

A SENTINEL EXCLUSIVE

ELEANOR PARKER

Incognito, but Invincible

Eleanor Parker was one of the most distinctive actresses of the classic film noir era. The consummate professional, she combined overwhelming beauty with flawless acting, always playing the character, never herself. Nominated three times for the Best Actress Oscar for performances in *Caged* (1950), *Detective Story* (1951) and *Interrupted Melody* (1953), Parker proved to be incredibly versatile, turning in singular performances in every genre. An unlikely star who always shunned the limelight, the still-hale Parker, 88, discussed her career during a recent conversation with *Sentinel* senior editor Alan K. Rode.

AKR: When did you first break into the movies?

Parker: I signed with Warner Brothers on my birthday. I was 19 years old. And would you believe Jack L. Warner's wife, Ann, wanted to change my name to Ann Wiggins!

Well, I didn't know anything about the movies at that time, but shades of *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch* (1934)! I came from Cleveland with a background as a stage actress. I was determined to keep my name and the result was that Eleanor Powell and I kept getting mixed up by the movie fans. I would get complimented on my Chilean tap dance or something she had done, and Eleanor would be praised over some Warner Bros. movie that I appeared in. It became a joke between the two of us.

AKR: The arc of your career was upwardly mobile at Warners; initially appearing in bit parts, with your roles gradually becoming more worthy as you worked with some of the top directors on the lot such as Michael Curtiz in *Mission to Moscow* in 1943.

Parker: That was the studio system. It was a system; Warners brought you along and you learned the business. There is acting, which I knew, and then there is filmmaking—which you have to learn. As for Curtiz, I don't remember too much about him, my part in the film was quite small and what is it, nearly 70 years ago? What I remember about Mike Curtiz is that he had a reputation for being difficult with actors, but he was completely professional and polite with me. Also, he knew exactly what he was doing as a director. I had no problems.

AKR: Do you consider your breakthrough role to be *Pride of the Marines* opposite John Garfield?



Eleanor Parker in *Never Say Goodbye*

Parker: Correct. That was the big break. It was a great part and who wouldn't look good with John Garfield. He was absolutely wonderful. At first, he didn't seem like he was doing much and then you'd see the rushes. The camera loved John Garfield.

AKR: From your vantage point, how involved was Jack L. Warner in the day-to-day operations of the studio?

Parker: You couldn't get to Jack. Steve Trilling, his assistant was the person who ran the day-to-day operations at the studio. I got to know Jack and many of the other head guys from the studios from the poker games my husband (Bert Friedlob) had at our house.

AKR: I've read that many of the moguls, Goldwyn, Zanuck, the Schencks and

David O. Selznick were rabid poker players.

Parker: David Selznick was the worst poker player who ever lived! He was terrible; it was like taking money from a baby. It got so bad that my husband and the others would hide their cars so he wouldn't know where the game was, but he would go to everyone's house until he found out where they



Eleanor Parker as "Marie Allen" in *Caged*

were. Selznick had to sell the rights to *Gone with the Wind* because of his gambling losses. People could go bankrupt at those poker games. I remember one night when Lou Costello lost *everything*.

AKR: Were these games strictly stag affairs for the men?

Parker: Yes. I remember Joan Crawford's husband played. Joan came to the house and knitted the entire time.

AKR: Joan knitted?

Parker: She was excellent at it. I knit myself, but not like Joan. She could knit extremely fast and never dropped a stitch.

AKR: Getting back to movies, several of your Warner's films that I think highly of are *Between Two Worlds* (1944) and *The Woman in White* (1948) in which you co-starred with the great Sydney Greenstreet.

Parker: I loved Greenstreet! All of us, these young girls at the studio, would be sitting at his feet listening to his stories about acting and life; he was like a

mentor and a teacher. We were invited to his house and there was nothing risqué about it; just a delight. Sydney Greenstreet was just so dear, a wonderful man.

AKR: I want to ask you about *Caged*, a personal favorite. For the record, I think it was an injustice that you didn't win the Best Actress Oscar for your performance. The metamorphosis of your character, Marie Allen, in *Caged* is a tour de force.

Parker: Well, that is really nice of you to say that, thank you. Actually, I was relieved that I didn't win.

AKR: Relieved?

Parker: Yes. Judy Holliday certainly deserved to win, but I would have hated to get up in front of all those people and say something. It's something that I dread. I was nominated three times and it always seemed that it was never a weak year; that I was always up against stiff competition. I always knew that I wasn't going to win.

AKR: You were pitted against stellar

performances in your Oscar years. In 1950, there was Holliday, Bette Davis for *All About Eve*, Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Blvd.* The next year had Vivien Leigh winning for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but also Hepburn in *The African Queen*... and then 1955: Anna Magnani won for *The Rose Tattoo* along with Susan Hayward and Hepburn being nominated again. That's mighty tough competition.

Parker: Exactly. For me, though, it was always about the work, not fame. I also had four children and I would never sacrifice family for my career. I am also afraid now that certain people are mad at me about turning down repeated invitations to personal appearances and declining being filmed to discuss acting and my career. Just thinking about being filmed discussing in this or that movie makes me want to faint.

scared me to death in that one! As you know, it was pretty much an all-female cast in *Caged* and we just had fun! Betty Garde was great as well, but I have to tell you about Hope Emerson. She was the total opposite of that horrible matron she played in the film. She was fun-loving. She played the piano in between scenes and sang. She also took beautiful care of her Mother who would visit the set in a wheelchair; Hope was a darling. I suppose it's pretty boring to keep hearing how wonderful everybody is?

AKR: Not at all.

Parker: I loved most all the people I worked with, I really did. There was only one person that I didn't get along with during my career and it wasn't a conflict between the two of us. *Everyone* disliked this man. I won't mention his name...



Eleanor Parker pleads for mercy from warden Agnes Moorehead in *Caged*.

AKR: Why is that?

Parker: It's just the way I am. I've never been one to toot my own horn and I don't like public appearances that are about me. Again, for me, it was the work.

AKR: Returning to *Caged*... Was that your actual hair that Hope Emerson sheared off in that devastating scene?

Parker: No, it wasn't. The studio wanted me to say that it was, for the publicity. I absolutely refused to lie. I will *not* lie, perhaps a white lie to spare someone's feelings, but I don't play games with the truth. I told Warner Bros: "Why don't you tell the truth about the wonderful make-up work with the wigs that created the illusion that my hair was sheared off?" I absolutely adored making *Caged*. It was a great part, a compelling story and what a wonderful time we had! Agnes Moorehead was terrific; I was in *The Woman in White* with her and she

AKR: Oh, come on, dish a bit.

Parker: Well, I guess it doesn't matter because he's dead now. In fact, all of these people are gone now, aren't they? It was Stewart Granger in *Scaramouche*.

AKR: Wasn't he married to Jean Simmons at the time?

Parker: Yes. Sadly, Jean is gone now too. Stewart Granger was a dreadful person, rude... just awful. Just being in his presence was bad. I thought at one point the crew was going to kill him. Jean visited him on the set and would leave his dressing room in tears. He humiliated her. It was terrible. All of the dueling scenes in *Scaramouche* were wonderful though. I'll give Granger credit for that. He didn't know how to do any of that, but worked hard and learned. Mel Ferrer, his counterpart in the movie, was extremely adept at the swordplay, but was a gentleman. He could have taken advantage and upstaged Granger, the star, but he never did.





With Kirk Douglas in *Detective Story*

AKR: What about *Detective Story* with Kirk Douglas?

Parker: Kirk was fine and the director, William Wyler, he left it up to me to play the part. Do you know the playwright of *Detective Story*... what was his name?

AKR: Sidney Kingsley.

Parker: Yes. Well, he wrote me this lovely letter saying that my portrayal of Mary McLeod in *Detective Story* was the first time that the part had been played correctly, exactly how he had originally intended.

AKR: What was it like working with William Wyler? Did he subject the company to the endless number of takes that he became so noted for?

Parker: He didn't do that because he couldn't. Wyler was told going in that the studio did not have the budget to accommodate his usual method of a lot of takes so he worked around that. He used little tricks where the cast rehearsed "off the record" so to speak—after all, it was a play, and so there was a minimum number of takes on the set, three, and four or five and that was it. He adapted to the situation; the studios were starting to take a beating from television around that time and the budget to indulge Wyler just wasn't there.

AKR: I almost forgot to ask about *Chained Lighting* (1950) and Humphrey Bogart.

Parker: I was stuck playing this lousy part with Bogart, who was delightful, but he knew it was a stinker too. He was playing a jet test pilot and was too old for that type of part. I had no agent at the time and was still under contract at Warner's so I had to do it. It was a bad picture, but Bogart was the ultimate professional. I eventually ended up leaving Warner's and split my time between Paramount and MGM.

AKR: I thought one of your most distinctive roles was *The Man with a Golden Arm* (1955). The picture had ample star power with Frank Sinatra and Kim Novak, but your turn as Sinatra's neurotic wife really held the film together.

Parker: *Golden Arm* was a dream part. Everyone in it was wonderful, marvelous. I knew Frank socially before the movie. He was great in it, right in there working hard. Later on, when we made that film with Frank Capra, what was it?

AKR: *A Hole in the Head* (1959)

Parker: That's right. That picture was a different story. Frank was always running off in an airplane with his "boys," going somewhere. He was always late, not showing up, not wanting to do more than a few takes. Frank was the executive producer as well as the star, he didn't show up for work and it was disruptive. It drove Capra mad. I rehearsed a lot of my scenes with Capra and spent a great deal of time just sitting around the hotel. Of course I couldn't lie in the sun and get tanned because of the picture.



With Humphrey Bogart in the regrettable *Chained Lighting*

AKR: How did you get on with Otto Preminger on *Golden Arm*?

Parker: He liked me and we got on fine. I was right for the part and was always prepared. Otto could be awful with people who didn't know their stuff or weren't right for the part somehow. I remember there was someone who didn't open a door properly... He could be merciless.

AKR: Many film buffs remember you from *The Naked Jungle* with Charlton Heston and those pesky army ants... and you're out in the South American jungle in a gown and a piano!

Parker: That's Hollywood for you. The studio went down to South America and shot some of the second unit footage of the jungle—mostly long shots—but all of the scenes with the actors on the plantation and in the "jungle" were filmed at Paramount. Do you know Chuck Heston was asked during the film if I was a temperamental actress? He said, "Temperamental? How about more like professional!" This was one of his early movies and he was very nice to work with... There I go again!

AKR: *Interrupted Melody* (1955) was another high point and your third Oscar nomination.

Parker: *Interrupted Melody* is my favorite picture. It was a wonderful experience. I played Marjorie Lawrence and I had to learn opera. I worked incredibly hard. We couldn't use Marjorie Lawrence's voice because she had lost her upper register. Eileen Farrell, who plays a small part in the film, did the singing. She had the most incredible voice and could sing *anything*, the blues, just fantastic. Do you know I gave the final OK to Glenn Ford for his part in *Interrupted Melody*? His career had gone downhill somewhat—just cowboy movies—but he held out and insisted on getting top billing. I wanted to do what was right for the pic-



ture, so I said let him have the top billing. Glenn was kind of a difficult man, but he was right for the picture and a very fine actor.

AKR: From Glenn Ford to Robert Mitchum in *Home from the Hill* (1960).

Parker: I loved Bob. He was wonderful. Are you familiar with that sleepy, laid back quality that Mitchum had?

AKR: Of course—that was Mitchum.

Parker: I think it was because he was always a little drunk, a little high. Now, I never actually saw him take a drink, but we were filming at this college down in Mississippi—Ole Miss—and the town was dry, or at least it was very hard to get booze. Someone in the company would go on liquor runs for Mitchum and some of the others over in the next county.

AKR: What was your most difficult experience making a film?

Parker: *The Valley of the Kings*, filmed in Egypt, was simply a dreadful nightmare. We had a terrible producer who made no accommodations for the company or crew on location. We were in Egypt, out in the desert filming, with no sanitary facilities, no dressing rooms to speak of, it was unbelievable. Robert Taylor and I had to use the bathrooms with the locals, hiding behind coats. Additionally, the director (Robert Pirosh) had no idea what he was doing; the head cameraman (Robert Surtees) was directing the film. Then the crew wasn't getting paid and our great cameraman told them that we were all going out on strike until everyone got paid. Believe me, the money showed up. I ended up having a view of desert from my hotel room in Cairo when we weren't filming. Come to think of it, it was probably like Sarah Palin saying that she had a view of Russia from Alaska. ■