

Actress Diane Keaton dies at 79

David Walsh
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American actress Diane Keaton died October 11 at the age of 79. Reports indicate that her health had declined rapidly in recent months. Pneumonia has been identified as the immediate cause of death.

Keaton performed in films for half a century, first appearing in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* in 1972. Her personal and artistic relationship with comic-filmmaker Woody Allen became quite important. She had roles, small or large, in eight of Allen's films, between 1972 and 1993. *Annie Hall* (1977), which largely made Keaton's reputation, and *Manhattan* (1979) are the most noteworthy.

When all is said and done, however, the most substantial film in which Keaton appeared, the one with the most enduring and valuable influence, was Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981). The drama based on the life of left-wing journalist John Reed—author of the immortal *Ten Days That Shook the World*—provides an honest, moving account of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, something virtually unique in cinema history, outside the pre-Stalinist Soviet Union. Keaton plays Louise Bryant, American journalist and Reed's lover, as they participate in and he later writes about the momentous event.

Of course, Keaton's obituary presents certain difficulties for the contemporary American media. She remained close to and defended until the end of her life "Disgraced Director Woody Allen" (in the words of a *People* magazine headline this week). As Patrick McGilligan wrote in his recent biography of Allen, "One woman who remained steadfastly by Allen's side was Diane Keaton. ... Keaton's loyalty never wavered." She termed the allegation that Allen had sexually abused his adopted daughter Dylan Farrow "absurd ... There's no way Woody would ever abuse anyone, much less his seven-year-old daughter. To be falsely accused is horrible and as his close friend of many years I really feel for him."

On top of that, Keaton co-starred in a film sympathetically and compellingly dramatizing the life and times of a witness to and chronicler of the Russian Revolution, and one of the founders of the Communist Party in the US (or one of its organizational predecessors). The media has tended to step gingerly around these disturbing realities.

It is not so easily determined in a given case, but, under the proper artistic and social conditions, actors may bring out fundamental characteristics or facets of their time and society through their performances. They may come to embody physically and mentally enduring or underlying features of their era.

How does that take place? It is not mysterious. An actor's acute intuition plays a principal role. Powerful, external social processes, such as a broad popular radicalization, for example, "overflow" and help produce a widely shared "sensing of the world, people and events; the roots of this basic feeling penetrate deeply into the core of the unconscious, instinctive and intuitive." (A. Voronsky)

Keaton, with her freshness and liveliness, her "free-spiritedness," spoke to a generation—or generations—that were shedding stale morals and old prejudices in the US, including in some cases anti-communism.

Keaton was born Diane Hall in Los Angeles in 1946 to Dorothy (Keaton), an amateur photographer, and Jack Hall, a civil engineer. She was the eldest of four children. The Halls moved to Santa Ana in Orange County when she was 10. According to biographer Deborah Mitchell,

Influenced and supported by her family, Keaton performed in summer stock after she graduated from high school in 1963. That fall, she enrolled at Santa Ana College where she spent one semester before transferring to Orange Coast College. Her drama coach there, Lucien Scott, encouraged her to quit after only two semesters, to study with [famed acting teacher] Sanford Meisner in New York.

After several years in New York, in 1968, Keaton won a role in *Hair*, billed as Broadway's "American Tribal Love Rock Musical," suffused with the counterculture's anti-war and "peace and love" themes, although she declined to take her clothes off on stage, thereby forsaking the \$50 nudity bonus. Keaton and Allen met when she auditioned for a part in his Broadway play, *Play It Again, Sam*, which opened in 1969. She later appeared in the 1972 film version (directed by Herbert Ross) of that lightweight effort, in which Humphrey Bogart's ghost figures importantly.

Keaton played Kay Adams-Corleone, the second wife of mobster Michael Corleone, in Coppola's trilogy of *Godfather* films. The actress was not especially satisfied with the character or her part in the film. "I had no interest in that woman. I thought she was such a dip. She was so willing to go along with all of it. She was such a nice WASP," she said, and, later, "[Al] Pacino was great. Robert De Niro was great. I was background music," which is largely true.

After several slight Allen films, *Annie Hall* represented a change. The filmmaker had told the *New York Times* prior to its production that he now wanted to make "more risky films, less conventional ones," films about "real people, real problems." In *Annie Hall*, Allen plays a standup comic and Keaton his aspiring nightclub singer girlfriend. The film, unfolding in retrospect, examines the evolution of their bond and its dissolution. Love fades, charmingly but sadly. Various cultural, psychological and sexual obstacles present themselves, including the characters' (especially Allen's) self-involvement.

Critic Andrew Sarris suggested the relationship at the heart of the film carried with it "deeper and stronger tensions ... between his [Allen's] intellect and her [Keaton's] intuition, his morbidity and her eccentricity, his tortured personality and her furtive personality. The pairing is so ridiculously impossible that it becomes indescribably moving." The film was "by far" Allen's finest "to date," Sarris argued, and a "cinematic valentine" that he "has woven for Diane Keaton."

A little of the charm has worn off, as the elements of affluence and narcissism seem more grating. But, still, *Annie Hall* is a lovely, funny film in many ways and Keaton is a delight. She won an academy award for the role at the ceremony in 1978 and was perhaps the most popular American film actress at the time. She was considered a new type of "leading lady." Keaton's appeal was not that of a gazed-upon "sexpot," her definite sensuality more active, egalitarian and emotional-comic, her presence a little eccentric, vulnerable and intelligent, flawed and self-deprecating, but firmly independent.

Following her death, Allen wrote a touching tribute in which he

remembered Keaton as “charming,” “magical” and “beautiful.” He added that “Unlike anyone the planet has experienced or is unlikely to ever see again, her face and laugh illuminated any space she entered.”

Keaton appeared in a number of other films in the 1970s, including two comic efforts with Elliott Gould, *I Will... I Will... For Now* and *Harry and Walter Go to New York* (both 1976) and Richard Brooks’ sensationalized *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977), about a young schoolteacher whose sexual adventurousness leads her to a tragic end.

Reds was the outcome of many years of work by Warren Beatty to create a film biography of John Reed. He had begun researching Reed’s life in the mid-1960s. It is entirely to Beatty’s credit that he persevered against considerable odds. Remarkably, he convinced Paramount to put a good deal of cash into a film about an American Bolshevik. British playwright Trevor Griffiths, who had been influenced by the Trotskyist movement, wrote the first version of the script.

As Griffiths told this writer when we held a public discussion on “The Writer and Revolution” in Manchester in November 2008:

Actually it was initially called *Comrades*, but *Comrades* was a bit too communist. *Reds*, which is a term of opprobrium in America, is a gently ironic title, which I had no power over anyway, so I accepted it, but I would have preferred it to be called *Comrades*, because that deals with the overt political structure of the piece and also the relationship, love and trust, between Louise Bryant and John Reed.

Beatty and Griffiths spent months reworking the first version of the script, first in New York and then in London, before they clashed sharply and, according to Griffiths in a 2006 *Vanity Fair* article, “Thunder on the Left: The Making of *Reds*,” “Beatty exploded, and I exploded again and walked out of the room, packed my bag, and left. And never saw him again.” Various others, including Elaine May and Robert Towne, subsequently worked on the screenplay.

According to Deborah Mitchell

Keaton, who plays Bryant, was Beatty’s only choice for this portrait, and she was with him early in 1979 as he traveled throughout Russia, Spain, England and other countries scouting locations for the film that he would control as producer, director, and star. Keaton says of Beatty at the time, “He was possessed by this movie. He was consumed by this movie. He wanted to make a great movie, and he spent a year shooting [it].”

The eventual production was demanding, in part because of Beatty’s predilection for dozens of takes of each shot. (*Vanity Fair*: “According to [production manager Nigel] Wooll, ‘We went through over two and a half million feet of film.’ One source in a position to know claims Beatty shot three million feet—roughly two and a half weeks’ worth of screen time—with one million feet actually printed.”)

Keaton explained to Mitchell:

[Warren] helped my performance because he wouldn’t stop doing takes. He just kept pushing and pushing and pushing and pushing and trying all different things. You know, he was never satisfied. We would average, you know, on a set-up, we would average like 25 takes. People only usually do five at the most. Sometimes you’ll do nine.

In her memoir, *Then Again*, she expands on this, observing that in the scene of Reed and Bryant’s reunion at a Petrograd train station toward the end of the film, the “perfectionist” Beatty “waited through something like sixty-five excruciating close-ups before I finally broke through my self-imposed wall of defiance and let go of my judgment call on a woman I needed to love in order to play.”

In her autobiography, Keaton acknowledged her initial distaste for her character:

I wasn’t prepared for playing Louise Bryant, someone far less romantic than I’d imagined. She became my cross to bear. I didn’t like her. There was nothing charming about her will to be recognized as an artist in her own right. Her pursuit of the magnetic revolutionary John Reed was suspect and, frankly, laced with envy. I hated her.

Another Keaton biographer, Jonathan Moor, writes about the difficult final months of shooting:

Jerzy Kosinski [who played Grigory Zinoviev] recalls about this period, Warren was living in a little hut with no hot water, a hotplate to cook on, and a bathroom with a door that wouldn’t close. “I was living with him the last three months. He dressed like John Reed onstage and off. He was in worse shape than Reed. Exhausted. Coughing all the time. Sick. Emaciated.”

The ultimate result was extraordinary, and *Reds* stands up today. The *Bulletin*, a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, commented in a December 18, 1981 review that *Reds* brought to life “the profound revolutionary upheavals of the first quarter of the 20th century as well as one of the period’s most heroic figures, John Reed.”

The review further noted that

Much of the first part of the film deals with Reed’s romantic relationship with fellow journalist Louise Bryant in the radical bohemia of New York’s Greenwich Village of 1915. Reed was in a process of breaking with this milieu which is peopled by the cynical playwright Eugene O’Neill (brilliantly portrayed by Jack Nicholson), the anarchist Emma Goldman (Maureen Stapleton) and the socialist propagandist Max Eastman.

As the film progresses, Reed and Bryant travel to Russia and become swept up in the revolutionary events. The *Bulletin* pointed to one of the film’s central and most moving and politically telling sequences, and the review’s description is worth printing in full.

Reed together with Bryant enter a tumultuous meeting of workers debating whether to go on strike in support of the revolution. Menshevik orators argue that they cannot walk out because by doing so they will be abandoning their brothers in Britain, France and the US who are fighting the German army. When the workers learn that an American is present they demand that he speak and lift him over their shoulders onto the platform.

Reed tells them that the American workers too are against the war and that what they need from the Russian masses is a

revolutionary example. He declares that if the Russian working class carries through the revolution, the American workers and the workers of the world will follow and put an end to the war and the system which created it.

The factory meeting erupts in wild cheering and the singing of the *Internationale*. This was the voice of the October Revolution. For the workers of Petrograd, internationalism was a guiding principle and their revolution was just the first shot in the world revolution.

In a second comment on *Reds*, January 15, 1982, the *Bulletin* argued that the work was

faithful to the history of Reed, not only in the care which it takes with the details of his life and times, but in portraying how very real people with very real emotions and problems were won to the socialist revolution ...

and suggested the film was essentially about “the making of a revolutionary.” Moreover,

One line in the film spoken by Reed to Louise Bryant as she was seeking to overcome her own subjectivity and insecurity, should be taken to heart by today’s writers, artists and filmmakers; “If you want to be taken seriously, write about serious things.”

The scene pointed to also deserves recalling:

Louise: I’m just living in your margins. I don’t know what I’m doing here. I don’t know what my purpose is. ... I can’t work around you.

Jack: Will you tell me why you’re doing this?

Louise: I’m not taken seriously when you’re around. ...

Jack: You mean you think I’m taken more seriously? Is that what you’re talking about?

Louise: Do you mean you’re not? Come on, Jack. You know what I’m saying. You’re not being honest with me.

Jack: I don’t know what you’re saying.

Louise: You’re not being honest with me. Please, be honest with me. ...

Jack: Maybe if you took yourself a little more seriously, other people would, too. I told you what I thought about the Armory [art exhibition] piece. I was honest about that. I think it’s very nice, but no, I don’t take it very seriously.

Louise: Thank you.

Jack: Why do you even expect to be taken seriously if you’re not writing about serious things?

Keaton told *Vanity Fair* in 2006:

This movie meant so much to him [Beatty], it was really the passion of his professional life—it was the most important thing to Warren. Completely, absolutely. I understood that then, and I

understand now, and I’m proud to have been part of it.

Keaton went on to appear in dozens more films, in some of which she had amusing or insightful things to say or do, but *Reds* was surely a high point. Actors are not in charge of what they are offered or the general conditions of the film industry.

The fact Keaton was involved in some of the meaningful work of the time was not an accident. Her artistic abilities, enthusiastic nonconformism and genuine feeling for life prepared her for that.



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