

A Remarkable Life

FOR LEGEND AWARD RECIPIENT ANGELA LANSBURY,
BOUNDARIES WERE MADE TO BE BROKEN

BY TED
JOHNSON

WHEN ANGELA LANSBURY was asked earlier this year about whether she would retire, she answered as if she hadn't dwelled much recently on the thought.

"Well, no I don't think so," she told Alec Baldwin, who interviewed her at TCM's annual film festival in Hollywood. "I always say, you got to keep moving, and that is what I am trying to do."

Lansbury, the recipient of tonight's Legend Award presented by the Los Angeles Press Club, added that stage roles propel her to go forward, with the feeling that, "you the audience are there and we are together in this."

At 91, Lansbury is one of the few performers left from the heyday of Hollywood's studio system. Her endurance is a credit to her ability to break free of its constraints.

She gave up an MGM contract in the 1950s to spur a career on the stage, including Tony-

winning roles in *Mame*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Dear World* and *Gypsy*.

Meanwhile, her role as Jessica Fletcher in the CBS series "Murder She Wrote" ran for 12 seasons starting in 1984. It made her famous and showed her range: Another of her notable roles was that of the Machiavellian mother Mrs. Iselin in *The Manchurian Candidate*. Much has been made of the fact that she was just three years older than Laurence Harvey, who played her brainwashed son in the John Frankenheimer classic.

"I always say to everybody, 'Leave yourself at home. Don't bring yourself to that set,'" she told the TCM audience. "Be that woman and get on with it. That seems to work on various levels in various roles."

Lansbury was born in London, the daughter of Moyna Macgill, an actress, and Edgar Lansbury, a politician. With her mother and two younger brothers, she moved to the United





States in 1940 as her native city was bombed in the Blitz. She eventually moved to Los Angeles, where a chance meeting with a fellow actor helped land her an introduction to a casting director at MGM.

She garnered her first film role, as the young maid in *Gaslight*, after studio boss L.B. Mayer watched her screen test and said, "Sign that girl."

"I was signed out of nowhere," Lansbury said, according to Martin Gottfried's authorized biography of her, *Balancing Act*.

She quit a \$28-a-week job as a clerk at Bull-ocks-Wilshire and moved into a \$500-a-week starting salary in the studio's standard one-year contract, with six year options, according to Gottfried's book.

The 1944 movie earned her an Oscar nomination, when she was just 18. It was followed a

Above, Lansbury appeared in "Blithe Spirits" in 2014 at Ahmanson Theater

Left: On the set of "Murder, She Wrote"

Page 18: Lansbury appeared in *Harvey Girls*; Sitting in her mother Moyna Macgill's lap at age 3 and sister, Isolde



In 1984, Lansbury's role as Jessica Fletcher in the CBS series, "Murder She Wrote," lasted for 12 seasons. She became a TV star at age 59.

Above: Lansbury sits outside a Los Angeles Court room in 1943. A minor at 17 years of age, she had to go to court to sign her contract with MGM; Lansbury's success on stage includes winning a Tony Award for *Mame*

year later by another nomination for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Roles in *The Harvey Girls*, *State of the Union* and *Samson and Delilah* followed, though eventually she found that her parts were diminishing to character roles.

Mayer, she told the TCM audience, "put me in some dreadful parts, and I couldn't wait to get away from MGM and to the theater."

She got out of her MGM contract in 1952 and began moving into stage performances as well as some TV work. She made her Broadway debut as Bert Lahr's wife in *Hotel Paradiso* and returned three years later in *A Taste of Honey*.

John Frankenheimer worked with her in *All Fall Down* in 1962. On the last day of the shoot, he gave her a copy of the Richard Condon novel *The Manchurian Candidate*.

"It was wonderfully well-constructed, so orig-

inal, so extraordinary, I was really blown away by it," she said.

One of the stars of the movie, Frank Sinatra, wanted Lucille Ball for the part of Mrs. Iselin, but, "I think Frankenheimer had put his foot down" to demand that she get the role, Lansbury said.

A breakout role in musical theater came in 1966, when she starred in *Mame*. In Gottfried's *Balancing Act*, composer Jerry Herman recalled that on the opening night curtain call, "When the audience realized they had just seen one of the great performances of all time and had discovered a new star who was the image of goodness and decency and fairness—well after the Hollywood years and the character actor stuff, she suddenly became the lady in the white dress. She was it, the one in the spotlight."

In addition to starring roles on stage, she made movies such as *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* and *Death on the Nile*. Meanwhile, she and her husband Peter Shaw moved their family from Malibu to a home in County Cork, Ireland.

Her role as Miss Marple in *The Mirror Crack'd* was a forerunner to that of Jessica Fletcher in "Murder, She Wrote." Jean Stapleton had turned



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In 2014, she became Dame Angela Lansbury, a title bestowed by Queen Elizabeth.

down the part, but Lansbury saw great potential for the character of a mystery writer and crime sleuth.

The role, she told Walters, gave her a “personal sense of achievement I have never known before.” She became a TV star at age 59.

Lansbury supplemented the long run of “Murder, She Wrote” with other work, including voice roles in the animated classic *Beauty and the Beast*. Later she guest starred on shows like “Law & Order” and appeared in Emma Thompson’s *Nanny McPhee* in 2005. The latter came after the death of Shaw, a producer and former agent, to whom she had been married for 53 years.

In an interview with CNN in 2014, Lansbury credited their long marriage to “mainly our mutual interest in what we were doing together.”

After 23 years, she returned to Broadway in *Deuce*, and two years later won another Tony as Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit*. She reprised that role in London in 2014, and later toured with the show, including a stop in Los Angeles. She also appeared in recent years in stage revivals of Gore Vidal’s *The Best Man* and Alfred Uhry’s *Driving Miss Daisy*.

Lansbury received an honorary Oscar in 2013. At the ceremony, she recalled the legendary actors she had worked with—Ingrid Bergman, Katherine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Sinatra—as well as directors such as George Cukor and Frankenheimer.

“I even had coffee in the MGM commissary with Clark Gable. That’s as far as it went, you understand,” she said, to laughs. “But we were on the lot together.”

But then her memories of the past gave way to the present, and to the family members and friends with her at the ceremony. “Let me tell you, it doesn’t get much better than that.”

In 2014 she was promoted from a mere Commander of the Order of the British Empire to Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE). Thus, this year’s Legend is Dame Angela Lansbury.