

BAY AREA REPORTER

Forever Phyllis!

Chat with SF Pride Celebrity Grand Marshal Cloris Leachman



Bay Area Reporter
By Tavo Avador
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Cloris Leachman's laugh is deep – a rumble. She laughed frequently during a recent telephone conversation. This year's Pride Celebrity Grand Marshal is "excited" about the June 28 festivities. A long-time supporter of gay and lesbian rights, she finds opposition to same-sex marriage "so last century! It's old, stupid, has nothing to do with today." The bigotry comes from people believing "the Bible tells me so."

In a six-decade career, she's won an Oscar, a record nine Emmys, "and a Golden Globe. Everyone forgets that!" Her autobiography, *Cloris* (Kensington, \$24), co-authored with ex-husband and best friend George Englund, is out. She's launched a clothing line for mature women.

Born (1926) in Des Moines, she attended Northwestern (classmates included Paul Lynde and Charlotte Rae), acted in Chicago, was crowned Miss Chicago, and was a Miss America finalist. She moved to Manhattan and was cast as the sexy student boarder in William Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba*, starring Broadway legend Shirley Booth, "who was darling, but who paralyzed me. I was terrified of doing anything." Nonetheless, she attracted attention. Tallulah Bankhead praised her lavishly, but told her to change her name. Hollywood, always looking for sexy blondes, was interested, but Leachman wasn't. She had, from the beginning, a strong sense of self. "I always wanted to be myself. Not that I always like who I am, but I have to be myself. Changing my name, having my nose shortened, becoming a sexy starlet, weren't me. I wasn't a pin-up girl. I knew I was a good actress." While rehearsing *Sheba*, she auditioned for Katharine Hepburn, about to star in a revival of *As You Like It*.

Screen star Cloris Leachman. Photo: Karen Itagaki *e It*. Leachman was offered – and accepted – a supporting role. Hepburn also induced terror. "I didn't want to do anything to distract from

her." Other cast members helped her overcome her awe. She got excellent notices and Hepburn's respect, despite one mishap. Another Broadway success was replacing Mary Martin in *South Pacific*. "Oscar Hammerstein said, 'It was as if you were standing behind me while I wrote the music.' I was thrilled."

Picture shows

She thrived during the days of live television, then she and Englund, a director and producer whom she met and married in New York, moved to Los Angeles. They had four sons and a daughter. Leachman worked steadily on television and movies, then played Ruth Popper in *The Last Picture Show* (1971). Director Peter Bogdanovitch "offered Ruth to Ellen Burstyn, who preferred playing Cybill Shepherd's mother, so I got it," and won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar. The film and her performance hold up well, but "I could do the first part better, a little more filled in."

To a whole generation, however, she will forever be Phyllis Lindstrom, the self-involved landlady on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77). Regarding Phyllis' elaborate hairstyle, "I wanted it long and curly, like Topsy." In one memorable episode, Phyllis' brother visits Minneapolis, and she thinks he'd be perfect for Mary, but to her dismay, he dates Rhoda (Valerie Harper). Horrified, Phyllis confronts her nemesis. "Phyl, don't you know he's gay?" "Thank God!" replies Phyllis. Leachman roars recalling that scene. "Valerie and I knew exactly how to play it. We barely rehearsed. We had so much fun." She collected two Emmys as Phyllis. She recalls Lynde warmly. Does she think he suffered from the internalized homophobia so prevalent back then? "I don't know. I knew he was gay, but we never discussed it. He was a darling man," although he could become abusive when he drank. Marlon Brando – a very close friend of her husband's – and Judy Garland, whose daughter Lorna was a regular visitor, were among the troubled superstars she often comforted. How did she avoid their problems? "I was never part of the Hollywood scene. I was a working wife and mother. I loved them, but couldn't save them."

She admires Meryl Streep and Julie Harris, whom she met at the Actors Studio. "It was a thrill to be there, with Eli Wallach, Martin Balsam, Jack Warden, and Julie." She laughs remembering Harris saying, "Cloris, if I had your tits, I could rule the world!"

Her laughter momentarily stops while discussing "an unbearable sadness," the death from drug addiction of her son Bryan. Her writing about his loss is poignant and shows how dehumanizing labels can be.

The hostile critical reception the remake of *The Women* (2008) received "surprised me. It was reflective of how women really are," she insists. In the remake, Sylvia (Annette Bening) betrays her closest friend Mary (Meg Ryan), then strives to repair their relationship. "Women are supportive of one another, not always competitive. I loved making that movie."

What's next? "I'm off to New York to dance with children in [choreographer/dancer] Chuck D'Amboise's program. One thousand kids participate. It will be thrilling." For them as well.