

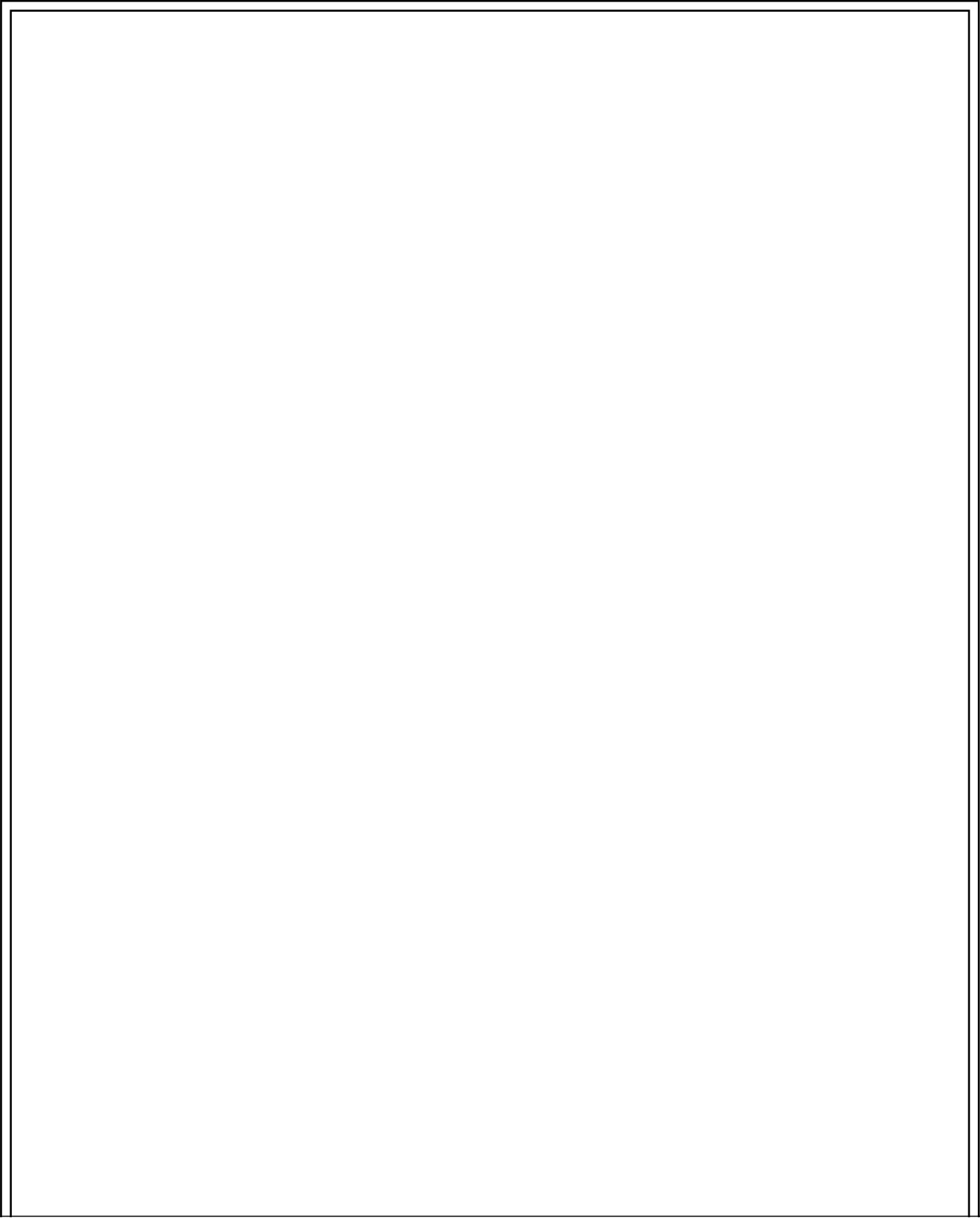
Interview: Oscar Winner George Chakiris Reflects on the Silver Age

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 12, 2012 - 3:25pm

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CHICAGO – What is striking about George Chakiris is not so much the memories of his unforgettable performances in films of another era, but his true kindness and humility in the wake of all that jazz. Winner of the Best Supporting Actor Oscar in 1961, playing Bernardo in “West Side Story,” the combination of his youth, energy and gratitude comes from his roots as a dancer.

Chakiris was born of Greek immigrant parents in Norwood, Ohio. Ending up in Los Angeles at a young age, he was able to hook into his advocacy by studying at the American School of Dance there (story below). He touched the last gasp era of great Hollywood musicals, famously backing up Marilyn Monroe in the “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend” number from the film “Gentleman Prefer Blondes” [1953] and started hearts a-fluttering when he made a key cameo one year later in the holiday film classic, “White Christmas.” His greatest achievement was yet to come.





George Chakiris in Chicago, 2010

Photo Credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Chakiris was sleeping on couches in New York City, when he won a part in the London stage version of “West Side Story” in the late 1950s. He actually played the part of Jets gang leader Riff on stage, and switched to The Sharks in the movie version, portraying Bernardo. On Oscar night that film year of 1961, both he and his lifelong friend Rita Moreno won the Academy Award for their roles in “West Side Story.” Interestingly enough, he then took a mixed bag of roles in the 1960s, and settled into a series of TV, movie and stage bits until he left the business around 1990. His hobby as a silversmith and jewelry maker morphed into his second career, and he continues to make appearances on behalf of his participation in the Silver Age of Hollywood, and that award-winning role of his youth.

It was during one of those appearances in 2010, for the 50th Anniversary of “West Side Story” at the Hollywood Palms Cinema in Naperville, Illinois, that Chakiris talked to HollywoodChicago.com. The comprehensive conversation covered [that historic film](#) [16] and extended into his storied early career. His time as a dancer has kept him trim and fit, and he looks twenty years younger than he may be.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your training in dancing that led down the path into being a dancer in your early film career?

George Chakiris: I didn’t start taking dance classes until I was 19 years old. A friend of mine told me about the American School of Dance in Hollywood, and after I observed a class I knew it was what I wanted to do. I got a job in the advertising department at the May Company downtown, and I took classes at night. I was talking to dancers who had been in ‘Singin’ in the Rain,’ and it all sounded wonderful, but you also had to be in the Screen Extras Guild union to get a job in those days, and I wasn’t in it.

Eugene Loring, who ran the school, was doing a film called ‘The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T’ [1953], for which they needed 60 male dancers. There weren’t that many in the Guild, so they opened the auditions for non-union extras, and I got to be one of the dancers in the big number on that crazy film. And I worked on it long enough, and made enough money, that I got to join the union.



The Face That Launched a 1000 Proposals: Rosemary Clooney and George Chakiris in 'White Christmas'
Photo credit: Paramount Home Video

HollywoodChicago.com: On the DVD commentary of the film 'White Christmas,' Rosemary Clooney said Paramount was flooded by letters when you appeared in the music number with her called 'Love, You Didn't Do Right By Me.' What do you remember about that sudden fame?

Chakiris: I was also in the 'Mandy' number earlier in the film, and there were 16 dancers in the background. The choreographer told us that they would do the other song down the line, and there would only be four of us in number with Rosie, which was great. We each got a medium shot and close-up.

The fan mail thing was wild. We were in 'Life Magazine' at the time, and girls drew pictures and diagrams on that particular shot. I was working on a film called 'The Girl Rush' right afterward, and I remember that Robert Emmett Dolan, the producer of 'White Christmas,' came over to the set one day, and had the letters in his hand. That led to a screen test for me, and that's how I got a contract with Paramount Pictures. The screen test also got me the MGM film 'Meet Me in Las Vegas,' because Paramount lent me out for that one. I got to sing and dance in a number choreographed by Hermes Pan. But unfortunately that number got edited out of the film for time, but it all started with 'White Christmas.'

HollywoodChicago.com: You did a couple of films overseas in the 1960s. Was it because your opportunities were limited in America or was it just the opportunity for a good role?



Oscar Winners: George Chakiris, Rita Moreno in Chicago, 2010
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Chakiris: It was the good roles. The one I did with Claudia Cardinal, 'La Ragazza di Bube,' had a great Italian producer, Franco Cristaldi. The other was 'The Young Girls of Rochefort,' which also starred Catherine Deneuve and Gene Kelly. The people who represented me told me not to do that one, because it was an ensemble picture, but it was an opportunity to work in Europe. It was totally different than working in America, the temperament was different.

HollywoodChicago.com: You morphed a hobby of silversmithing and jewelry into another career. Describe your origin of interest in it and what you sell now?

Chakiris: In the 1980s and '90s I was in France and Japan a lot, doing theater, television and personal appearances. I had a little Italian Greyhound at the time named Sammy, and once when I came home I had been gone for eight months, and I realized that was a long time in Sammy's life. I decided to stay home for awhile and starting taking classes in silversmithing and jewelry, I just fell in love with it. I set up a studio in a garage, and after a long time was so into it that I actually forgot about the show business stuff. I developed a line accidentally, and I have a Japanese distributor who has worked it into a department store there. It's been a long journey, but it's taken me to a new place.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did being a dancer best prepare you for life in general?

Chakiris: Whether you were working as a dancer or not, you were always in class. And that always allowed me to work out, in a sense, and that exercise has also given me a general sense of well being. Dancing is such an incredible means of expression, even if it's just in dance class.

The Hollywood Palms in Naperville, IL and the Hollywood Blvd Cinema in Woodridge offers an unique movie experience and special events. [Click here](#) [17] for details.



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