

BARBARA HARRIS | 1935-2018

Second City alum became toast of Broadway, movies

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Actress Barbara Harris' luminous charm and comedic timing took her from the first number of the first-ever show at Second City to being the toast of Broadway and a star of films directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Ford Coppola and Robert Altman.

Ms. Harris died early Tuesday of cancer in Scottsdale, Arizona, where she had lived for years. Her friend Charna Halpern, co-founder of Chicago's iO Theater, said the cause was lung cancer. The Internet Movie Database gave her age as 83.

Second City credits her as a founder of modern improv and a co-founder of the troupe.

Funny and sexy, she blended the kittenish quality of Tuesday Weld with a knowing daffiness reminiscent of Madeline Kahn or Judy Holliday. The blog Media Funhouse once labeled her "the Garbo of adorable urban neurotic Sixties actresses."

Yet she was an original whose performances were memorable for their vulnerability and authenticity. She danced with grace and had a bell-like singing voice that could veer into an Ethel Merman-style growl. Without seeming twitchy or trying too hard, she stole scenes with little bits of business — a head toss, a single tear or an offbeat musical note.

Broadway legend Mary Martin described her freshness and versatility when she was introducing the nominees at the 1967 Tony awards, at which Ms. Harris won for her performance in "The Apple Tree."

"Her ability to give the impression she was making up her lines as she went along, I was so excited about what I saw, her somehow intangible quality," Martin said.

Ms. Harris earned an Oscar nomination for her role as a fragile would-be actress in the 1971 movie "Who is Harry Kellerman and Why is He Saying Those Terrible Things About Me?"

In 1995, when Chicago Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert created a list of his 100 Great Movie Moments to celebrate the centennial of film, he included Ms. Harris singing "It Don't Worry Me" to calm a frightened crowd after a shooting in the 1975 Altman film "Nashville."



Barbara Harris plays a model in *The Compass Players'* first performance, on July 5, 1955, with Andy Duncan (right) and David Shepherd. SUN-TIMES FILES

She didn't care about stardom or money, according to a 2002 interview she did with the Phoenix New Times after moving to Arizona. "I used to try to get through one film a year," she said. "But I always chose movies that I thought would fail so that I wouldn't have to deal with the fame thing."

"I think the only thing that drew me to acting in the first place was the group of people I was working with: Ed Asner, Paul Sills, Mike Nichols, Elaine May," she said. "And all I really wanted to do back then was rehearsal. I was in it for the process, and I really resented having to go out and do a performance for an audience because the process stopped; it had to freeze and be the same every night."

In 1966, after she starred in Broadway's "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever," writer Cecil Smith said that Ms. Harris — with "the face of an errant chipmunk under haphazard blonde hair and darting dark eyes" — always seemed to be just on the brink of being discovered, whether



Barbara Harris in "Who Is Harry Kellerman and Why Is He Saying Those Terrible Things About Me?" FILE PHOTO

in her early improv shows, onstage or in movies.

Young Barbara grew up on the North Side, where she would hitchhike home after classes at Senn High School, actor Bruce Dern said in his memoir. She also attended Wright Junior College. Her father Oscar worked for the Chicago Tribune, and her mother Natalie Densmoor Harris taught piano to her four children, according to the 1990 Janet Coleman book "The Compass: Improvisational Theatre That Revolutionized American Comedy." Ms. Harris became involved in the Playwrights Theatre Club at the recommendation of co-founder Byrne Piven, a family acquaintance.

She was bitten by the acting bug at Playwrights, a precursor to the Compass Players and Second City.

"The theater was so exotic and intriguing," she said in Coleman's "The Compass" book. "When I saw those bright lights, well, it's just too corny."

The PTC members were struck by her beauty.

Her face "was that of an angel," said actor Ed Asner.

"I'm bereft," Asner told the Sun-Times. "I just felt she was the greatest thing in the world. She had a great sense of humor; if you connected



The original 1959 cast of *The Second City* (left to right): Eugene Troobnik, Barbara Harris, Alan Arkin, Paul Sand, Bill Mathieu, Mina Kolb, Severn Darden and Andrew Duncan. SECOND CITY

with her; and was a joy to work with. She was a beautiful improviser; and improvising with her when *Second City* came out to California freed me and inspired me.”

Halpern said she made people laugh until the end. At one point, Ms. Harris turned to a hospice nurse and asked: “So what am I supposed to do — lay here until I die?”

Ms. Harris “was the innocent-looking ingenue with the unexpectedly rapier-like mind,” *Second City* co-founder Bernard Sahlins said in his book “Days and Nights at the Second City.”

On Dec. 16, 1959, she kicked off the opening number of *Second City*’s first show. It began “with Harris appearing in a spotlight, singing

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ED ASNER, on Barbara Harris

‘Everybody’s in the Know,’ ” according to *Second City*.

She and Alan Arkin later did a memorable sketch titled “Museum Piece.” The interplay between her straitlaced art lover and his guitar-strumming beatnik seemed to embody the culture clashes of the 1960s, Arkin said in the 2012 book “*Second City Unscripted: Revolution and Revelation at the World-Famous Comedy Theater*” by Mike Thomas.

Ms. Harris had “the same kind of vulnerability that Marilyn Monroe exhibited,” *Second City* artistic consultant Sheldon Patinkin told Thomas, “but without that added oh-I’m-so-sexy part.”

By 1963, when she’d moved on to Broadway, she was listed as one of 13 “Who’s Who

of American Women” alongside such figures as naturalist Rachel Carson, who exposed the dangers of pesticides, and Dr. Frances Kelsey, a government scientist who withstood corporate pressure and refused to approve the drug Thalidomide, later linked to major birth deformities.

Ms. Harris played a phony psychic in the 1976 Hitchcock movie “*Family Plot*.” She told the *Phoenix New Times* about Hitchcock’s frustration when another actress took a while to get into character:

“There was a scene in our film where Karen Black was acting, acting, acting — all that Lee Strasberg, human-struggle stuff,” Ms. Harris said. “And it took her so long to get those tears going, and Mr. Hitchcock turned to the cameraman and said, ‘We will just photograph the actors’ feet in this scene.’ ”

She portrayed the mom opposite daughter Jodie Foster in the 1977 body-switching comedy “*Freaky Friday*” and starred with Meryl Streep and Alan Alda in 1980’s “*The Seduction of Joe Tynan*.”

In 1986, *Sun-Times* critic Glenna Syse praised her “quiet but luminous” portrayal of the mother in Coppola’s “*Peggy Sue Got Married*.”

She also appeared in the 1988 Michael Caine-Steve Martin vehicle “*Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*” and, in her final film role, as the mother of hit man John Cusack in 1997’s “*Grosse Pointe Blank*.”

Once married to actor and improv pioneer Paul Sills, Ms. Harris taught acting after her move to Arizona.

She is to be cremated, and her remains will be brought to Markesan, Wisconsin, where her parents and grandparents are buried and where a service will be held in the near future, said her cousin Mary Lynn Fisher. She listed Ms. Harris’ other survivors as niece Allison Becker; nephew Reid Galbraith, and cousins Phyllis Spencer, David Knipfel, Jan Otterlei and Gretchen Lambert.

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