

# “Remember me”: The 70-year career of American actress Cloris Leachman, from *Kiss Me Deadly* to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Mel Brooks and beyond

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The extraordinarily gifted actress Cloris Leachman died January 27 at 94 at her home in Encinitas, California. Leachman’s acting career, comprising nearly 300 credits, extended from the late 1940s until very near the end of her life. When she died, she had two movies in post-production and had recently reprised her voice role in another.

Leachman is probably best remembered for her film and television work during the 1970s, a decade in which she received an Academy Award for her performances in Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show* (1971), starred on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-75) and her own spinoff series, *Phyllis* (1975-77), and featured memorably in *Young Frankenstein* (1974) and *High Anxiety* (1977), directed by Mel Brooks. In addition to the 1972 Academy Award, Leachman won eight Primetime Emmy Awards, tying her for the most individual acting awards in Emmy history.

Leachman was born in 1926 in Des Moines, Iowa, the daughter of Cloris (née Wallace) and Buck Leachman, who worked in the family-owned lumber business. She attended Northwestern University, before becoming Miss Chicago and competing in the Miss America pageant in 1946.

Soon afterward, Leachman moved to New York to study acting at the Actors Studio, where her fellow classmates included Julie Harris, Montgomery Clift, Jack Warden and Marlon Brando. Brando became a lifelong friend, and more particularly a friend of Leachman’s husband, from 1953 to 1979, producer-director George Englund, with whom she had five children. (Englund directed Brando in *The Ugly American* [1963] and wrote a memoir about the actor, *Marlon Brando: The Way It’s*

*Never Been Done Before*, 2001.)

Leachman’s studies in New York coincided with the emergence of live television drama, and she worked in that field extensively starting in 1948. Her first film role, in which she appeared uncredited as a “Dancing Nightclub Patron,” came in Edgar Ulmer’s *Carnegie Hall* (1947).

Her first speaking part in films is unforgettable, if brief. She appears in the opening moments of left-wing director Robert Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), his anti-Mickey Spillane film version of a Mickey Spillane potboiler novel. A distraught, terrified Leachman runs down a road at night, barefoot (in fact, clothed only in a trench coat), vainly attempting to stop passing motorists, before the opening credits.

Finally, Leachman’s character stands in the middle of the highway and compels Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker), driving along in his sports car, to screech to a halt. He can only complain, “You almost wrecked my car. Well? Get in.” She pants and sobs through a Nat “King” Cole number on the radio as the credits roll by backwards.

Eventually, when she calms down, Leachman’s character offers a sobering and accurate assessment of the self-absorbed Hammer: “You’re one of those self-indulgent males who thinks about nothing but his clothes, his car, himself ... Bet you do push-ups to keep your belly hard. ... I could tolerate flabby muscles in a man if it would make him more friendly. You’re the kind of person who never gives in a relationship, who only takes.” She tells Hammer that “Christina Rossetti wrote love sonnets. I was named after her.” Christina’s parting words remain with the viewer, “If we don’t make that bus stop ... remember me.” Soon afterward, Leachman’s

character is tortured and murdered.

Leachman appeared countless times on television during the 1950s and 1960s, including in such popular series as *Lassie*, *Rawhide*, *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, *Checkmate*, *Hawaiian Eye*, *Gunsmoke*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *The Twilight Zone*, *The Untouchables*, *Route 66*, *Wagon Train*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Stoney Burke*, *77 Sunset Strip*, *The Defenders*, *Mr. Novak*, *Dr. Kildare*, *Perry Mason*, *The Big Valley*, *The Name of the Game*, *Mannix* and *Ironsides*.

She became a virtual household name in the US, however, as the result of her role on CBS's *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which was immensely popular during its first five seasons in particular (during the 1972-73 and 1973-74 seasons it was the seventh and ninth most-watched program, respectively). It was a comedy series done with some wit, elegance and savoir faire. Leachman played Moore's landlady and snobbish, self-absorbed downstairs neighbor, Phyllis Lindstrom, married to dermatologist Dr. Lars Lindstrom, whom we endlessly hear about, but never meet. As noted above, Leachman then inherited her own spinoff series, *Phyllis*, which ran for two seasons, also on CBS.

Leachman received accolades for her role in a semi-tragic part in Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show*. She plays Ruth Popper, an unhappily married, middle-aged woman. In her frustration, she begins a relationship with a high school senior (played by Timothy Bottoms), who abruptly drops her. The film is one of those artistically schematic efforts that strives for feeling and emotion rather than organically possessing them, but Leachman's performance is certainly genuine. She received an Academy Award for best supporting actress at the annual ceremony held April 10, 1972.

Leachman's other film credits in those years include *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Lovers and Other Strangers* (1970) and Jonathan Demme's *Crazy Mama* (1975). An undoubted high point of her career was her work with director-writer-comic Mel Brooks. Playing the intimidating Frau Blücher, the very mention of whose name causes horses to whinny and rear in fright, Leachman was one of the extraordinary comic ensemble in *Young Frankenstein* (1974), Brooks's most thoroughly accomplished work.

Brooks later commented: "I was madly in love with Cloris right from the beginning, because she could do anything. Talk about talent, she was maybe one of the most talented people we had there. She could play anything, and her accent was perfect right from the

beginning. We asked her to play Frau Blücher like Judith Anderson's domineering and cold Mrs. Danvers from Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, and she got it immediately."

In Brooks's *High Anxiety* (1977), Leachman had the opportunity to play Nurse Charlotte Diesel, she of the astonishing conical breasts, one of the conspirators at the Psycho-Neurotic Institute for the Very, Very Nervous, who specialize in institutionalizing very, very wealthy people and extorting money from their families. She acted in a third Brooks film, *History of the World: Part 1* (1981), as Madame Defarge (of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* fame), stirring up the "scum" of Paris in preparation for the Revolution of 1789.

Leachman continued to perform in film and on television series (*The Facts of Life*, *The Nutt House*, *Walter & Emily*, *Thanks*, *The Ellen Show*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Raising Hope*) for the next four decades. If the works were not so intriguing for the most part, it was not the actress's fault, her career suffered as part of the general decline of American film and television. *Spanglish* (2004), for James L. Brooks, and *Adult World* (2013), directed by Scott Coffey, are two of the more notable among a generally lackluster group of films. She was a contestant on *Dancing with the Stars* in 2008, at the age of 81 (she finished seventh), and published an autobiography in 2009.

Leachman's energy, vivaciousness, comic timing and emotional depth will be recognized by all who viewed or view her performances. She clearly gave her all. No doubt there were disappointments and shortcomings too. In her autobiography, she addressed the by now deceased Marlon Brando in these words, tinged with sadness: "I remember our salad days at the Actors Studio, the shining young things we were then, so brimming with anticipation, so unaware of the startling events that lay ahead."



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