

American MASTERS

thirteen
WNET NEW YORK

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press information



AMERICAN MASTERS
is produced for PBS
by Thirteen/WNET
New York

THIRTEEN/WNET NEW YORK'S *AMERICAN MASTERS* PROFILES THE COMEDY QUEEN WHO "OWNED" SATURDAY NIGHT TV – AND CAPTURED THE HEARTS OF MILLIONS – WITH *CAROL BURNETT: A WOMAN OF CHARACTER*, PREMIERING NOVEMBER 5 ON PBS

Documentary On The Enduring Star Of Stage And Screen Whose Public Triumphs And Private Challenges Endearred Generations Of Viewers

Features New Audience Q&A, Clips From *The Garry Moore* And *The Carol Burnett Shows*, And Interviews With Julie Andrews, Tim Conway, Harvey Korman, And Tracey Ullman

Just about any American watching TV past 10 p.m. between 1967 and 1978 has a favorite moment from *The Carol Burnett Show*: "Starlet" descending the Tara staircase, Mrs. Wiggins fiddling with the intercom, Eunice bickering, Mama nagging, and any number of Tarzan yells.

By brilliantly playing with stereotypes of glamorous women, dumb broads and goofy girls, Carol Burnett smashed some of the most limiting female images and created an empowering new one: the woman who is as feminine and likable as she is talented and powerful, and whose message isn't any more radical than a simple invitation to laugh. Her on-stage joyfulness and fearlessness remain an inspiration to performers such as Tracey Ullman, Ellen DeGeneres, Kristin Chenoweth, and Jenna Elfman.

This fall, *AMERICAN MASTERS* pays tribute to the entertainer who transformed herself into a one-woman army of comedic characters and seduced countless Saturday night friends to fall in love with her finest character of all: Carol Burnett.

AMERICAN MASTERS Carol Burnett: A Woman of Character premieres Monday.

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November 5 at 9 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). The film is directed by Kyra Thompson, who also directed the award-winning *AMERICAN MASTERS Bob Newhart: Unbuttoned*. Susan Lacy is the creator and executive producer of *AMERICAN MASTERS*, a five-time winner of the Emmy Award for Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series and recipient of eight Peabody Awards.

“She played the consummate clown, whether in frumpy shift or sparkling evening gown and, through force of will and talent, forged a bond with her audience – we believed she was always ‘our’ Carol Burnett,” says Lacy. “We’re so happy to showcase her spectacular talents and to honor her as an American Master.”

Director Thompson frames the 90-minute film with one of Burnett’s signature devices: the audience Q&A that faithfully opened her weekly show (which won 25 Emmys). The questions, and Burnett’s humorous and telling improvised responses, provide the spine for the story of her life and career. Interviews with those who knew her best reveal the personal side of the public personae.

“There is a particularly poignant, particularly American story in the evolution of a talented and driven young woman who sang, danced and charmed her way into the hearts of a vast, broad audience,” says Thompson.

Burnett is best known for her long-running comedy variety show on CBS, but she was also a regular attraction on stage, television and, later in her career, films. *A Woman of Character* includes clips from a wide variety of sources that testify to Burnett’s breadth as a singer, actor and comedienne. Through cast mates and colleagues, the film also addresses the Chaplin-esque star’s impact on television, comedy and women’s roles in the media.

“Carol Burnett is a comic master,” says Tracey Ullman. “I studied her work when I first came to the U.S. She can play anyone. I don’t know where it comes from.”

As her beloved grandmother (her “Nanny”) once told Burnett, “Comedy is a tragedy plus

time.” The child of divorced, alcoholic parents, Burnett was raised in a less-than-glamorous environment by her eccentric grandmother. She describes her neighborhood as “a block north of Hollywood Boulevard, but a million miles from Hollywood.” She discovered a sense of self by pretending to be others, and through the movies she attended with Nanny eight times a week.

In her early 20s, Burnett went to New York, where she quickly proved she had star power, a great voice and strong comedic instincts. Appearances on *The Garry Moore Show*, *The Tonight Show* and *The Ed Sullivan Show* led, in 1959, to a starring role on the off-Broadway (and soon Broadway) hit *Once Upon a Mattress*.

An Emmy Award-winning concert special with Julie Andrews in 1962 drew critical acclaim and in 1967 Burnett was ready for her close-up with *The Carol Burnett Show*, which offered high-quality, original sketch material performed by one of the tightest, most talented comic ensembles ever to grace the small screen.

When the show moved to Saturday nights, it became a ratings powerhouse, one of the few series that appealed to young and old alike. As other variety programs were being cancelled, Burnett’s thrived, pushing the envelope just enough to keep things interesting. Burnett’s deep connection to her hilarious characters gave the sketches dimension.

As the ’70s wore on, Burnett also became active in the feminist movement and often indirectly began to bring that sensibility into sketches.

After more than 280 episodes, Burnett decided to quit while she was ahead. On March 17, 1978, she walked onto the stage in her charwoman costume and delivered a moving speech about her colleagues, her years on the series and her reasons for ending it.

“This is an evening of mixed emotions for me,” she told her audience. “It’s a lot classier to leave before you’re asked to...Now is the time to put the show to bed.”

As she did at the end of every program, Burnett sang the traditional closing song “I’m So Glad We Had This Time Together,” tugged on her ear (a gesture originally meant as a greeting for

her grandmother), and closed a chapter in TV history.

But Burnett's story was by no means at an end. She earned raves – and high ratings – for her dramatic turn in *Friendly Fire* as the mother of a soldier killed in Vietnam. She went on *The Dinah Shore Show* to discuss her daughter's battle with drug addiction and later successfully sued the *National Enquirer* for writing that she got into a row with Henry Kissinger in a Washington, D.C. restaurant. She donated the settlement from the suit to two universities to underwrite studies on ethics in journalism.

Several successful feature films (including *The Front Page*, *Pete 'N Tillie*, *Annie*) showcased Burnett's diversity, and enduring appeal. She also confronted her past and wrote a best-selling memoir. As she was working with her daughter, Carrie Hamilton, to develop the book into a play, Hamilton died of cancer. *Hollywood Arms* debuted on Broadway October 31, 2002.

AMERICAN MASTERS Carol Burnett: A Woman of Character is directed by Kyra Thompson. Susan Lacy is the creator and executive producer of *AMERICAN MASTERS*.

To take *AMERICAN MASTERS* beyond the television broadcast and further explore the themes, stories, and personalities of masters past and present, the companion Web site (www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters), created by Thirteen/WNET New York, offers interviews, essays, photographs, outtakes, and other resources.

AMERICAN MASTERS is produced for PBS by Thirteen/WNET New York. This acclaimed series, now celebrating its 21st season, has become a cultural legacy in its own right. The *AMERICAN MASTERS* film library is one of the most highly honored in television history with profiles of more than 140 artistic giants. In addition to eight Peabodys, an Oscar, two duPont-Columbias and two Grammys, *AMERICAN MASTERS* has won 19 Emmys, including Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series for 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2004.

Corporate funding for *Carol Burnett: A Woman of Character* is provided by Hallmark. *AMERICAN MASTERS* is made possible by the support of the National Endowment for the Arts

and by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Additional funding for *AMERICAN MASTERS* is provided by Rosalind P. Walter, The Blanche & Irving Laurie Foundation, Jack Rudin, The Marilyn M. Simpson Charitable Lead Trusts, The André and Elizabeth Kertész Foundation, and public television viewers. More information about *AMERICAN MASTERS* can be found at: www.thirteen.org.

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