

Film Feature: HollywoodChicago.com Remembers Penny Marshall

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- [75](#) [2]
- [A League of Their Own](#) [3]
- [Big](#) [4]
- [Dead](#) [5]
- [Dies](#) [6]
- [Film News](#) [7]
- [Garry Marshall](#) [8]
- [Happy Days](#) [9]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [10]
- [Jon Espino](#) [11]
- [Jumpin' Jack Flash](#) [12]
- [Laverne & Shirley](#) [13]
- [Michael Spike Walters](#) [14]
- [Obituary](#) [15]
- [Passed Away](#) [16]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [17]
- [Penny Marshall](#) [18]
- [Penny Marshall is Dead](#) [19]
- [Riding in Cars with Boys](#) [20]
- [Rob Reiner](#) [21]
- [The Odd Couple](#) [22]
- [The Preacher's Wife](#) [23]

CHICAGO – Penny Marshall was somewhat of an enigma, and admittedly not comfortable in the spotlight. The 1970s sitcom legend who evolved into a top American film director never seemed quite sure of her legacy, but she left behind a superior body of work that defined her as a filmmaker. Ms. Marshall died from complications due to diabetes on December 17th, 2018, at the age of 75.

Carole Penny Marshall was born in the Bronx, and lived in the same building that also housed the childhood residences of Neil Simon, Paddy Chayefsky, Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren. She was a tap dancer as a child, and graduated from the Walton High School in New York City. After a two year stint in college, she married and had a daughter in the early 1960s, but was divorced soon thereafter. She eventually moved to Los Angeles later that decade on the encouragement of brother Garry Marshall, a writer of sitcoms who would soon figure into the next phase of her life.



Penny Marshall, at the Height of Her Acting Fame in "Laverne & Shirley"

Photo credit: Paramount Home Entertainment

She began with bit parts in film and TV, even auditioning to portray Gloria Stivic in “All in the Family” (her then-husband Rob Reiner was playing Mike). She became a semi-regular on her brother’s sitcom adaptation of “The Odd Couple,” but really scored as Laverne DeFazio in 1975 on “Happy Days,” another Garry Marshall creation. The spin-off “Laverne & Shirley” was a number one show for Penny Marshall and co-star Cindy Williams, and made their familiar “schlemiel-schlemazel” show opening a pop culture icon.

Post “Laverne,” she began to direct sitcom episodes (notably “Working Stiffs” with Michael Keaton), and eventually landed her movie director debut with “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” (1986). She went on to direct the legendary “Big” in 1988, “Awakenings” (1990), “A League of Their Own” (1992), “Renaissance Man” (1994), “The Preacher’s Wife” (1996) and “Riding in Cars with Boys” (2001). She is survived by her daughter, actress Tracy Reiner. Rob Reiner, who she divorced in 1981, wrote on Twitter at her passing, “I loved Penny. I grew up with her... She was born with a funnybone and the instinct of how to use it... I will miss her.”

Patrick McDonald, Spike Walters and Jon Lennon Espino of HollywoodChicago.com have their favorite “Penny Marshall moments,” and pay tribute to the former Laverne through the following three remembrances...



BIG (1988) by Spike Walters



Penny Marshall with Tom Hanks on the Set of ‘Big’

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

It could be argued that Penny Marshall’s greatest contributions to pop culture as a whole occurred behind the camera. While “Laverne & Shirley” turned her into a major star, her film “Big” is a stone cold classic masterpiece. Coming amid a trend of body switching comedies in the late 1980’s, “Big” is the only one which transcends its origins to find the childlike humanity underneath... it is a movie beloved by generations. Not everyone can turn a scene like the famous dance-on-a-piano sequence at FAO Schwarz into an instant and memorable all time great movie scene. She had a perfect performance from Tom Hanks, but it was Penny Marshall that had the great comic instincts to enhance that performance, not to mention she blazed a trail by proving a woman can direct a box office hit.

THE MARSHALL PLAN: On the success of “Big,” “I’ll try anything. What are they gonna do, kick me out of show business? I didn’t have that problem because I wasn’t ambitious enough... I talked to my crew and said, ‘Just tell me the truth.’”

**A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN (1992) by Jon Lennon Espino**

Penny Marshall Sets Up a Shot for 'A League of Their Own'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

There is nothing that can be said about Penny Marshall that isn't already known, but there are many things about her that needs a reminder. Even as an actress, Marshall was a pioneer in popularity, mostly remembered for her part in "Laverne & Shirley," but she didn't truly show us who she really was until she started directing. As a filmmaker, she became the embodiment of everything that America should stand for, showcasing true American values and what we should all aspire to. The film that exhibits this best is, of course, "A League of Their Own."

The film is based on a true story and stars a legendary cast of actors including Geena Davis, Tom Hanks, Madonna, Lori Petty, and Rosie O'Donnell. "A League of Their Own" turns into a mirror reflection of the changes that Marshall was creating in Hollywood, forcing the system to take notice of women as writers and directors, as Marshall was the first woman to direct a film that made more than \$100 million. The film highlights not only patriotic duty during WWII, but also the importance of women in a society that really only placed value on men. Marshall showed us just how much we need female strength, not only for the different perspective they provide, but also because everyone benefits when equality is practiced. Penny Marshall preached this in her life and legacy, which consisted of films like "A League...", which will make sure her message lives on for future generations. Like her film, Penny Marshall was also in a league of her own.

THE MARSHALL PLAN: "I hadn't worked with so many women before," she said when the movie was released. "I thought it was something I should do. But I wasn't doing it just to do a women's picture. The problems as they're presented in the movie apply to both men and women. It's about, 'Don't be ashamed of your talents.' It's a universal thing."

**A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH PENNY MARSHALL (2011) by Patrick McDonald**



Penny Marshall in a Close Encounter in 2011 with Henry Winkler and Cindy Williams

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

For years now, I have been privileged to attend “The Hollywood Show” in Chicagoland, a dedicated autograph presentation for admirers of TV, film and pop culture stars. In 2011, the show scored a major coup by reuniting Henry Winkler, Cindy Williams and Penny Marshall of “Happy Days” and “Laverne and Shirley.” I had previously interviewed Ms. Williams at the Show, and Winkler had already indicated that he wasn’t interested. However, I hoped to sweet talk “Shirley” into my entry with “Laverne.” Cindy Williams was exquisitely willing to ask, but promised nothing. When the approach was imminent, the entire encounter is explained below. Later, Shirley apologized to me for Laverne, but it wasn’t necessary. Penny Marshall doesn’t owe anything to anybody, except her art. Her fans loved her, and that was enough.

THE MARSHALL PLAN: Hoping to entice Penny Marshall to a short interview, I mentioned that I took enthusiastic film fans to Wrigley Field, the site of a key scene in “A League of Their Own,” hoping that she would respond to that fandom. Her retort, “Yes, I remember doing that movie!”

Source material for this article is from Wikipedia. Penny Marshall, 1943-2018. All films and “Laverne & Shirley” are available on DVD/Blu-ray and digital download.



[24]

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- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/jumpin-jack-flash>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/laverne-shirley>
- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/michael-spike-walters>
- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/obituary>
- [16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/passed-away>
- [17] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/patrick-mcdonald>
- [18] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/penny-marshall>
- [19] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/penny-marshall-is-dead>
- [20] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/riding-in-cars-with-boys>
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