

Interviews: Tippi Hedren of ‘The Birds,’ TCM Host Ben Mankiewicz on the ‘Road to Hollywood’

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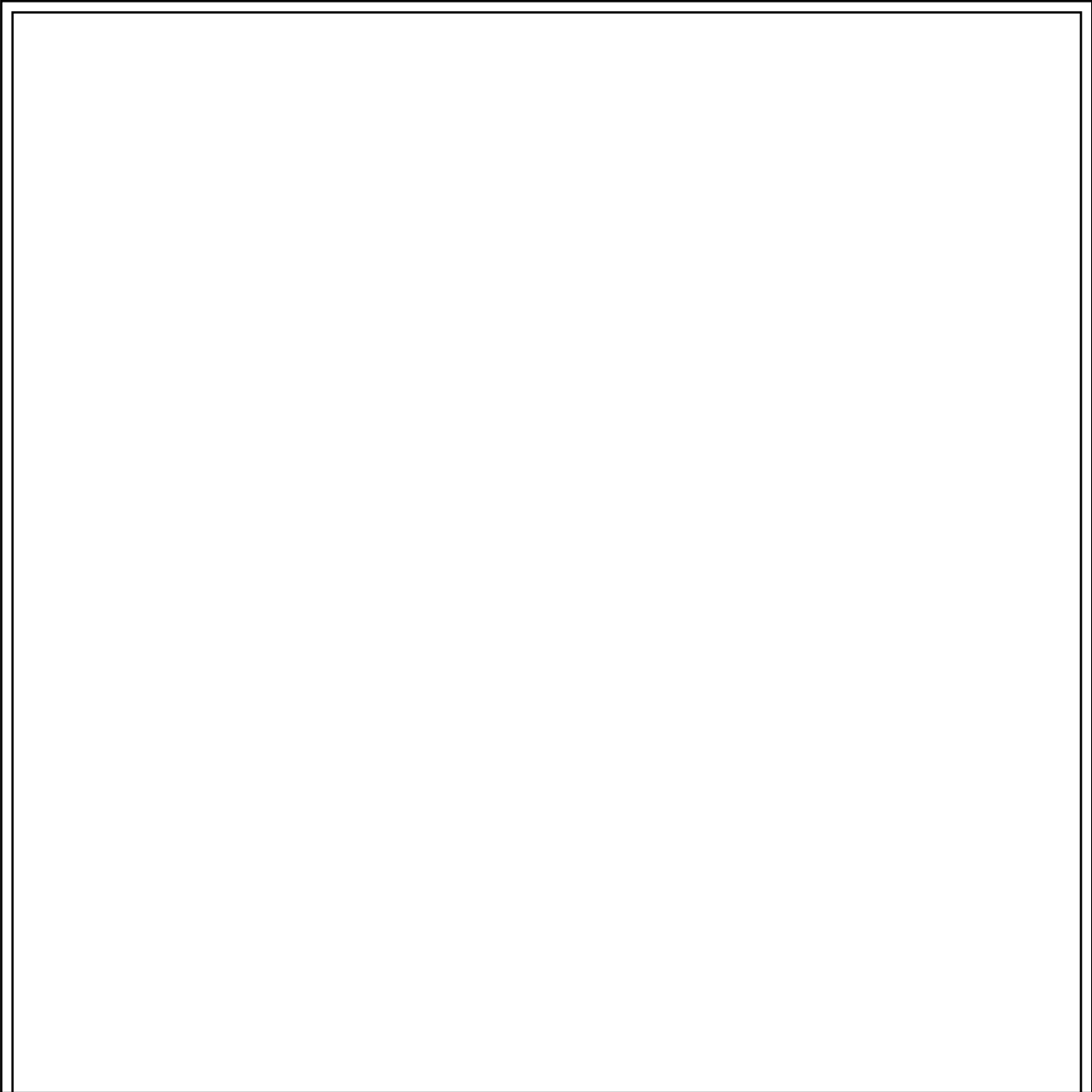
CHICAGO – Turner Classic Movies, the popular cable channel, will kick off their third annual TCM Classic Film Festival next week, from April 12th-15th. Recently, the festival preview came to Chicago, as TCM host Ben Mankiewicz and movie star Tippi Hedren introduced Alfred Hitchcock’s “The Birds.”

Hedren portrayed Melanie Daniels in her 1963 film debut for “The Birds,” and gave an unforgettable performance as the unlikely victim of nature gone out of control. She introduced the film last week as part of the “Road to Hollywood” series that Turner Classic Movies and Ben Mankiewicz are hosting in anticipation of the upcoming film festival. HollywoodChicago.com caught up with both of them the day of the screening.

Tippi Hedren of Alfred Hitchcock’s “The Birds”

Nathalie Kay “Tippi” Hedren was a model and actress on TV commercials when she was discovered by Alfred Hitchcock and thrust into the spotlight for her film debut. Hitchcock was looking for a blonde in the model of Grace Kelly, and Hedren had the same self assurance and appeal. She followed up “The Birds” with Hitchcock’s “Marnie” (1964), which she considers her best film. A contract dispute with the director effectively stalled her career, and although she has made several TV and film appearances, it wasn’t with the impact of the first two films.

But Hedren has another passion, that of the preservation and protection of African lions, after producing a film in 1981 called “Roar.” That activism has taken her to Congress, where she has recently co-authored two bills on the preservation of those animal rights.





Tippi Hedren in Chicago, March of 2011

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

HollywoodChicago.com: Since we've talked before, I always try to find a new question to ask regarding your role in 'The Birds'...

Tippi Hedren: Somebody did ask me recently, what gives me the strength to keep going on tours like these, and my work with the animals. So I yelled out to my manager Karen, and she said 'fearlessness.'

HollywoodChicago.com: No doubt about that. Since you did two films with Alfred Hitchcock, which of your fellow co-stars had a problem with Hitch's hyper-organized, anal retentive style of shooting?

Hedren: Rod Taylor ['The Birds'] stirred up a few problems, I don't remember what it was all about, but it seemed kind of silly.

HollywoodChicago.com: What delights you about attending these screenings of 'The Birds,' and what have you experienced regarding the film that you hadn't noticed when you made it or saw it back in the early 1960s?

Hedren: When a Hitchcock film is done, it's most likely going to be a success, so you start out with that concept initially. 'The Birds' has a life of its own, it goes on and on, which was the big surprise to me. As compared to his other films, 'The Birds' remains outrageously interesting. Especially the special effects, the way we did them, it is so funny when you compare it to today.

There was one effect where we had a fake bird swooping to attack me, and the prop guy had one tube filled with blood and the other with air. When the scene was being shot, the prop man stood right next to me with a plunger, and the bird came down at me on the wire and it all worked on the first take. That's how the effects were different. That's how imagination worked in the movies then.

HollywoodChicago.com: You directly went through the first strong wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s and '70s. Did you support

that movement, and did it alter your life in any way?

Hedren: I absolutely supported the movement. I had a wonderful advantage, because my parents had raised me to believe that I could do anything in life, which in those days was rare. It hadn't been too long since women had the vote. This evolution seemed like a natural progression in our lifetime, and although women are still struggling and there is a long way to go, we will go onward.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your role as an animal activist, you wrote a book in 1985 called the "Cats of Shambala," which chronicled your preservation efforts for African lions. Before you sat down to write one word, what did you want the book to say about your efforts?

Hedren: It was a lot different then, than it is now. Back then I was just beginning to get the idea that none of these animals should live in captivity, and now I'm so dedicated to getting the breeding of these animals stopped. I've co-authored a couple of bills in Congress. One in 2009 stopped the interstate trafficking of big cats to be sold as pets.

When I was testifying, you have five minutes to speak. I had my remarks prepared, but I noticed that no one was paying attention. The committee head said, 'Tippi, I hope you're as fascinated with us as we are of you.' I thought, this is good, I've got them. I talked about a 4 year-old boy in Texas whose arm was ripped off by his uncle's pet tiger, and the physical and emotional problems that followed. I then talked about 18 more similar incidences. The bill passed unanimously in the House and Senate.

The other bill is to stop the breeding, and it was introduced three weeks ago. Already it is causing a backlash. People in that business, dealing with wild animals, are on par with dealing illegal drugs. It's huge. When it gets that big it gets dangerous, and with the first bill my life was even threatened. Then may be tough, but they're not smart, they left the threat on my answering machine.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the first lesson about the movie business you learned when you did 'The Birds,' and in looking back what is hardest lesson you had to learn after you went through it all?

Hedren: I think it's about how political it can be and how it's about control, no matter how talented you are. I was under contract to Alfred Hitchcock, not a studio, and although he gave me an incredible education on how to be in a movie, and I was extremely grateful for it, I had to deal with the other end of it. That was about a man who became obsessed with me, and it's a horrible thing to be the object of someone's obsession if you're not interested.

He became so controlling, that I had to get out. He told me he'd ruin my career, and he did. And although after 'The Birds' and 'Marnie' I was hot in the business, every time a producer or director would ask for me, he would tell them I wasn't available. What really hurt was that Francois Truffaut wanted me for a film. So that was the hardest lesson.



Ben Mankiewicz, Turner Classic Movies Host

Ben Mankiewicz was literally born to be involved with the movies. His grandfather was the legendary Hollywood screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz ('Citizen Kane') and his grand-uncle Joseph Mankiewicz directed 'All About Eve' and the infamous Elizabeth Taylor 'Cleopatra.' His father Frank skipped the movie business, working as press secretary for Robert F. Kennedy during his last campaign.

Ben Mankiewicz started as newscaster in South Carolina, and worked his way through radio and television until he landed as weekend host at Turner Classic Movies. In 2008, he was tapped – along with co-host Ben Lyons – to replace Roger Ebert and Richard Roeper on the syndicated "At the Movies." The "Two Bens," as they were called, endured some critical backlash and were replaced on the show in 2009.



Tippi Hedren and Ben Mankiewicz in Chicago, March 27th, 2012
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Let's go back to your roots in Pennsylvania. What was it about your great-grandfather Franz Mankiewicz that created a family atmosphere that produced your highly creative grandfather Herman and his brother Joe?

Ben Mankiewicz: I don't know about creative, but there was an insistence on discipline and hard work with Franz. He was an English professor at Columbia, a tactician and a very stern man. There is a portrait of him that has been in the family for many years, and in a tradition I didn't know about, my cousin John recently gave me that picture when I moved into a rented house in Los Angeles. Joe Mankiewicz had it for a long time, and it's a horrible picture. [laughs] Franz is so stern looking and disapproving in the portrait, and Joe used to say the eyes would follow him around the room, judging every word he wrote.

Franz was very tactical when it came to language and life. My father reminded me of a family story that during World War II all the big stars – Humphrey Bogart, Errol Flynn and others – gave up their boats for the Coast Guard to use in the war effort. My uncle Joe Mankiewicz had a boat then, and he also gave it up. When they all did that, the Coast Guard automatically gave them the rank of 'captain.' When Joe told his father about it, Franz said, "tell me, do the other captains call you captain?" [laughs] That was Franz Mankiewicz.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did your father's political career affect your family dynamic, and what was your reaction when you saw video footage of him announcing Robert Kennedy's death in 1968?

Mankiewicz: Politics affected how I went through life, since I was very young. I even tweaked my Dad by saying I was for Richard Nixon in 1972. My Dad is a very strong, tough guy, who doesn't show weakness. On the video of him announcing Robert Kennedy's death, there is a longer version on YouTube, and he starts walking down the stage that they had set up there after he made the announcement. Somebody grabs his elbow because he momentarily wobbles – he hadn't slept in 48 hours – and I'd never seen my Dad in such a position that someone would have to help him that way.

HollywoodChicago.com: As a film reporter, and the grandson of Oscar winning screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz, if you could magically get him to come back right now, what would you ask him?

Mankiewicz: Where the f**k have you been for last sixty years? [laughs] Since it was common knowledge that he was self-destructive, I would have asked him about that, could he have done more or does he regret how he approached his craft. I think it was when he was working for Paramount, and they wanted him to write a 'Rin Tin Tin' film or get fired. He writes it, and in the first scene Rin Tin Tin grabs a baby, and carries it INTO a burning building. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Does the family still own the Oscar that Herman won for 'Citizen Kane'?

Mankiewicz: No, my father is unsentimental, in a good way, about things like that. My uncle needed some money, and they first sold the original script. The Oscar cost a lot to insure, and was in a safe deposit box. Since his brother needed the money, he thought it was crazy to keep it. I regret it a bit. But as my father said at the time, even Herman would have approved the sale, given the amount that they got for it.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was unfair about your tenure on 'At the Movies'? It seemed like you and Ben Lyons were dogged the minute you took over the show.

Mankiewicz: I don't think it was too unfair, it's television, and you have to roll with it. It was difficult only because it seemed we were under the gun the minute we started, more than usual for succeeding in syndicated television. Our ratings were identical to the previous year, and in comparison to the year after we left. Ben Lyons took a lot of heat, and I understand a bit of that when you take a guy from the E! Network and put him in Roger Ebert's chair. But it was ultimately unfair to him, because he's a smart guy. It was difficult because it seemed exceptionally personal. That's what happens when you're on TV, but the extent of the vitriol caught me off guard.

The TCM Classic Movie Festival, presented by Turner Classic Movies, is in Los Angeles from April 12th-15th. [Click here for details.](#) [14]



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