

Jennifer Jones, prominent figure in postwar Hollywood, dies at 90

Hiram Lee
28 December 2009

Veteran American actress Jennifer Jones died December 17 at the age of 90. A talented and sensitive performer, Jones was one of several dynamic young actors to emerge in the American cinema during the postwar period. She earned an Academy Award for her performance in *The Song of Bernadette* (1943) and was nominated three more times during her career. Jones appeared in her final film, *The Towering Inferno*, in 1974 and had remained largely out of the public eye ever since.

Jennifer Jones, whose given name was Phylis Isley, was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on March 2, 1919. Her family ran the Isley Stock Company, a touring theater group that performed tent shows throughout the southern and midwestern United States. Jones began performing with the company while still a child.

Having developed a passion for acting at an early age, Jones would go on to attend New York's American Academy of Dramatic Arts in the late 1930s. Here she met another young actor, Robert Walker (1918-1951), who is today best remembered for co-starring (along with Farley Granger) in Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951). Walker and Jones married in 1939. The two briefly moved to Hollywood and Jones landed small parts in a Western and a Dick Tracy serial. The two returned to New York after Jones failed an audition with Paramount Pictures.

It was in New York, after working in radio and modeling on the side in hopes of finding more acting work, that Jones had a life-changing audition with the powerful producer and movie mogul David O. Selznick. Selznick was the producer-auteur behind the epic 1939 adaptation of *Gone with the Wind*. Jones and Selznick took to each other at once. They began an affair and would eventually marry in 1949.

From the first audition, Selznick determined to make a star of the actress. He gave her the stage name by which she was known the rest of her career and took a special interest in guiding her career, shaping her persona, and selecting the roles she would perform. Jones's name, in the opening credits of her films, was accompanied by the note that she appeared "by arrangement with David O. Selznick." For better or worse, often perhaps for worse, her film career was inextricably linked to Selznick's tastes and interests.

Jones won an Oscar for her first major film role. *Bernadette* (1943) told the story, from a believer's point of view, of Bernadette Soubirous, the late 19th-century peasant girl from the south of France who claimed to see visions of the Virgin Mary (played in the film by a then pregnant Linda Darnell!). It is not a great film by any means, and one simply cannot go along with the reverential story, but Jones gives a memorable, though somewhat uneven, performance in it. In the film she makes herself very small and speaks quietly. Her Bernadette, rather than someone possessing a defiant streak, carries herself as someone who simply cannot deny the convictions that compel her to enter into conflict with a stupid and brutal government and the cold hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

The film tends to place the miraculous and the holy on the side of the poor and the "least of us," and not with the bureaucratic apparatuses that claim to preserve virtue and spirit. One need not believe in the film's religiosity to be moved by the final lines addressed to the vision of Mary by Jones's character from her death bed. The soft and sincere "I love you" spoken by her in this scene is beautifully and memorably delivered.

Among Jones's best films was *Cluny Brown* (1946), a comedy directed by Ernst Lubitsch, an essential figure in the American cinema. Here Jones plays a young woman who doesn't "know her place." She is the frank and uninhibited niece of a plumber who gets herself into trouble and is sent away to be the parlor maid to a wealthy couple. Once there she will be courted, on the one hand, by an uptight pharmacist and, on the other, by a lively and mischievous writer played by Charles Boyer.

No one who has seen the film will ever forget Jones's opening line; arriving at a client's apartment to repair a clogged sink she says, in a classic Lubitsch innuendo, "Well, shall we have a go at it?" Jones makes Cluny into a real, living human being, spontaneous, funny, eager to discover something in life. One genuinely feels for her as she is forced to bend to the will of the strict head of the maid service at the wealthy couple's mansion. As she tells her boss, "I understand. If I feel like feeding the squirrels to the nuts, this isn't the place for it." The film, on the whole, defends liveliness and sensuality

against conventionality, restrictive and absurd moralizing, and “knowing one’s place.” Jones’s lively performance plays a significant part in this.

In Vincente Minnelli’s memorable 1949 adaptation of *Madame Bovary*, Jones gives a fine performance as Emma Bovary, the tragic young country girl who dreamed of “fashion and luxury” and “high romance.” The moral compromises she makes, as a provincial doctor’s wife, in her pursuit of status and luxury ultimately destroy her. Jones forcefully navigates the extreme emotional territory of the character; her desperation feels especially urgent, her far away and longing stares seem to penetrate very far indeed. Jones seems to feel a real connection to the material. If occasionally she goes too far with her performance, she is nevertheless able to maintain her sincerity.

Jones also makes a strong impression in her films with director King Vidor, *Duel in the Sun* (1949) and *Ruby Gentry* (1952). *Duel in the Sun* is a visually striking Western about a half-white, half-Native American girl sent to live with white relatives after her parents die. She finds herself in a violent love affair with the wild son (Gregory Peck) of a wealthy land baron. It’s a feverish, often over-the-top film with Jones asked to perform in a somewhat exaggerated fashion, but somehow it all manages to work. She is a striking presence in the Vidor films.

Beginning in the 1950s, with few exceptions, the films and roles become less interesting. Selznick pushed his star toward prestige pictures and dull literary adaptations, including poor attempts at bringing F. Scott Fitzgerald’s remarkable *Tender is the Night* to the screen in 1962 and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell To Arms* in 1957. One of her best-remembered films, *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, is one of her worst. Jones would retire, more or less, from acting by the late 1960s.

David O. Selznick died in 1965, beginning a series of personal tragedies in Jones’s life. The actress struggled with mental health issues during this time and attempted suicide in 1967. Her daughter, Mary Selznick, committed suicide in 1976.

In 1971, Jones married Norton Simon, a multimillionaire art collector who had amassed one of the largest private art collections in the world. Following his death in 1993, Jones served as chair of the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California. She made significant renovations to the museum and a number of changes intended to provide greater access to the collection by the public. Jones remained out of the public eye herself as best she could after the end of her acting career and typically refused to grant interviews to the press.

As talented and honest a performer as Jones was, one often feels there was something incomplete about her. As good as she may have been, she was probably never a truly great actress, but then her career took shape under less than favorable

circumstances. The Hollywood she began working in was passing through the anticommunist witch hunts of HUAC and Joseph McCarthy. A broad effort was under way, with the direct consent and cooperation of many studio bosses and moguls, to implement the blacklist and to purge Hollywood of left-wing elements. What one could say, openly, after the witch hunts became limited.

The postwar period saw an economic boom and the US emerged as a superpower. New social moods were prevailing. An artist like Jones did not develop in a culture enriched by socialist or even a great deal of critical thought. And while she made a number of interesting films in the 1940s, Selznick kept a tight rein on Jones’s career. She worked with talented and important filmmakers like Lubitsch and Minnelli, but was never really afforded the opportunity to work in many films that challenged or explored the nature of the new postwar order with the depth that artists like Orson Welles or Fritz Lang were able to achieve. And by the late 1950s and the 1960s, it was certainly the case that talented performers would only find less and less meaningful works in which to practice their art. Jennifer Jones may never have developed as complete an artistic personality as she might have, but there were fewer opportunities open to her to do so than in a previous period.

Even as one considers the personal limitations of Jones and the limitations she had thrust on her by the conditions under which she worked, she nevertheless stands out as a talented and sincere performer. Her best work deserves to be remembered and revisited.

The US cable television channel Turner Classic Movies will broadcast four of Jones's films as a tribute on January 7. The broadcast will include Duel in the Sun, John Huston's Beat the Devil, Madame Bovary and Vittorio De Sica's Indiscretion of an American Wife.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact