

Gifted actress Angela Lansbury dies at 96

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British-born actress Angela Lansbury died Tuesday, only a few days before her 97th birthday. Lansbury began performing professionally in a cabaret act at the age of 16 in 1942 and won an Academy Award nomination for her first film appearance, in George Cukor's *Gaslight*, released in 1944. Her acting career lasted more than three-quarters of a century.

One of the most enduring presences of her generation, she will be remembered for the consistent vivacity, precision and depth of her acting in film, television and the theater. To a wider audience, Lansbury is best known for *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and her years as writer and amateur detective Jessica Fletcher in the popular television series *Murder, She Wrote* (1984-96).

Lansbury's background and early life are intriguing. The *New York Times* coyly writes in its obituary that the actress's father was "Edgar Lansbury, a businessman." The truth is a little more complex and suggestive than that.

Lansbury's mother was Irish actress Charlotte Lillian McIldowie (stage name Moyna Macgill), who had success on the London stage in the 1920s. Her father Edgar was the son of George Lansbury, eventually leader of the Labour Party from 1932 to 1935. A pacifist and a left reformist, George Lansbury helped establish the *Daily Herald* in 1912 and supported the Russian Revolution in 1917.

In *The Magic of Believing*, Angela Lansbury's brother, also Edgar, writes about their grandfather: "England was not yet out of the era of Charles Dickens. ... [George] Lansbury and his family became confirmed socialists and early believers in the Bolshevik experiment that was developing in Russia. One of his daughters, Violet, was a Socialist-Communist, who eventually went to Russia. Her sister, Daisy, a committed suffragette, helped Sylvia Pankhurst escape from the police by covering her face with a dark veil

and surrendering herself to the constables who, unaware of the switch, thought she was Pankhurst."

In 1921, George and Edgar Lansbury were involved in what became known as the Poplar Rates Rebellion, a tax protest on behalf of the poor. Both men and Edgar's first wife, Minnie, were sent to prison. The latter, 32, "died while in prison from pneumonia contracted during her incarceration." Edgar himself joined the Communist Party when it was founded in 1920 and like his father, served as mayor of Poplar, a poor district in the East End of London, only the second Communist in Britain to serve as mayor. He was a Labour local councillor in Poplar from 1912-25, for the last five of those years being elected as a Communist/Labour candidate. Edgar Lansbury was also a successful businessman, who died of stomach cancer in 1935. Angela Lansbury once described herself as a "proud socialist."

Lansbury's mother and her four children (one by a previous husband) emigrated to the US at the outbreak of World War II.

In 1943, Angela more or less accidentally stumbled into a screen test at MGM for a memorable part in the Victorian melodrama, *Gaslight*, about a husband (Charles Boyer) who manipulates his wife (Ingrid Bergman) into believing she is losing her mind. The filmmakers needed a girl talented enough to play the couple's young Cockney housemaid.

Again, according to her brother Edgar's memoir, "After the [screen] test nothing was heard from the studio for weeks, and Angela had no idea whether or not she had landed the role. According to Cukor, who wanted her in the part, the front office had some question as to whether she was sexy enough. Sympathetic to the strain the waiting must have put on the young actress, he phoned her one day and said, 'Miss Lansbury, I don't know whether you are going to get the job, but you are a very talented actress.'"

Cukor later recalled, “On the first day of shooting, even though she was only seventeen and had no film experience, she was immediately professional. Suddenly I was watching real movie acting. She became this rather disagreeable little housemaid, even her face seemed to change, it became somehow lopsided, and mean and impertinent. I was delighted with her from the start.”

After a part in *National Velvet* (Clarence Brown, 1944), as Elizabeth Taylor’s older sister, Lansbury was even more memorable and moving as the tavern singer Sibyl Vane (she had a wonderful singing voice and performed extensively in musicals) in the 1945 film version of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Albert Lewin). The worldly dandy Gray teases and toys with the young girl, eventually humiliating and discarding Sibyl, driving her to suicide.

Lansbury performed in a number of relatively undistinguished films in the late 1940s and early 1950s—Lewin’s *The Private Affairs of Bel Ami* (1947), Frank Capra’s *The State of the Union* (1948), Cecil B. DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and John Sturges’ *Kind Lady* (1951). Although she increasingly made appearances in television, Lansbury did appear in a number of valuable films in the 1950s, *A Life at Stake* (Paul Guilfoyle, 1955), the modest, intriguing Randolph Scott Western *A Lawless Street* (directed by the talented Joseph H. Lewis of *Gun Crazy* and *The Big Combo* fame, also 1955) and Peter Godfrey’s *Please Murder Me!* (with the equally adept Raymond Burr as her screen partner, 1956).

Lansbury’s appearance in John Frankenheimer’s *The Manchurian Candidate* was mesmerizing and horrifying. The film, scripted by George Axelrod, follows a Korean War veteran, Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey), brainwashed by Soviet and Chinese doctors into becoming a cold-blooded “sleeper” assassin. The anticommunism was relatively predictable and formulaic, but the film’s attack on the anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s is its most striking feature, brilliantly embodied by James Gregory’s McCarthy-like Senator John Iselin. Lansbury plays Iselin’s monstrous wife and Raymond Shaw’s “desperately controlling mother.” As we noted in an obituary for Frankenheimer in 2002, the film “does manage to convey something of the paranoia and delirium of the Cold War years.”

Many of Lansbury’s later film and television projects were unworthy of her. On Broadway, she won Tony Awards for *Mame* (1966), *Dear World* (1969), *Gypsy* (1975), *Sweeney Todd* (1979) and *Blithe Spirit* (2009), plus a Lifetime Achievement Award. Her final Broadway performance was in 2012 in Gore Vidal’s *The Best Man*. Lansbury also received six Golden Globe Awards, an honorary Academy Award, 18 Primetime Emmy award nominations and a Grammy Award nomination.

Lansbury was always an intelligent and indelible performer, who never gave anything less than her all. She was incapable of that.



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