

Film News: Remembering Debbie Reynolds, in 2009 Interview

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 29, 2016 - 5:05pm

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LOS ANGELES – The shocking news of the passing of Debbie Reynolds, hours after her daughter Carrie Fisher passed away, is still resonating in the 2016 atmosphere. Ms. Reynolds died of a massive stroke on December 28th, at her son's home near Los Angeles, while making funeral arrangements for her daughter. She was 84.

Debbie Reynolds is a true movie star, straddling the era between the studio system of the 1940s through co-starring in a film by Albert Brooks ("Mother"). She was the old fashioned "quadruple threat," adept at song, dance, drama and comedy. Her daughter Carrie was the prodigy of her marriage to singer Eddie Fisher – they were the All-American couple of the 1950s – but they were destined to have a messy and public divorce two years after Carrie was born, when Eddie revealed an affair with Elizabeth Taylor. Through it all, Reynolds maintained her movie star status, from her first film in 1948 ("June Bride") to her final major role portraying Liberace's mother in "Behind the Candelabra" (2013).



Debbie Reynolds in Chicago, 2009

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

Mary Frances “Debbie” Reynolds was born in El Paso, Texas. Her family moved to California, and Reynolds won a beauty pageant (Miss Burbank) that landed her a contract with Warner Bros. studio. The newly dubbed Debbie started in light musicals, scoring a hit with the “Aba Daba Honeymoon” song in 1951. A year later, at age 17, she co-starred with Gene Kelly and Donald O’Connor in the legendary movie musical “Singin’ in the Rain,” and never looked backed. She would move through Top 40 hits (“Tammy,” from the movie of same name), light comedy (1953’s “The Affairs of Dobie Gillis” and 1955’s “The Tender Trap”), movie dramas (1956’s “A Catered Affair” and 1962’s “How the West Was Won”) and Las Vegas cabaret. She was nominated for one Oscar, as the lead in “The Unsinkable Molly Brown” (1964).

Reynolds turned to television after the 1960s, and became known as the “mother of Princess Leia” after daughter Carrie landed that role in “Star Wars.” She made a formidable movie comeback in Albert Brook’s “Mother” (1996) and continued to work until health issues limited her activity in the last three years. Reynolds was also know for her valuable collection of movie memorabilia, the last of which she auctioned off in 2014.

Her personal life was – by her own admission – not as successful as her career, with two other marriages after Eddie Fisher also ending in divorce. She is survived by her son (and Carrie’s brother) Todd Fisher and Billie Lourd, her granddaughter through Carrie.

In 2009, Debbie Reynolds sat down with Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com, and her portrait – which she later used in publicity and promotion – was taken by photographer Joe Arce. Her interview is reprinted below.



Debbie Reynolds Hoofs it Up with Donald O'Connor (left) and Gene Kelly in 'Singin' in the Rain'

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

HollywoodChicago.com: You were put into the spotlight at a very early age. Was that a natural place for you to be or did it take awhile for you to catch up with it?

Debbie Reynolds: Goodness, it took me awhile to catch up with it, because I began as a true beginner, not knowing how to dance or perform. I just entered a local contest in town as a joke, because if you entered you got a free blouse and scarf. We were rather poor back then so those things were great to get if I just entered, I never expected to win. I did, thank God, make that very big mistake and I did win. And that started me on a new path, and into show business.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were literally a teenager when you joined the storm front of Gene Kelly and 'Singin' in the Rain.' Looking at it today, which scenes in the film do you make Gene Kelly look better?

Reynolds: [Laughs] I don't think anything I could ever do could make Gene Kelly look better than he was. Gene Kelly was a great dancer and I was lucky to be in 'Singin' in the Rain.' He was my teacher when I was 17 years old, when he was 37 years old. He taught me everything. Donald O'Connor was in the film as well, and he was only 27 years old. So we were closer in age, and had more fun together on the set. Gene was more my teacher and mentor.

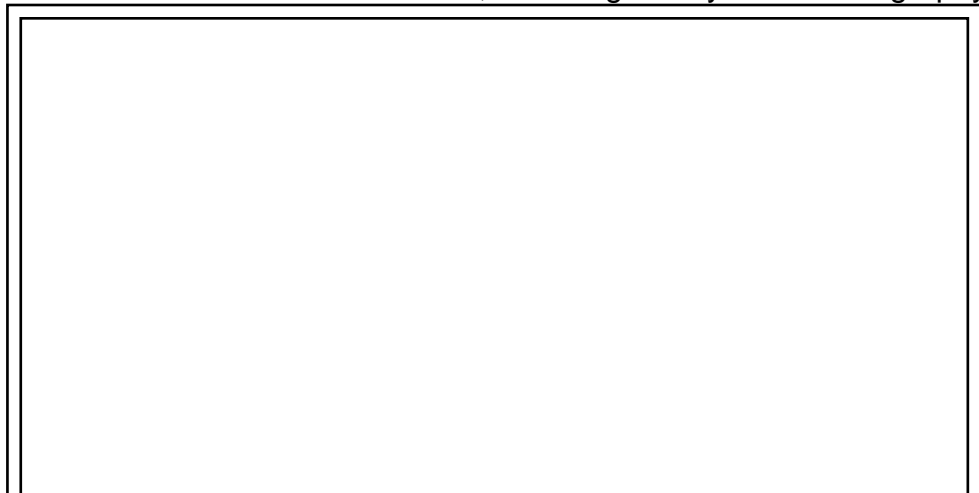
HollywoodChicago.com: I've read that Frank Sinatra was infamous for only wanting to do one take. Did you experience any of that method during the filming of 'The Tender Trap'?

Reynolds: Yes, one take, so you better be ready and you better be good. One take and that was it. It was something that was spontaneous. Both Sid Caesar and Jackie Gleason was like that as well.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you have a good relationship with Sinatra?

Reynolds: Very much so, I loved Frank, he was wonderful...just don't get on his bad side. I don't think I would have wanted to marry him, but I probably should have since I married idiots anyway. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: You co-starred with the legendary Bob Fosse the 1953 film 'The Affairs of Dobie Gillis.' What did you think of his later and more notorious success, including his style of choreography and the way he directed film?





With Albert Brooks in 'Mother' (1996)
Photo credit: Paramount Home Video

Reynolds: Well, Bobby was very difficult to work with, he wanted to be a big star at MGM, but it was the end of making musical movies at the time. So the heads of the studios, like Louis B. Mayer, didn't want to create any more musical stars. So Bobby left and went to New York City to be a choreographer, and created brilliant work. But he was a temperamental fellow – it was his way or the highway. I always found that kind of hard, and even though Gene Kelly was also a taskmaster, Bobby was tougher.

HollywoodChicago.com: How difficult a challenge as an actor was it to do the film 'How the West was Won,' since it was shot in the widescreen 'Cinerama'? Were the technical aspects of camera placement and movement hard to get used to?

Reynolds: Yes, very hard, because it was a three cameras technique, meaning three cameras wide. Therefore I wasn't speaking to my fellow performer, I was speaking to a camera, or a line next to the camera. It was difficult to do, because its not real acting. I had to pretend that I was 'seeing' Agnes Moorhead or Jimmy Stewart or Carroll Baker. I wasn't, I was acting to a drawn line. It took me personally two years to make the film, because my character starts at age 16 and I end up being 92 years old in the film. By the end of that production, I was ready for a long nap.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've had some experience on the Broadway stage. What do you appreciate about the live stage and how does it feel to you versus acting for the movies?

Reynolds: Live is exciting, live is real, the people are there. It is very rewarding to walk out on stage, feeling the love and reception. I still perform live primarily. I just keep traveling and doing live shows. The main difference in film, you know in your mind that you are doing it for posterity, you are doing for the eventual audience and it will be around forever.

But when I was doing theater in the 1950's, 60's and 70's we weren't allowed to film any of the shows that I did, it was against union rules. It was a stupid law, because so much is lost. We now have no record of these famous stage plays, so it turned out to be very narrow-minded thinking.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you were appearing in Las Vegas in the early 1960s, besides the smaller size of the town itself what was different about the experience and atmosphere of Vegas in those days?

Reynolds: It was thrilling, exciting... I would describe it as very Parisian. For example, years ago nudity was not done in the United States. But during that late 1950s era in Vegas it began at the Tropicana, and spread to the other venues. Now the showgirls are going away again and Cirque du Soleil, the magic acts and the animal acts reign in Las Vegas. But I don't think you'll completely lose the boobie shows. [laughs] I think men like the boobie shows. Vegas will always be Vegas.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are a consummate collector of Hollywood memorabilia. What was your personal favorite piece and why? Did you save anything from 'Singin' in the Rain'?

Reynolds: I have the largest private collection in the world. I have over 5000 costumes, and the furniture and memorabilia that goes with them. For 'Singin' in the Rain,' I bought most of the costumes – the 'Fit as a Fiddle' costumes and the 'Make Them Laugh' Donald O'Connor outfits and the 'Good Morning, Good Morning' clothes we danced in.

My favorite is the white dress Marilyn Monroe wore in the subway breeze scene in 'The Seven Year Itch.' But I also have a pair of ruby red slippers from the 'Wizard of Oz' and Dorothy's gingham dress...and on and on. I saved as much as I could and still do, because people are still interested in it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you have a relationship with Marilyn Monroe? Was she as difficult as she has been made out to be?

Reynolds: I did. You probably only know what you've read. You didn't know her. The people who talk about her didn't know her either. She was a very sweet girl, she was a very innocent girl. She was taken advantage of by most of the men that knew her, including Frank Sinatra and Joe DiMaggio, whom I also knew very well. DiMaggio was quite mean to her when they were married. But after she died, he did tend to her grave, which made up for it.

But Marilyn was really mistreated. Near the end, she was badly treated by Fox Studios, during the ‘Let’s Make Love’ film shoot in 1960, they threw her off the set because she had a cold. She was a bit temperamental, a little diva-like, but she didn’t deserve what she got. And certainly not at the time of her death, because I’m a big believer that she was killed. My belief also is that she passed away long before she should have left us. She was a great talent who didn’t deserve what she ultimately got.

HollywoodChicago.com: Tell me about playing the title role in Albert Brook’s ‘Mother.’ Were you modeling the character after someone you knew or through Brook’s interpretation of his story and life?

Reynolds: I think it was Albert’s mother and everyone else’s mother, including myself as a mother. I’m not a cook and I always stick everything in the freezer and then I leave things out, saying ‘if it’s good today it will be good tomorrow.’ [laughs] Albert wrote the script and Albert interpreted everything about it. I hope I did well by the role. I loved doing the part.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your daughter Carrie Fisher is currently in a one woman show talking about herself in relationship to your family. Is her type of honesty the best policy for sharing family history?

Reynolds: Well, you don’t tell Carrie a secret, because it will in a script or a book. So if you have a secret, keep it to yourself. But she is a great writer and very funny, and she takes things that are funny and makes them funnier. Every secret gets known to the world. The show she is doing now, ‘Wishful Drinking’ is very funny and a huge success on Broadway. It’s very sophisticated show, it’s about family and Hollywood, about Hollywood ‘royalty’ like Elizabeth Taylor, Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds – all that nonsense, and all the other gossip.

It’s a kick of a show, great fun and highly entertaining.

Source material for this article is from Wikipedia. Debbie Reynolds, 1932-2016



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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 23 2024 - 10:30pm):

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