

## Interview: Mitzi Gaynor Lights Up the TCM Classic Film Festival

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CHICAGO – This weekend is the Turner Classic Movies (TCM) Classic Film Festival, and few movie stars alive represent that classic status better than Miss Mitzi Gaynor. Whether co-starring in movies with Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe, or starring in the film version of “South Pacific,” Mitzi Gaynor always inspires the old “razzle dazzle.”

Francesca Marlene de Czanyi Von Gerber – nicknamed Mitzi – was born in Chicago, and her family moved to Hollywood when she was eleven. She started singing and dancing with the Los Angeles Civic Opera at age 13, and managed to get a contract – and a new last name – with 20th Century Fox Pictures at age 17. Her star shined during the last gasp of glitzy movie musicals in the 1950s, co-starring with Marilyn Monroe in “There’s No Business Like Show Business” (1954), Frank Sinatra in “The Joker is Wild” (1957) and Gene Kelly in “Les Girls” (1957).

Gaynor was the unexpected choice to take the high profile lead role of Nellie Forbush in the film version of “South Pacific” (1958), replacing the Broadway stage originator Mary Martin. She will be introducing the film and taking questions afterward as part of the TCM Classic Movie Film Festival, running from April 25th-28th in Hollywood.



Mitzi Gaynor and Rossano Brazzi in ‘South Pacific’  
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

HollywoodChicago.com got the opportunity to speak with Mitzi Gaynor prior to this weekend’s events, as she appeared in Chicago to introduce “South Pacific” with film critic Leonard Maltin, as part of TCM’s promotional “Road to Hollywood,” in anticipation of the film festival.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Legend has it that director Josh Logan auditioned practically every top name female actress of the era for ‘South Pacific’...even Elizabeth Taylor. Did you know that this process was going on while you in the process of auditioning, and what was the it factor that you believe eventually won you the role?

**Mitzi Gaynor:** Mostly those other actresses didn't test or audition, citing their other films, but were mentioned when the casting was going on. I auditioned by singing for Oscar [Hammerstein, the composer of 'South Pacific'], plus Josh and I got along extremely well. I also sang in Mary Martin's key. because we had a similar soprano voice. I really wanted it, Josh was amused by me and Oscar really liked me.

On set, Oscar would stop by occasionally to direct us. He was thin guy, with a prominent belly, and would put his arms behind his back and point out directions with that part of his body. I always would say that Oscar Hammerstein directed me with his tummy, and after we wrapped I gave him a gold disc with the inscription, 'To Your Tummy.'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Where did you find the essence of the Nellie character, through research, the script, the rehearsal process or in collaboration with Josh Logan?

**Gaynor:** Definitely in collaboration with Josh. For instance, I was suppose to say 'Gosh, I don't know' in the script and it came out in the take as 'Gee...' Josh called cut, and said that Nellie would never say 'gee.' He then looked at me, and said 'chorus girls say gee.' [laughs] Need I say more?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did you reach out to Mary Martin during the filming for any tips or information about being Nellie Forbush?

**Gaynor:** No, I did not. She was upset about losing the role. They had cast Rossano Brazzi first as Emile, and he was about 38 years old at the time. Mary was about 45 years old by then, and so it was kind of a reversal.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since it was a different era for women in show business in the 1950s, with men running virtually all of it, did the actresses and female production associates help each other by warning each other about the guys who were most sexist at the time? Did you ever have to sidestep the casting couch?

**Gaynor:** Good God. [laughs] I was never good looking enough for that to happen.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Come on!

**Gaynor:** This will give you an idea of my image. If one of the tabloids back then, like "Confidential," called me, they just asked me for recipes for Hungarian Goulash. [laughs] I was married, and had talent, so I wasn't exactly a target.

One time I was giving a ballet class at the studio, in my ragged dancer tights and clothes. As I was driving out afterward, I was stopped at the gate and told that Darryl Zanuck [20th Century Fox's Founder and President] wanted to see me. And I thought, oh sh\*t. After going through three secretaries, I walked into his office, with a lead-up larger than a ballroom, wearing shoes that were squeaking from the rain outside. He eyed me from his desk that sat on a riser, and said, 'you look much better on screen.' [laughs] And I said, 'thank you, sir,' a bit confused. He just said, 'that's all,' and I left, my shoes squeaking down the hallway again.



Mitzi Gaynor and Film Critic Leonard Maltin in Chicago, March 19th. 2013  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In our last interview together, you told me you quit doing movies because they stopped doing musicals. Were there any offers for other type of films that you contemplated after doing your last one in 1963?

**Gaynor:** Yes, I was offered other parts, but for me television was much better for women around the mid 1960s. Gene Kelly gave me some good advice, never do television unless it was an event. So I never did a weekly series, just occasional event type specials. Those specials

were nominated for 17 Emmys, we won seven, and the PBS compilation of those specials also just won an Emmy.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** If you could get any one of your famous co-stars or performer friends who has passed away to somehow come back, who would it be and what is the first thing you'd say to them?

**Gaynor:** I'd like all of them to come back, I never worked with anybody that I didn't like – all those guys like Donald O'Connor, Frank Sinatra and Rossano Brazzi. If you send out good vibes it always works. Especially with Gene Kelly, he and I got along so well. Whenever we would have a disagreement, and I would say I'm not going to do something, Gene would say, 'Mitzi, don't be recalcitrant.' I shot back, "I'm not, I'm Catholic." [laughs]

*The TCM Classic Film Festival takes place in Hollywood, April 25-28, 2013. The Turner Classic Movie station will highlight the films and guests throughout the weekend. See local cable or satellite listings for channel location. [Click here](#) [15] for more information.*



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