

In Memoriam: Oscar Nominated Character Actress Shirley Knight

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- [83](#) [2]
- [As Good as it Gets](#) [3]
- [Beyond the Poseidon Adventure](#) [4]
- [Dead](#) [5]
- [Dies](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [Interview](#) [8]
- [Joe Arce](#) [9]
- [Maggie Winters](#) [10]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [11]
- [Paul Blart: Mall Cop](#) [12]
- [Petulia](#) [13]
- [Picnic](#) [14]
- [Shirley Knight](#) [15]
- [Sweet Bird of Youth](#) [16]
- [The Dark at the Top of the Stairs](#) [17]

CHICAGO – There was a time in Hollywood when the character actor was a familiar and reassuring presence in great movies and TV series. Shirley Knight, who worked from 1959-2018, was one of those reliable performers. Knight passed away on April 22nd, 2020, at the age of 83.

Shirley Knight was born in Kansas, and came up through the famous Pasadena Theatre School and the HB Studio in New York City in the 1950s. Her unique look and talent was evident in her Oscar nominated roles in “The Dark At the Top of the Stairs” (1960) and “Sweet Bird of Youth” (1962). She worked steadily in film during the 1960s, with roles in “The Group” (1966) and “Petulia” (1968), which have become cult favorites.

In subsequent years, she was cast in films as diverse as “Beyond the Poseidon Adventure” (1979). “Endless Love” (1981), “As Good As it Gets” (1997), “Paul Blart: Mall Cop” (2009) and the Blumhouse Production, “Mercy” (2014). On TV, she performed on the classic series “The Outer Limits,” “The Fugitive,” “The Streets of San Francisco,” “Tales of the Unexpected,” “Thirtysomething” and yes, “Law & Order.” She was a regular on the one season run of “Maggie Winters” (1998).



Shirley Knight in Chicago, circa 2011

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

In 2011, Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com interviewed Shirley Knight during an appearance in Chicago. Photographer Joe Arce took the Exclusive Photo.

HollywoodChicago.com: You had two Oscar nominations very early in your career. What do you appreciate about having participated in those Oscar ceremonies in that point in history?

Shirley Knight: It was very shocking when I got those nominations, particularly the first time, for 'The Dark at the Top of the Stairs.' It was basically my first film. I brought my father as my date to the awards, and didn't win. At dinner afterwards, my father sat next to Shirley Temple. I sat next to him, and thought 'oh daddy, please don't tell her,' but eventually he did. 'I named my daughter after you,' he said to her. I was red in the face, of course.

HollywoodChicago.com: Richard Chamberlain told me in an interview that he had no idea what director Richard Lester was doing in the film 'Petulia.' How was your feeling during production, and what did you think of the final film?

Knight: Oh, I love that film, it was so far ahead of its time. I loved [director] Richard Lester, and I also worked with him on 'Juggernaut' [1974]. It was a very interesting script, and it was made during the Summer of Love in 1967, in San Francisco with Haight Asbury and all that. I had a boyfriend who was a rock star, so it all seemed to fit.

HollywoodChicago.com: Who was it?

Knight: I'll never tell, but thanks for asking. [laughs] Anyway, it was a weird time, and I understand Richard saying that, because it was an unusual film and the way it was done was unusual.

I was friends with Joan Baez at the time. One night she said let's go to this basement and hear this band, because this girl in it is suppose to be unbelievable. I also asked Richard Lester to come, and that band was Janis Joplin with Big Brother and the Holding Company. So we go, and she happens. Janis Joplin has the power of a happening, and it was just amazing. It was so amazing, that Richard Lester said that he was going to put them in the film. That's how they got in the movie.

HollywoodChicago.com: What energizes you about the Broadway stage that film and television can't fulfill?

Knight: It's very different, in the sense that when you work on a role, it's much more difficult when you're working in isolation, as in film or TV. I feel my best performance on film is in 'Dutchman' [1967]. That is no accident, I did the play for seven months. I knew that character.

For example, I've played Blanche DuBois in "A Streetcar Named Desire," which is a very complex and multi-layered role. I took on the role twice on stage so that the second time I could finish my work regarding her. I think if you only do roles on film and television, you can't possibly progress as an actor. For me, the puzzle of finding the character is the most fun.

I call film and TV acting a form of 'coitus interruptus.' You just get started to understand maybe what the scene is about that you're doing, and someone says 'cut' and 'print.' And you say, wait a minute, I haven't come yet. It's literally like I'm not done yet. It's a crude way to put it, but it illustrates the point.

HollywoodChicago.com: Who was your favorite director, stage or screen, and why?

Knight: My favorite director is Lucian Pintilie, he was a Romanian and was also the director of that country's film commission. I did 'The Cherry Orchard' for him at the Arena Theater in Washington. He was a genius. I've been so fortunate to work with Tennessee Williams, Francis Ford Coppola and Ingmar Bergman, but Lucian was my favorite.

HollywoodChicago.com: What motivates you to keep working at this point in your career?

Knight: People keep asking me to work. I think I'm one of the most fortunate people ever, because I started acting in the 1950's and I've never been out of work. I'm just like the Energizer Bunny, I just go and go. [laughs]

Source for this article is Wikipedia.com. Shirley Knight, 1936-2020.



[18]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/as-good-as-it-gets>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/beyond-the-poseidon-adventure>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/dead>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/dies>
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- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/petulia>
- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/picnic>
- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/shirley-knight>
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