

OLYMPIA DUKAKIS
1931-2021

Farewell to a Force of Nature

A MAGNIFICENT AND ALWAYS ADVENTUROUS ACTRESS, SHE BECAME
A HOUSEHOLD NAME AT 56 WHEN SHE COSTARRED WITH
CHER IN THE CLASSIC *MOONSTRUCK* By TOM GLIATTO

Olympia Dukakis was a hardworking 56-year-old theater actress with a string of credits on and off Broadway when, in 1987, Norman Jewison started telling her she was destined for an

Oscar—and soon. He had just directed her in *Moonstruck*, a Manhattan-set romantic comedy in which she played Cher's wise, long-suffering Sicilian mother, and after watching the completed film, he was sure she'd win Supporting Actress. "I looked at him like he was stark raving mad," Dukakis told the A.V. Club in 2015. "I thought, 'This little movie and that little Italian lady are gonna get an award?' I said, 'You really think so?' He said, 'Yeah!'"

Jewison was right. Not only did the film become a classic, but it earned Best Actress for Cher and Best Supporting Actress for Dukakis, who held up her statue to salute Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, her cousin, who at the time was running for President. "Okay, Michael," she said, "let's go!"

That was the beginning of a late-blooming but always busy film and TV career for the Greek-American Dukakis, who, after a long period of failing health, died at 89 on May 1 in New York City with her daughter Christina

KEN SHUNG/NPTV



Acting Up a Storm

Dreaming of the Stage

"I never sat around thinking I wanted to be a movie star," said Dukakis (in a '60s portrait). "I just wanted to play great parts."



Moonstruck

"Olympia was a great actress and brought immense joy to anyone who was lucky enough to see her work her magic," said Cher, who played her daughter. "People around the world will miss her." She said she spoke to the ailing Dukakis only weeks ago.



Steel Magnolias

"I enjoyed and admired the women," she wrote of the powerhouse ensemble of actresses in the 1989 hit.



Tales of the City

Dukakis (with Laura Linney) played Anna Madrigal, a transgender landlady in San Francisco, in four adaptations.

The Good Fight

Dukakis became an idol to the gay, lesbian and trans community largely through her acclaimed work on television in *Tales of the City* and was herself a longtime champion for LGBT rights. (She also played a lesbian in the 2011 independent film *Cloudburst*, with Brenda Fricker.) She cherished the memory of serving as a celebrity grand marshal in the San Francisco Pride parade in 2011. "Never let anyone intimidate you," she once said. "Continue the work to move the conversation forward.... Justice always prevails."



At the San Francisco Pride parade in 2011.

Zorich by her side. (Her husband, actor Louis Zorich, who played Burt on NBC's *Mad About You*, died in 2018.) An actress who could project regal, leonine authority while knowingly undercutting herself with droll comic timing, Dukakis racked up an additional 80-plus credits in her four decades of stardom. She remained best known as *Moonstruck*'s Rose Castorini ("Get your head out of the toilet") but was also loved as Clairee Belcher in 1989's *Steel Magnolias*, an all-star comedy-drama costarring Sally Field, Dolly Parton, Julia Roberts and Shirley MacLaine. "She was a gift," said Field, "unique and talented and one of a kind." Dukakis was in *Look Who's Talking*

'One of my favorite people that I have ever known or worked with'

—DOLLY PARTON

(1989) and its two sequels and played Frank Sinatra's mom, Dolly, in the 1992 TV movie *Sinatra*. (After watching her shoot a scene, she said, Sinatra himself "came over to me and, by way of telling me it had been very good, said, 'Look, I've got a little money. You wanna run away?'" Her own favorite role—one that figured centrally in her campaign for LGBT rights—was the trans landlady Anna Madrigal in the TV adaptations of Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* in 1993, 1998, 2001 and finally 2019. "That's the one," she said. "That affected me. Not only as an actress but as a human being living my life."

Throughout her career Dukakis was also a dedi-

cated acting teacher, with students including *Better Call Saul*'s Michael McKean. "She would tell us: don't forget that the reason you wanted to do this was that it looked like fun," he said on Twitter. Says Harry Mavromichalis, a longtime friend and director of the 2020 documentary *Olympia*: "She was so smart and intelligent. Always searching and questioning."

A first-generation American, the Lowell, Mass., native was the daughter of working-class Greek parents, Constantine and Alexandra. Olympia loved acting from the get-go—she said her stage debut came at 13, playing the Spirit of Greece in a local production to raise money for the Red Cross. "I was supposed to open a box and free two white doves into the air," she wrote in her 2009 memoir *Ask Me Again Tomorrow*. "I remember taking a dove in each hand, lifting them to the sky, and having one of them relieve itself all over my arm. Now I recognize this was an omen about what much of my life in 'show biz' would be like."

She had a challenging but productive actor's journey ahead of her.

For years she ran a theater company, the Whole Theater, in Montclair, N.J., the town where she raised three children with husband Louis, whom she married in 1962. He was the love of her life, and vice versa. "They would make each other laugh and tease each other," says Mavromichalis, "and then they would talk about acting and help each other rehearse and create projects together." None of it was glamorous: "I used to do the laundry, repair the props, whatever," she



Winner's Circle
Dukakis won both the Oscar and the Golden Globe for *Moonstruck*.

once said. "I was capable of doing a lot of things."

Back then Dukakis occasionally had small film and TV appearances. One of her first network roles was on an episode of *Dr. Kildare* in 1962, and she had a run on the soap *Search for Tomorrow* in 1983.

Moonstruck changed everything, even though she later said she hadn't expected much from the movie. "As a matter of fact," she recalled, "one day we were sitting around talking, and somebody asked Cher what she thought was going to happen, and she gave it the thumbs-down." Dukakis suddenly went from having to pay her daughter's college tuition with credit cards to buying a house on St. Maarten in the Caribbean and christening it after the film. "Before, I would never have spent money on something like this," she told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1992. "Still, I'm renting it out, using it as an investment. I'm too much of a Greek—some part of me can't do it all the way."

Up until her last major role in 2019, Dukakis's whole self remained committed to being an actress. Asked in 2003 if she ever intended to retire, she answered, "From what? I love this chaotic, contradictory, loving mess that has been my life."

Reporting by GILLIAN TELLING



The Homebody
Dukakis and her children Christina, Peter and Stefan (right) in 1973.



With Her Brother

Dukakis's only sibling, Apollo (in 1940), also found a career in acting, often on TV.

Love & Family

Time with her kids and husband, Louis Zorich (in 2008), was everything to her. "I want more of our family vacations where we all gather in a big house by the water and eat and play and genuinely enjoy one another," she wrote in her memoir. But she was happy to hit the trail for family too, campaigning when cousin Mike (with wife Kitty) ran for President in 1988.

