

Interview: Oscar Winner Olympia Dukakis at the Chicago Gabby Awards

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CHICAGO – The highlight of the Gabby Awards, the June 19th ceremony in Chicago honoring Greek Americans, was Oscar winner Olympia Dukakis receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award.

In an emotional and memorable acceptance speech, Dukakis remembered her early childhood experiences and the lessons of her immigrant Greek parents. She also recalled a moment during the presidential campaign in 1988 of her cousin Michael Dukakis, where the two of them shared happy tears thinking of where they had both come and the family that allowed them to get there.



Olympia Dukakis at the Gabby Awards, Chicago, June 19, 2009

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

Olympia Dukakis is a longtime stage veteran who broke through in a big way at the age of 56 in her Oscar-winning turn as Cher's mother in "Moonstruck" (1987). She followed that with significant film roles in "Steel Magnolias" (1988) and "Mr. Holland's Opus" (1994), plus playing the key character (Anna Madrigal) in the mini-series "Tales of the City" (1993).

HollywoodChicago.com talked with Ms. Dukakis at the Gabby Awards, and her fiery spirit showed throughout in discussing her career and point of view.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was different about the theater scene in the 1960s, when you were first starting out, as compared to the later eras, all the way up to today?

Olympia Dukakis: It was a lot more egalitarian back then, a lot more collaborative. People really believed that their work could make a difference and change things. There was theater in the streets, in the bars, in the coffee shops. There was kind of a belief in life.

HollywoodChicago.com: As an acting instructor of high academia and regard, what type of honesty in a performance can still turn your head?

Dukakis: Being honest is good. But practicing informed honesty is better. To be vulgar about it, a dog pissing in the street is honest (laughs). So it has to be honesty with an informed sensibility and – having made such a vulgarity – a refined sensibility (laughs).



Ms. Dukakis Speaks Her Mind

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

HollywoodChicago.com: Your cousin was a presidential candidate and you are described as an activist and feminist. Why do you feel the descriptive feminist has fallen out of favor with women in the last 20 years?

Dukakis: There was a reaction and backlash that happened after the first wave with everybody, especially men. It became popular to denigrate women who felt they wanted to do something to raise the consciousness of other women and men.

I think what has happened now, in viewing the world and how badly women are treated in other countries, that it has really brought us back to a more sensible place regarding the concept of feminism.

HollywoodChicago.com: What kind of perspective did you gain in the process of writing your memoir, 'Ask me Tomorrow, A Life in Progress'?

Dukakis: That was one of the most difficult things I've ever done. They kept asking me to do it, three times in all. I felt like Julius Caesar, twice he refused and the third time his vanity was hit. So he finally said yes, and that is what he got killed for (laughs).

It felt that way to me. But the publisher persisted and I began to think that maybe I do have something to offer. But the writing of it was very difficult for me.

I did gain perspective about my life, I remembered things. For example, when I was 12 years old I began to carry a knife. I had forgotten that and why I did it. It simply was necessary on the streets of my neighborhood, to fight my way to and from school.

HollywoodChicago.com: Where did your personal best moment as an actor take place? Was it part of your stage or film work?

Dukakis: I have had wonderful moments on stage and some great film roles. It’s hard to compare them because they are so very different. I loved them both because they are two unique experiences, two different ways to communicate. I enjoy them both.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, as an instructor and mentor, what is your best one sentence advice to student actors?

Dukakis: Patience, or get out.

Olympia Dukakis has three films scheduled for release in 2009 and 2010.



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