#) [7]
- [Joe Arce](#) [8]
- [Millie Perkins](#) [9]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [10]
- [The Diary of Anne Frank](#) [11]
- [Wild in the Streets](#) [12]

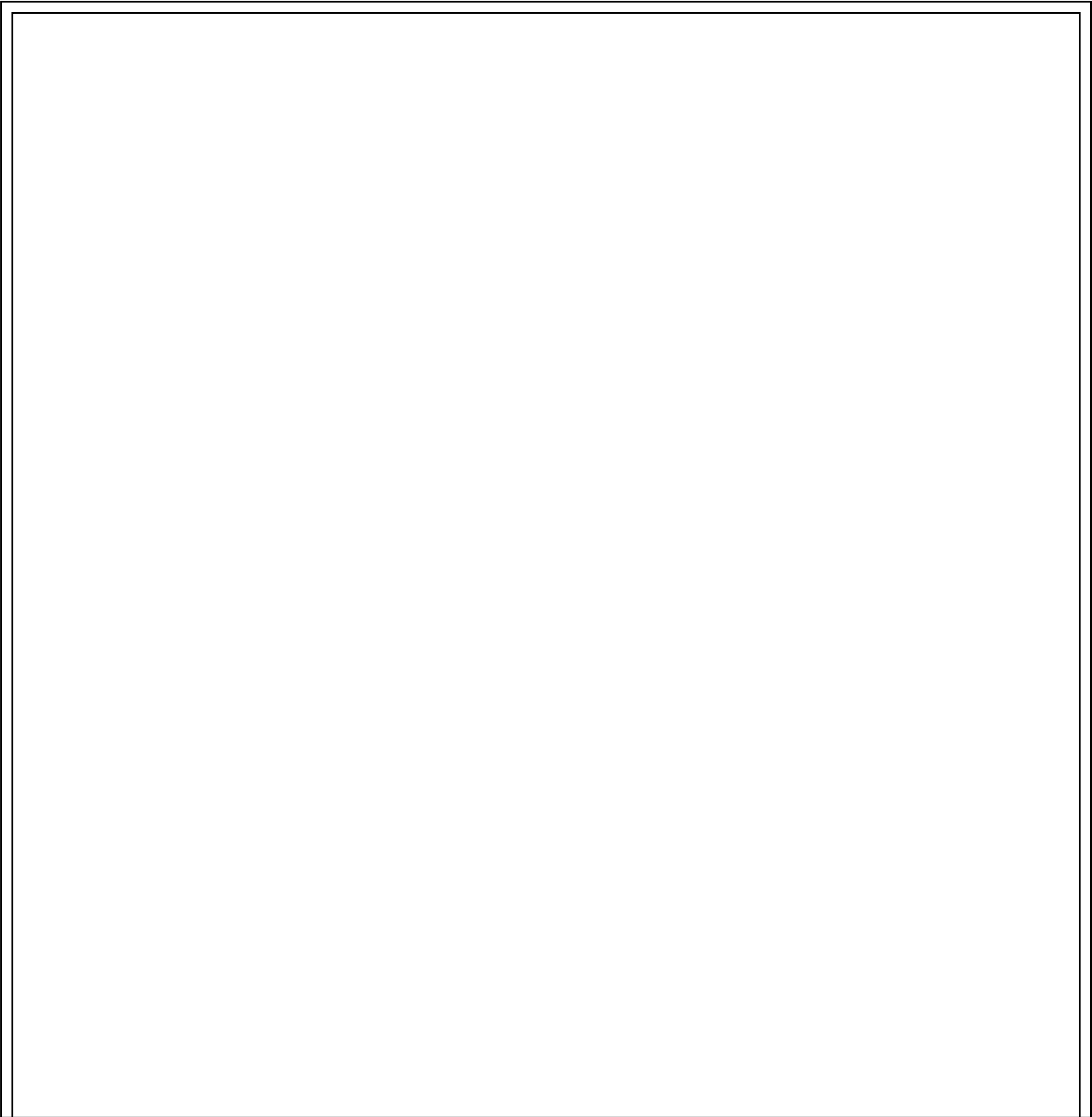
CHICAGO – The year was 1959, and the film was “The Diary of Anne Frank,” based on the 1955 Pulitzer Prize winning stage play, which in turn was adapted from the famous diaries of a young girl hiding from Nazi occupiers in WWII Holland. Two actresses, Millie Perkins (Anne) and Diane Baker (her sister Margot), made their movie debuts in this renowned film.

The director of “The Diary of Anne Frank,” the celebrated George Stevens, led a nationwide search for the lead teenage actress to portray Anne, after Audrey Hepburn, Natalie Wood and Susan Strasberg (Anne in the original play) passed on the role. The film won Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actress (Shelley Winters), Best Art Direction and Best Cinematography, and was also nominated for Best Picture and Best Director.

Millie Perkins and Diane Baker were participating in the “Hollywood Celebrities and Memorabilia Show” in September when they talked to HollywoodChicago.com. They also posed for photographer Joe Arce.

Millie Perkins, Anne Frank in “The Diary of Anne Frank”

Millie Perkins was a promising international model when she was picked to portray the title character of one the most notable stage plays of the 1950s. The raven haired cover girl went on to co-star with Elvis Presley in “Wild in the Country” (1961) and “Ensign Pulver” (1964), but neither film ignited her career. Her last film in the 1960s, “Wild in the Streets” (1968), was based on a short story by her husband, screenwriter Robert Thom, and later became a cult classic. She did not appear again as an actress until a decade later, and has worked steadily in TV and movies ever since.





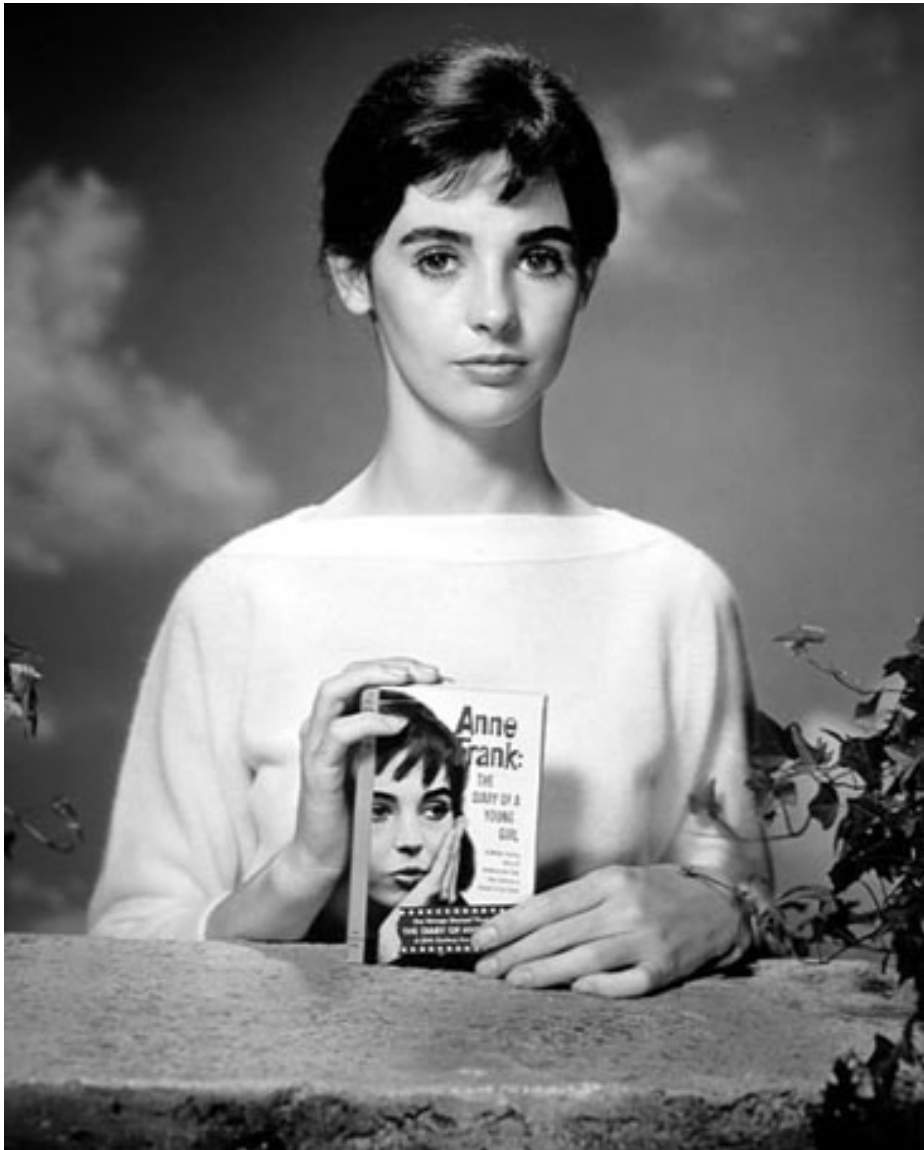
Millie Perkins at the Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show, Chicago, September 2011
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: You had a tremendous spotlight on you when you played the title role in ‘The Diary of Anne Frank.’ What kind of pressure was on you during the time and how did director George Stevens guide you through that pressure cooker?

Millie Perkins: I had never acted before, I was a model in New York City, and this was just after I had left home. I had been lucky, making a lot of money in just one year as a model. People approached me because they had seen my picture, and I had heard that George Stevens was casting the film. I left for Paris for my first overseas modeling job, and the casting people were actually searching for me, but I didn’t want to go back. I never had seen the Diary on stage, nor had I read it. But when I mentioned to my French colleagues that it was George Stevens, they convinced me to leave to audition. I was crying all the way home.

I wasn’t a movie person, but one of my favorite books was Theodore Dreiser’s ‘A Place in the Sun.’ So I saw the movie of that book when I was in high school, and when I realized it was the same George Stevens who directed that movie from my favorite book, it made me feel better about auditioning. It was a whirlwind. I read the book on the way to California, after having to sign with a agent for less than I was making as a model. I then met George Stevens, and he loved me. He knew I hadn’t acted before, but he trusted that I had the right instinct – natural or nothing at all. I was very independent, and although he was very strict with the other actors, he knew if he yelled at me once I would have gotten on a plane and went home. He knew how to handle a set, and was one of the great directors in America at the time.

HollywoodChicago.com: Given all that, how was the rest of the shoot?



Millie Perkins in an Anne Frank Publicity Photo
Photo credit: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment

Perkins: During filming, I went to him and said, 'Mr. Stevens, I don't want to be an actress anymore, I think I'd like to go home.' And we were halfway through the movie shoot. But I didn't understand Hollywood, and it was all a lack of sophistication and naivete. I stayed because George Stevens trusted me. We shot for six months, and if we didn't get it in one or two takes, I was never going to get it. He knew that instinctively when he hired me. It was meant to be, obviously.

HollywoodChicago.com: You both co-starred with Elvis Presley in a film and later played his mother Gladys [the TV series from 1990, 'Elvis']. What insight did you have about his relationship with Gladys that allowed you to understand her better when you played her?

Perkins: We shot the show in Memphis, it only ran for 13 episodes, despite great reviews. Priscilla Presley produced it, and when I went to Memphis, I heard all the negative things about Gladys, that she's a drunk and overweight, and no doubt she had problems before she died. But I met her best friends, and one of them told me that when Gladys once drove near a mental institution, she said, 'if Elvis signs with that Col. [Tom] Parker, he'll be dead by the time he's 40 and I'll be in that mental ward.' Of course, Elvis died when he was 42, she just knew that Col. Parker wouldn't treat he son as he needed to be treated.

HollywoodChicago.com: You did back-to-back Westerns with Jack Nicholson and Monte Hellman in the mid-1960s. What was driving Nicholson in those days and how did you start a collaboration with him?

Perkins: Jack and I were in acting class together, along with Warren Oates and Carole Eastman [screenwriter, 'Five Easy Pieces']. So we started a little acting group, and once a week we would get together. Jack would intimidate other actresses, so our coach would put he and I together because he never intimidated me.

We went to Utah to shoot both "Ride in the Whirlwind" and "The Shooting" at the same time, two weeks each. We had no make-up or wardrobe, we picked out our clothes at a western costume shop. We had a good director in Monte Hellman and a good cameraman, and it just was a fun collaboration. It was my best experience as an actress to that date.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were in the infamous cult film "Wild in the Streets," for which your husband at the time, Robert Thom, wrote the screenplay. Why do you think that film still has a resonance and an effect even today?

Perkins: The short story and the screenplay was my idea. We were sitting in the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles on Hollywood Boulevard, during the height of the protest movement in the 1960s, and I said to Thom what if the teenagers took over, put drugs in the water and that sort of thing. So Thom wrote that up as a short story for Esquire Magazine. It was almost predicting the future of the protests, just because he took it to the extreme. The rights were first sold to a stage producer, and it would have been the first hippie play, even before 'Hair.'

The stage producer sold it to Paramount Pictures, who in turn got scared of the material, and resold it to American International Pictures [producers of 1960s B-movie youth movies]. It was their biggest moneymaker up to that point. Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, who wrote the music, are both in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The timing was right, and it was a great time for the film.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've been a working actor fairly consistently since there was a rumor that you'd past away in the late 1970s. What has been the key to that consistency, and which role did you enjoy most after 1980?

Perkins: I had only taken some time off, and actually taught acting at Oregon State College. After my husband died in 1979, I knew I had to get back to something that made sense in a way. I did a fun play in the 1980s called 'Neon Life,' a musical written by Shirley Kaplan. I also did a part in 'Knots Landing.' The last movie I did was 'The Lost City,' playing Andy Garcia's mother. We had no money, but it was great. When I came back to Hollywood in the early 1980s, a girlfriend asked me how did I think I was going to get back to work at 'my age.' I never intended to not have a life, it never occurred to me that I wouldn't work. Why wouldn't I want to work, I can act, what are you talking about?



Diane Baker of "The Diary of Anne Frank" and "The Silence of the Lambs"

Diane Baker has worked as a character actress in movies and TV ever since she made that film debut as Margot Frank, Anne Frank's sister. After that film, she appeared in such diverse 1960s classics as Alfred Hitchcock's "Marnie" (1964) and TV's "Dr. Kildare" and "The Fugitive." In the 1970s, she did character parts on most of TV's iconic shows, including "Love, American Style," "Medical Center," "The Streets of San Francisco," "Marcus Welby, M.D.," "Police Woman," "Columbo," "Kojak" and "Fantasy Island." In 1991, she portrayed Senator Ruth Martin in the Oscar-winning Best Picture, "Silence of the Lambs." She continues to work steadily in movies and TV shows, including the recent "House M.D."



Diane Baker at the Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show, Chicago, September 2011
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: We talked to Millie Perkins about her intense spotlight, beginning her on-screen career in 'The Diary of Anne Frank.' But how was it for you making your film debut in such a prominent film?

Diane Baker: George Stevens was a gentleman, and gentle with us. He knew it was Millie and I's first role. He let me go through it quite easily, but he was there to calm my nerves when I needed it. He simply encouraged us to be as natural as possible.

HollywoodChicago.com: You came onto ‘Dr. Kildare’ during it’s very popular TV run. What do you remember about your short time with Richard Chamberlain and Raymond Massey?

Baker: I remember vividly in the show playing Jack Hawkin’s daughter, he was the great British actor. The six episodes I did included the subject of religion versus science, it was fascinating. Kildare was one of the few series that would do multi-episode stories. I enjoyed Richard Chamberlain as well, and he turned me on to a singing teacher that I used.

HollywoodChicago.com: You also did a bunch of guest shots on 1960s television shows. Which classic television show set do you remember being most tense and which one was the best?

Baker: I don’t remember tense so much, because every one of them was a challenge. When I did ‘Marnie,’ I was very tense because of Hitchcock’s problem with Tippi Hedren during the filming. She was leaving and he wasn’t talking to her, and I was in the middle of it. Television was just too quick. I came in, I shot it and I moved on.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you observe to be more difficult for actors today than when you were working from TV series to TV series?



Diane Baker in ‘The Silence of the Lambs’
Photo credit: MGM Home Entertainment

Baker: We simply had more opportunity to work. Nowadays, it’s harder for young actors to get a job or stay in it. Plus you have managers, agents and publicity people to keep a person in the public eye, and we never had to have any of that. Once you did a good job on a TV show, they just hired you to do more.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you hook up with the Christopher Guest experience on the film ‘A Mighty Wind’ and did you do improvisation in your scenes?

Baker: Yes, I had a very small role. When Christopher Guest asks you to do something, you don’t say no, just because it is Chris Guest. My part ended up on the cutting room floor.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was strange about playing a Kennedy [Mother Rose in the TV movie ‘Jackie Bouvier Kennedy Onassis’] given that you went through the golden age of his era? What did you give the character of Rose that just came from your research?

Baker: I tried to give Rose a sense of dignity by being very straight and upright. I worked with the accent, tried not to be condescending, and tried to allow her to come from a place of wisdom and knowledge. I worked on just simple presence, being in the moment. She had put up with a lot with her husband Joe Kennedy. I had a very dear friend named James Seymour, who was an aid to Joe Kennedy when he was ambassador to London in the 1930s. James stayed on in London, and he left me some letters in his will that contained information about Rose and Joe. It was interesting, because she was a matriarch and he was a finagler.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the most recent you’ve learned in your lifelong education as an actor?

Baker: How much more there is to know, but at the same time to let go. To simplify things, and not to push so hard. You can’t get anywhere by forcing. I teach now, and teaching acting to students has allowed me to learn more. I’ve learned so much about what not to do. To not worry about tomorrow or the next month, but to get through today and do the best you can at this very moment.

The “Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show” is now “The Hollywood Show” and will be in Chicago on March 24th and 25th. 2012. [Click here for details.](#) [13]



[14]

By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [15]

Senior Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

pat@hollywoodchicago.com [14]



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- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/diane-baker>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/elvis-presley>
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