

# American MASTERS

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## press information



PBS

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*Q&A With Carol Burnett*

### AMERICAN MASTERS Carol Burnett: A Woman of Character

*In the interview below, the versatile performer provides her own take on an award-winning career that began in New York City in the 1950s. **AMERICAN MASTERS Carol Burnett: A Woman of Character** premieres Monday, November 5 at 9 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings).*

**Q: What challenges did you face starting out?**

**A:** I wanted to be on Broadway, but in musical comedy. Aside from being cast in *Once Upon a Mattress*, which was a comedic role but also a great singing role, I was asked to be a regular performer, one of the second bananas as they say, on *The Garry Moore Show*. I kept thinking, "I'm not really television, I really want to be Broadway." But the television became more fun for me because we still did music and we still had comedic sketches, with the advantage that it changed every week. So I was able to learn how to do different characters, and to be different people, as opposed to being the same person on a sitcom every week, or the same person eight shows a week on Broadway. This was like doing a little Broadway revue every single week, and that became what I liked the most because it gave me, as we say, variety.

**Q: Tell us about your early days in New York City and doing summer stock.**

**A:** I got there in August of '54, and the following year I got a 10-week commitment for summer stock, in the summer of '55, at a place in the Adirondacks called Green Mansions. There was a lot of training. In fact, some of the people who were starting out then too, were also in this same summer stock group. Sheldon Harnick, who later went on to write *Fiddler on the Roof*, Charles Strouse and Lee Adams, who went on to write *Bye, Bye Birdie*, Bernie West, the comic, and Mickey Ross, who was the director, went on to produce *All in the Family*. We did an original musical comedy revue every week on a Friday and a Saturday. We would do a variety show, where we would do our own acts, on Sunday. On Tuesdays we would do a play, and on Thursdays we would do an operetta. Sometimes you were in all of them. And you had to learn that much in a week. It was fabulous training. The following year, I went to another summer stock place in the Poconos called Tamament, where Arte Johnson and I were the comics, along with Bernie West. The year before I got there, they wrote *Once Upon a Mattress* at Tamament.

In '57, I got a job at the Blue Angel nightclub, and a gentleman named Ken Welch wrote all my material for me. I lived at a place called the Rehearsal Club that was actually the basis for a play called *Stage Door*. It was a brownstone that housed about 25 young ladies interested in the theater. It was all on the up and up, and run like a tight ship. The gentleman callers couldn't go above the parlor. And every one of us in the club had to be actively pursuing a career in the theater because the rent was subsidized by a lot of wealthy New York socialites. They only charged us \$18 a week room and board. I got a part-time job with one of my roommates at a ladies tea room called Susan Palmer's Tea Room. My roommate Joyce and I split the tips. We got tips and food. But we made around \$30

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each a week, which left us 12 bucks after rent to squander.

**Q: What do you think it was about you that caught the eye of producers on *The Garry Moore Show*? What set you apart?**

**A:** I had a good loud voice and I wasn't afraid to be goofy or zany. Those were the titles they used to give us – that goofy girl or that zany girl. I was encouraged by Garry Moore to just go for everything. I had been on his morning show, where he would introduce new young talent like me and Jonathan Winters and Steve Lawrence. Then he got a night-time variety show on Tuesdays and this one Sunday they called me and said that the guest, Martha Raye, who was a brilliant comedian, had terrible bronchitis, and could I come over immediately and learn the show for Tuesday night? I lived just a block from the studio and I ran over there and learned the show and it was live on Tuesday night. Afterwards, Garry, during the bows, called me out and explained to the audience that I had just learned all of this. The audience was very nice. Martha Raye sent me flowers backstage. The next week I got a call asking if I wanted to be on every week. Then I got into *Once Upon a Mattress* in May of '59, and when Garry's show came back in the fall of '59, they were taping on Fridays, which then enabled me to double. So I did Garry's show every week, and eight shows of *Once Upon a Mattress* every week.

**Q: What was it like the very first time you saw yourself on television?**

**A:** Oh, Lord. Who's that big mouth? It was a little scary, but there weren't VCRs then or anything so I really seldom saw myself.

**Q: Over the years, you've mastered comedy and drama, you've been on stage and screen. You're also an accomplished singer. What's your favorite?**

**A:** My favorite is doing the television show, as a variety show, every week. If the show wasn't that great one week, we could always come back and apologize, you know?

**Q: Your ensemble of players on *The Carol Burnett Show* was one of the greatest ever. How did they earn that reputation?**

**A:** Ours was different because each one of our people had to be different people every week. They weren't playing the same character all the time. We had to be flexible and versatile. And that was always the most challenging and the most fun. None of us ever played to the camera that much. We always played to the studio audience because we figured if we got a laugh out of them, we'd be getting a laugh out of the folks at home. We did very few pick ups, or retakes. In 11 years I don't think we did more than 12. We just let it go, because then it had the spontaneity and the danger of being a live show.

**Q: Over the years you created so many different characters. Which one did you enjoy playing the best?**

**A:** I loved it whenever we had a "Family" to do. Eunice and Mama and Ed, we called them the Family, and they were just so highly dysfunctional and pitiful. I loved the writing, because it was funny, yet there were no jokes per se. It was all character driven, so that was a lot of fun to do, to walk that fine line, because sometimes they were kind of sad, like when poor Eunice was gonged on *The Gong Show*. We got a lot of mail on that, from people upset for poor Eunice. And I always loved it when we did the movie take-offs. You know, golly, to go out there and be Joan Crawford, or Bette Davis, or Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, and to do our take-offs on the movies and *Gone With the Wind*. And I also enjoyed being with Tim Conway, when we did the dumb secretary, Mrs. Wiggins, and Mister Tudball. But then that was our show.

**Q: How did your childhood help shape your comedy?**

**A:** We were on relief. And my grandmother would save her pennies so that we could go to the movies. That was our respite. I was raised in that fantasy world of the '40s, where in the movies everything came out okay. There was no cynicism in the movies. The bad guys got it in the end, and the good people always survived, and there was music. If there was violence, it wasn't as graphic as it is now. I actually came away with a Mickey Rooney-Judy Garland mentality, that if you had a show in a barn, you could put it on, and then it would wind up on Broadway. There was no cynicism. Yeah, it was rough at home, but I knew I was loved. We didn't have money and there were a lot of arguments between my mother and my grandmother about drinking and stuff. I would kind of disappear behind a little shade and I would draw and at one point I thought I'd be a cartoonist and illustrate fairy tale books. But then I'd go to the movies and we'd come home and my best girlfriend and I, Ilomay, we'd act out the movies we saw. We'd pretend to be Betty Grable and sing and act out the movies with the neighborhood kids.

**Q: When did you discover your singing voice?**

**A:** On the good days, my mother would haul out the ukulele and we'd sit around the kitchen table – it was a cardboard table with a linoleum top – and sing. My grandmother played the piano, although we didn't have a piano then, but she was a trained musician, so mama would play the uke and then we would sing. I'd take the lead and Nanny would take the third and Mama would sing the second or fifth. We'd sing all the popular songs of the day. We were a pretty good little trio and I could carry a tune.

**Q: You were one of the first female hosts of your own TV show, and many of the female characters you created were as strong as they were funny. Back then, did you consider yourself a feminist?**

**A:** I really didn't at the time, until the ERA came about. And the person who got me very interested in the ERA was Alan Alda. He's a feminist, and he took my husband and me out to dinner one night and he started talking about the ERA and what it was about. I was rather apolitical then but I said, "Well, that's not right. Women should be equal in the eyes of the law." So I got on the bandwagon. With our show, as we got a little more sophisticated, I wouldn't do negative jokes about women, or men, really. You know, we could do some funny put downs in character, but I wouldn't do it for real.

**Q: Do you think entertainers should be political?**

**A:** I think they can be anything they want to be. After all, we do pay taxes. We never got political on our show that much at all. We just wanted to be funny and not make a lot of statements. We never preached. I did it as myself, for the ERA.

**Q: Which female comedians do you enjoy watching today?**

**A:** Recently, this past year, I caught Ellen DeGeneres in her one-woman show on HBO. She blew me away. There was no gratuitous blue material in there. And it was all fall-down funny. She would pick on the foibles of you as a human being, the real crazy things you do, and I thought it was brilliant. I just loved her. The same thing with Lily Tomlin, when she did her one-woman show. I couldn't imagine being able to do all of that in an hour and a half. It was just fantastic. As far as sitcoms go, I thought Jenna Elfman in *Dharma and Greg* was a wonderful physical comedienne who had great timing.

**Q: What do you think of today's television landscape?**

**A:** There are these are reality shows where they're themselves. They come out and they dance

and they're great. But where's the variety? Where's the sketch? Where's the goofball like Tim who comes out and cracks everybody up? It's a matter of laughing, isn't it? When we were doing our show, my God, there were several variety shows. There was *Laugh-In*, there was Flip Wilson, Sonny and Cher, the Smothers Brothers, Glen Campbell, Jim Nabors, Dean Martin. There would be times where you were at home and laugh out loud.

**Q: Why do you think it changed, and do you think variety shows will ever come back?**

**A:** I think it changed because it might have gotten too expensive. Our show couldn't be done today, not the way we did it. The prices are just too high. We had a live, 28-piece orchestra. Wow! And those costumes every week. Twelve dancers, two guest stars, and all the different sketches. It was quite a production. I don't think they could do it today. You'd have maybe six pieces in the orchestra and a synthesizer. And one chorus girl! It would only come back if there was somebody that the networks were after, and they would have to really love that person to give them that kind of show.

**Q: After your show ended, you could have taken the money and retired. But you went on to play dramatic roles, write a memoir, and a Broadway play. Your career has continued into your 70s. Where do you find the energy?**

**A:** Well, I'm not that driven any more. I only do stuff that I want to do. Before, if I wasn't working, I'd worry that I'd never work again. Which is kind of a disease we all have when we're younger. But now I'm writing again, I'm doing a book of anecdotes, of answers to questions that I get when I do my one-woman show like "What's your most embarrassing moment? What was Tim Conway really like? How did you know Lucy?" The embarrassing moments, stories about the family, my kids when they were little, that are funny. It's fun to write. I just finished doing the voice-over animation for *Horton Hears a Who*, from the Dr. Seuss book. Jim Carrey's playing Horton, Steve Carell is playing the mayor of Whoville and I'm the evil kangaroo. That opens in March.

**Q: Is it fun, sometimes, to play the bad guy?**

**A:** Oh, I love it. Especially if it's funny. Even if it's not. I'm hooked on Glenn Close in *Damages*. She's so brilliant and I just love to watch her, and that's not a very sweet person.

**Q: What do you tell young performers who ask for your advice?**

**A:** Sometimes I get letters, and if they leave me their phone number, I'll call them because it's easier than writing them back. A couple of little girls who are maybe 12 years old will write me a letter and say, "I want to be the second Carol Burnett." So I'll call them and I'll say, "No, you don't. You want to be the first Mary Jane Smith, because that's who you are. There will never be another Mary Jane Smith. You're the only one. So why would you want to be some second person? You just develop yourself and take classes in school and if there's community theater, try out for that. And if you're turned down, don't ever take it personally, because it could just be that you weren't the type they were looking for. But just keep on trying, because if you have the fire in the belly, you're going to make it." I never want to rain on anybody's parade and say maybe you're not talented enough. I don't know that. I was pissed on a few times, you know? But I always felt there was something that I could do that would see me through.

**Q: If you had your career to do over again, is there anything you would do differently?**

**A:** No. It all happened the way it was supposed to. I wouldn't change anything. I had such a great run. It's not like I turned down *My Fair Lady*. I never regretted turning down anything, I never regretted losing a job because I always felt something else was out there. In fact, when I

was in New York in '59, I was raising my kid sister, I had done Garry and I almost had the lead in a revival of Babes in Arms. They kept calling me back to sing a couple of songs, and it was like I had the part. The director wanted me, but then they decided they wanted to go with a name. I cried a little when I got the word. And my kid sister said, "But Sissy, you always say, like Pollyanna, one door closes, another opens." I said, "You're right." I dried my eyes and the phone rang and it was to come down and audition for George Abbott in *Once Upon a Mattress*. *Babes in Arms* never did open on Broadway. When I left UCLA, my classmates said, "What are you going to do when you get to New York, girl?" I said, "I'm going to be in a Broadway show, and the first Broadway show I'm going to be in will be directed by George Abbott." I always held that in the back of my mind. It makes you kind of wonder.

**Q: What does it mean to you to be included in the American Masters library?**

**A:** I was very flattered. I had seen a few of them and I'd loved the one that they had done with Bob Newhart. I could see that it's a class act, I could see the care and research that they put into everything. I saw the one they did recently with Tony Bennett, which was great. And I thought, what a nice living scrapbook to have.

**Q: Is there a question you always wished you'd be asked in an interview that you'd like to answer now?**

**A:** I think I've been asked everything in the world. There was one recently, in Texas, that I'd never been asked and I didn't know how in the world I was going to answer it. A woman in the balcony said, "If you could be a member of the opposite sex for 24 hours and then come back and be yourself, who would you be and what would you do?" I thought, "I'm stuck, I have no idea. Would I want to be George Clooney or the cute one with the dimple?" And I thought, okay, dear God, I'm going to open my mouth and just whatever comes out, comes out. And I said, "I'd be Osama bin Laden, and I'd kill myself." The place exploded.

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