



Once
Unstoppable
Unforgettable

DEBBIE REYNOLDS
51st Life Achievement Honoree

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ALBERTO E. RODRIGUEZ/GATTY IMAGES

Ask film buffs what their favorite Debbie Reynolds role is and responses will run the gamut of her 65-plus year acting career. From spunky Kathy Selden in *Singin' in the Rain* to love-struck Tammy, and from sassy Bobbi Adler on *Will & Grace* to that unsinkable Molly Brown, Reynolds' roles are beloved and in a class of their own. With those famous roles have come many honors and awards and, in January, Reynolds will be adding one more to the mantle as she is honored with the 51st SAG Life Achievement Award. The award will be presented on Jan. 25 during the 21st annual Screen Actors Guild Awards® telecast.

"She is a tremendously talented performer with a diverse body of screen and stage work, live performances and several hit records," SAG-AFTRA President Ken Howard said of Reynolds' artistry. "Her generous spirit and unforgettable performances have entertained audiences across the globe, moving us all from laughter to tears and back again."

With more than 50 motion pictures, two Broadway shows, two television series and dozens of television, cabaret and concert appearances, the 82-year-old Reynolds really has done it all.

"If you stay at home in a closet, nothing will happen to you and you won't get hurt," Reynolds told *The Daily Mail* in 1995. "But you also won't experience anything about life. You have to expose yourself to life and everything there is in life."

And that's exactly what she did.

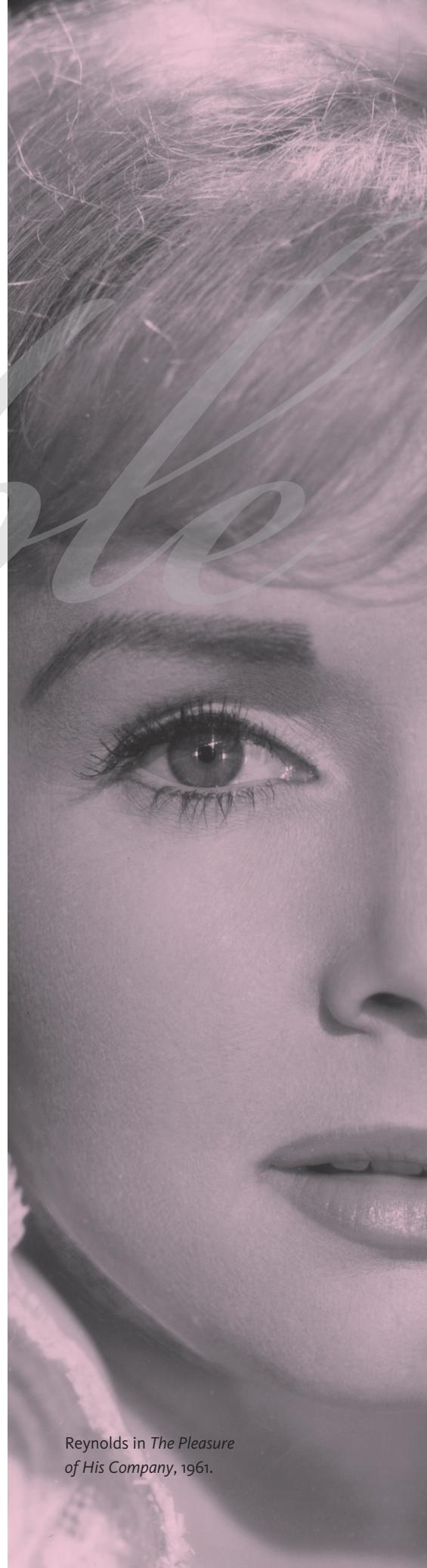
Born Mary Frances Reynolds in El Paso, Texas, Reynolds and her family moved to Burbank in 1939. As a young

teen, she performed in the Burbank Youth Orchestra, high school plays and became Miss Burbank at age 16 — which started the wheels turning in her career. Talent scouts from Warner Bros. and MGM saw the young Miss Burbank and flipped a coin to see who would give her a screen test. Warner Bros. won, and under the guidance of Jack Warner himself she gained a studio contract and a new name.

Reynolds made her screen debut as June Haver's younger sister in the 1950 musical *The Daughter of Rosie O'Grady*. A successful audition at MGM landed her the role of the "Boop-Boop-A-Doop" girl Helen Kane in the biopic *Three Little Words* and a contract at the studio, known for its spectacular musicals. Her breakout role was in one of the greatest musicals of all time, *Singin' in the Rain*, starring opposite Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor. Reynolds worked for three months, eight hours a day, with multiple teachers to develop the dancing skills needed for the film.

For the next 10 years, Reynolds made more than 25 films, including *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, which garnered her an Academy Award nomination; *How the West Was Won*; and *Tammy and the Bachelor*, which included the Oscar-nominated title song *Tammy*, a No. 1 smash hit that earned Reynolds a gold record. Over the course of her career, Reynolds has sung with Frank Sinatra, danced with Fred Astaire and starred opposite Tony Curtis, Walter Matthau, Dick Van Dyke, Jason Robards and James Garner, to name just a few.

But musicals were not Reynolds' only forte. In 1956, her first non-musical dramatic role was as a bride-to-be in *The Catered Affair*, starring Bette Davis and Ernest Borgnine. The performance earned her a Best Supporting Actress Award from the National Board of Review. And, 40 years later, Reynolds' dramatic chops in Albert Brooks' *Mother* landed her a Golden Globe nomination, a Golden Satellite Award and an Online Film & Television Award nomination. *Mother* was just one of many later roles in which Reynolds has played a matriarch. On television's *Will & Grace*, she played Bobbi Adler, a character she has described as one of her favorites; Katherine Heigl's grandmother in 2012's *One for the Money*; and in 2013, Liberace's mother Frances in the award-winning



Reynolds in *The Pleasure of His Company*, 1961.



RON GALELLA, LTD./WIREIMAGE

Reynolds and Donald O'Connor at The Thalians gala, 1991.

The Philanthropist

In 1955, a group of performers felt frustrated by the widely held perception of young Hollywood stars as partiers and philanderers. They set out to cultivate a new, more accurate perception of young actors, and The Thalians were born. Named after the Greek muse of comedy, Thalia, the organization, which is both social and charitable in nature, raises funds for mental health programs.

Among the group's founders is Debbie Reynolds, who continues to be the face of the organization. She has spent decades alternating between that role and chair of the board with best friend Ruta Lee (the two perform an annual duet at the organization's gala). While Reynolds currently holds the title of president emeritus, she has been deeply involved in the organization for decades, raising funds and presiding over The Thalians' annual gala.

In its nearly 60 years, The Thalians have donated millions to mental health programs, such as The Thalians Mental Health Center at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and to UCLA's Operation MEND, which helps returning soldiers with severe facial injuries get reconstructive surgery and mental health care.

HBO telefilm *Behind the Candelabra*. Off screen, Reynolds fulfilled a personal role as mother to actor and author Carrie Fisher and producer Todd Fisher.

Reynolds expanded her film and television career to the stage as well. From her live performances in Vegas — including at the Debbie Reynolds Hotel & Casino, which she owned and operated from 1993 to 1998 — to Broadway, starring in such hits as *Irene*, *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Woman of the Year*, as well as a revival of *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*.

"The film work dried up in the '70s and I had to make a living, so I went back to the stage," Reynolds told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1997. "Films were changing: they were making very dramatic movies with a lot of nudity I didn't care for. I was in my 30s and everybody was out when the studio system crashed. Some of the men, like Kirk Douglas, went into producing their own films, but we didn't know how to do that. The women sat at home and waited for their agents to call, and they didn't."

But perhaps Reynolds' greatest contributions — and the ones she is most proud of — include the work she has done as an advocate for the treatment of mental illness, her work in preserving the history

of Hollywood and founding the dance studio that bears her name.

In 1955, Reynolds, along with Jack Haley Jr., Hugh O'Brien and other young stars, founded a charity to fight the stigma of mental illness, calling themselves The Thalians, after the goddess of comedy, Thalia. Today, The Thalians still thrive and have raised more than \$30 million for mental health programs (see sidebar at left).

Reynolds also collected memorabilia of Hollywood throughout her years at MGM and other studio lots. After displaying it at her now-closed casino and making numerous attempts over five decades to establish a permanent home for the collection, Reynolds sold it in a series of auctions between 2011 and 2014 (see sidebar at right).

Her legacy still remains in North Hollywood, where the Debbie Reynolds Dance Studio is located. The studio provides comfortable space for dancers to rehearse and attend professional classes.

Asked in 2002 by *The Vancouver Sun* if she ever thinks of taking a break or giving up her career, Reynolds responded, "What would I do? And what would I want to do? This is what I love to do. I don't know anything but the entertainment business."



MGM/GATTY IMAGES



NOEL MASQUEZ/GETTY IMAGES



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Previous page, Reynolds arrives at LaGuardia Airport for promotional activities on behalf of *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, 1964; top, Reynolds and daughter Carrie Fisher, 2011; above, Reynolds dances with Tony Curtis in a scene from *The Rat Race*, 1960.

The Historian



FAR LEFT, FRAZER HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN PARRY/THE PALEY CENTER FOR MEDIA X 2



[CLICK HERE](#)
for a look
at Debbie's
collection.

Far left, Reynolds shows off a costume she wore in *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* at The Paley Center For Media's *Debbie Reynolds: The Exhibit* in 2011. Left, costumes Reynolds collected from *Cleopatra* and *Singin' in the Rain*.

Her collection was the stuff of legend. Beginning in 1970, with the now-infamous prop-and-costume auction at MGM, Debbie Reynolds amassed the largest, privately owned collection of Hollywood memorabilia in the world.

"They literally threw away our history and I just got caught up in it. The stupidity and the lack of foresight to save our history ..." she told *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2014.

With her initial purchases, and in broadening that collection in the years since, Reynolds managed to save and preserve integral parts of Hollywood history — from Charlie Chaplin's iconic bowler hat to the white "subway" dress worn by Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch* — and keep them all together, safe and in one place.

The collection, which would eventually include thousands of costume pieces, props, poster art and even cameras, found a brief home in a museum at Reynolds' Las Vegas hotel and casino from 1993 to 1997.

Although Reynolds approached the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences a number of times about housing the collection, a plan never came to fruition. Citing the financial burden of maintaining the collection, most of it was sold at auctions over the last few years.

But, in building the collection, Reynolds managed to save pieces of Hollywood history. Things that might have been neglected or treated less carefully by another collector were fastidiously maintained under her supervision. Suits worn by members of the Rat Pack, Mae West's heels, even Elvis' pool table were protected and preserved.

As her son Todd Fisher told the *Wall Street Journal* in 2010, "Most people collect for themselves ... but she collected for the public. She collected for all of us. She collected for the American people to preserve the history of [the] industry."



DVR ALERT Thursday, Jan. 22

Turner Classic Movies is celebrating the 51st Life Achievement recipient with a Jan. 22 tribute to Debbie Reynolds featuring some of her most memorable roles. Check your local listings in case of a time change.

- 5 p.m. PT, *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)
- 7 p.m. PT, *The Catered Affair* (1956)
- 8:45 p.m. PT, *The Mating Game* (1959)
- 10:30 p.m. PT, *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1964)
- 12:45 a.m. PT, *Mary, Mary* (1963)

No. 51 and Her Co-Stars

Debbie Reynolds may hold the record for the most shared screen time with fellow Life Achievement honorees, having worked alongside 20 other award recipients (so far).

