

Interview, Audio: Illeana Douglas on Directors & Female Spirit

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 5, 2018 - 10:06am

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CHICAGO – The acting career of Illeana Douglas began with director Martin Scorsese and flourished in her first lead role for “Grace of My Heart” (1996). She is best known today for hosting the “Trailblazing Women” series on Turner Classic Movies, and in Part Three of a three part interview with HollywoodChicago.com, she talks about feminism, the essence of directors she has worked for, plus her grandmother Helen Gahagan, the third female Congress representative in U.S. history.

Illeana Douglas was born in Massachuettis, the daughter of Gregory Douglas, the son of 1930s movie star Melvyn Douglas (Helen Gahagan was his wife). She got the show biz bug as a young teenager, when she was able to visit her grandfather on the set of “Being There” (1979). After high school she moved to New York City to pursue a career. She studied acting while working various jobs, and met Martin Scorsese while he was editing “The Last Temptation of Christ.” She made her film debut in his segment of “New York Stories” (1989), and appeared in “Goodfellas.”



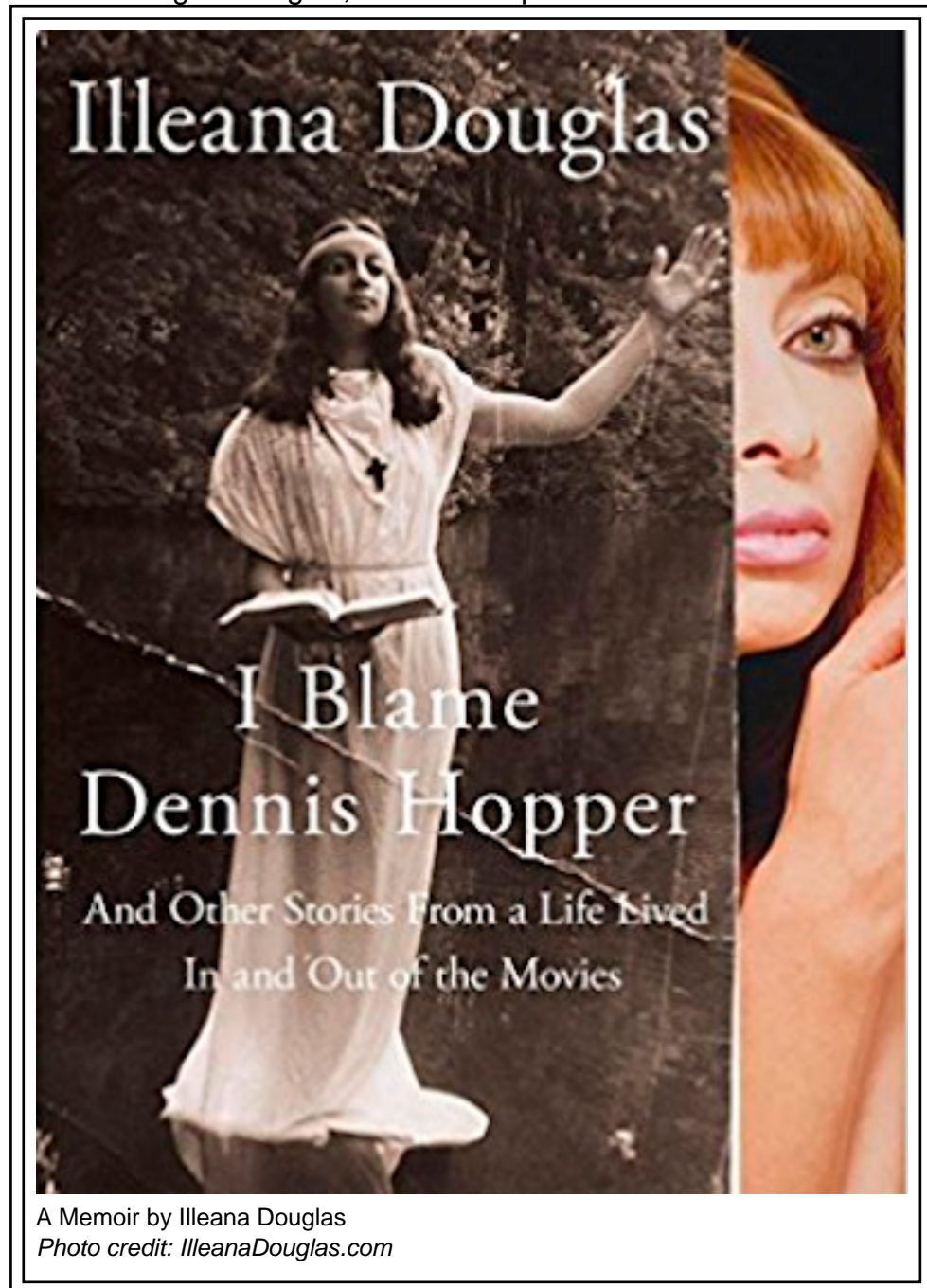
Illeana Douglas Works the Red Carpet for Turner Classic Movies

Photo credit: [IlleanaDouglas.com](#)

After her Scorsese work – including “Cape Fear” in 1991 – she landed a prominent supporting role in “To Die For” (1995), and the lead role in the 1960s-set musical, “Grace of My Heart” (1996). Other notable films include “Happy, Texas” (1999), “Ghost World” (2001) and “Factory Girl” (2007). On TV, she has guest starred on “Seinfeld,” “Frasier,” “The Larry Sanders Show,” and HBO’s “Six Feet Under” and “Entourage.” She also was featured in the popular web series, sponsored by IKEA, called “Easy to Assemble.” In 2015, she wrote her memoir, “I Blame Dennis Hopper: And Other Stories from a Life Lived in and Out of the Movies.” Her lineage and acting career cemented her interest as a film historian and advocate.

HollywoodChicago.com: We are both the beneficiaries of the first wave of feminism in our lifetimes. How much more do we need to evolve, in your opinion, before the feminine side of our consequence can get as much influence in our leadership structure as the patriarchal side?

Illeana Douglas: I can only talk about it in regards to my own life, hopes and aspirations. When I grew up my mother was a Single Mom who had to work to support us, and came out of that 1950s generation. Then they became hippies, and was quietly a feminist. My grandmother, Helen Gahagan Douglas, was an outspoken feminist before it became a movement. So as a child, I met Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug.



As I became an adult in the 1990s, I became complacent, and then working in the film business I found myself in a position of fear. I never spoke up because again and again we were told, if you speak up you will be fired. I really felt that quiet fear. What is interesting right now, as we continue to break free, is that we need men to help us acknowledge our contributions, then and now. And unless powerful men help women get their movies made, it's still difficult. But I feel today we're becoming more vocal, and there is an ability to cry foul [Interviewers's note: Douglas gave this answer a year before 2017's Year of the Woman Filmmaker and #metoo].

HollywoodChicago.com: You mentioned your grandmother, Helen Gahagan, who was the third woman elected to Congress, and an early victim of Richard Nixon's dirty tricks – he accused her of having communist sympathies when she ran against him for Senator. Did she get any satisfaction in seeing Nixon go down in the 1970s?

Douglas: [Laughs] Yes, we celebrated the anniversary of his resignation for years. That's how he did business, but grandmother got back at him even earlier by giving him the nickname, 'Tricky Dick.'

HollywoodChicago.com: You've had a long list of notable directors that you worked with, and even intimately known. What do you find is the common thread in the essence of a director, and what higher evolution of that essence separates the great ones from the others?

Douglas: My technical observation is that they have almost a photographic memory for staging a shot. They have an absolute ability for placement, and I see it in their faces – like Martin Scorsese and Jerry Lewis – where they want to re-arrange a room when they walk into it. [laughs] They want to place people where they want to place them. It's a natural desire to be in control.

Also, there is a constant need to re-create something from their childhood. It's a kernel that they go to again and again. When I worked with Gus Van Sant ["To Die For"], it was about his image of home and family... some of his best films deal with that narrative. With Marty, it's the

struggle between a religious upbringing and a violent upbringing. For Jerry Lewis, it's that Chaplin-esque pathos, the human condition, is it funny or tragic? In my own directing work, it's about overcoming the odds, and emotional triumph over my own demons. Ultimately I figured I can't do it myself, there was a need for other people.

In the audio portion of the interview, Illeana Douglas makes observations on her unique look, and remembers who was the director she most wanted to meet, after she signed with a huge Hollywood agency. To read and hear PART ONE of the interview, [click here](#). [25] For PART TWO, [click here](#). [26]

"I Blame Dennis Hopper: And Other Stories from a Life Lived in and Out of the Movies," by Illeana Douglas, is available online wherever books are sold. For more on Ms. Douglas, visit her website by [clicking here](#). [27]



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