

Cabaret Legend Claiborne Cary Enters Immortality at California Home, March 21, 2010

By: Andrew Martin

Claiborne Cary was one of those rare entertainers so gifted as both a vocalist and comedienne, and such a bundle of energy, that her passing seems not only shocking but incomprehensible. However, after fighting ill health for nearly three years at her home in Southern California, she lost the battle on the morning of March 21st. That it would occur on the first day of Spring seems somehow appropriate, since she was by all accounts, and to all who knew her, a rare and colorful blossom in the glorious garden of theatre, television and most certainly, cabaret.

Fiercely private regarding her date of birth and place of same, Cary was born on an unspecified date in Iowa; what is known, however, is that it was most likely in Des Moines (where her older sister, the great actress Cloris Leachman, was born in 1926), and that it was likely in the early-to-mid 1930s, for she made her Broadway debut in her early twenties as a dancer in the 1957 hit *New Girl In Town*, starring Gwen Verdon and Thelma Ritter, and choreographed by Bob Fosse. In 1960, she was given a strong role in the regrettably short-lived musical *Beg, Borrow or Steal* with Eddie Bracken and Howard DaSilva, and a year later, starred Off-Broadway in the musical *Smiling The Boy Fell Dead*, which not only featured lyrics by a then-unknown Sheldon Harnick, but cast her with such great character talents as Phil Leeds, Gino Conforti and Dodo Denney. The end of the year found her Off-Broadway once again, in *All Kinds of Giants*, with book and lyrics by Tom Whedon. However, it was during this time that artistic providence smiled upon Claiborne Cary, when she fell naturally into a cluster of talent at the Duplex, governed with a rod of firm, yet feminine, iron by the irrepressible Jan Wallman.

For the next three seasons, Cary was always a sure-fire draw at the club and quickly garnered a very large and impressive following. It's interesting to note that during this period, she built up a close friendship with then-budding comedian Joan Rivers, and is even acknowledged in Rivers' first memoir, *Enter Talking*. This, however, would change during the advent of the British Invasion led by The Beatles in 1964, in which such art forms as cabaret were firmly pushed out of the limelight and replaced by rock and pop. Undaunted, Cary soldiered on, quickly becoming a familiar face on all manner of television commercials for the remainder of the decade, when not appearing on club stages at every opportunity, and made her dramatic debut on television in an uncredited role in 1971's *The Sporting Club*, with a juicier role a year later as a nurse on *Young Dr. Kildare*. By the mid-1970s, aside from her continued work in cabaret (notably the first of several highly-lauded turns at The Ballroom), she landed cameo roles in such made-for-TV movies as *Crime Club* and *Hitchhike!*

The 1980s would be Cary's most gilded decade yet, and the glitter deservedly continued into the 1990s. A bonafide cabaret star at this point, she also understudied for both Sandy Dennis and Hope Lange in the marginally-successful Broadway comedy *The Supporting Cast* in 1981, after assuming roles in the TV movies *Doctor Franken* and *Nurse*. Then, when cabaret experienced its explosion back into popular culture in New York, Cary was right back where she belonged and she stayed, headlining at every major club on both coasts, releasing her live CD *Miss Claiborne Cary*, winning a Bistro Award in 1987, and the MAC Award for Outstanding Female Vocalist in 1993. What set her apart, and rose her to a unique level, was that she was equally at home with a ballad like "Jenny-Rebecca," a standard like "At Long Last Love," or such comedic tunes as "Let's Eat Home" by Dave Frishberg, and the continually-praised gem "Between Men," by Francesca Blumenthal. There was no doubt that writers such as John Wilson and Stephen Holden, both of the *New York Times*, were completely justified when shouting her praises to the skies. And it was a grateful audience that not only listened, but clamored to the clubs to find out

for themselves. She made her final television appearances in 1995 and 1996, first as a judge on *Law & Order*, and then on the situation comedy *Boston Common*.

Her personal life was equally eclectic, particularly her oft-stormy relationship with older sister Cloris Leachman, and the fact that the two would occasionally employ middle-sister Mary to run interference for them during a customary sibling squabble. However, Cary always professed deep love for her older sister, and nothing but pride in Leachman's accomplishments, and when the two did get along, they were an army unconquerable. She also considered cooking a favorite pastime, and adored museums. Most interesting of all is that the role of Sarah in Stephen Sondheim's *Company*, created brilliantly by Barbara Barrie, was and still is said to have been based on Cary.

At the time of this writing, funeral arrangements and memorial services have not been announced; however, any additions to this obituary will be brought forth when information is available. Suffice to say, Claiborne Cary was a one-of-a-kind, who leaves behind a rich legacy of top-notch entertainment in all matter of media and will be sorely missed by her legions of fans.