

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CAROL BURNETT INTERVIEW  
*MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Carol Burnett**

**Actor**

**September 8, 2011**

**Total Running Time: 1 hour, 1 minutes and 15 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

**Carol Burnett**

**Actor**

INTERVIEWER:

So let's start with, can you tell me about where you grew up and what your family was like?

00:00:15:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Well, my first memories are being in Texas when I was a little bitty thing. And, I remember, we lived in an old house, kind of like a plantation house, with a wraparound porch. The sidewalk in front of the house was cracked and it was buckled. I used to roller skate on the sidewalk, and I lived with my grandmother. My folks had come out to California. So, I was with my maternal grandmother, Nanny. I remember I would roller skate on that sidewalk and fall and bloody my knees. She'd take after me with the iodine and I'd be screaming. Then finally, it was decided that I could roller skate in the house. And so, there was a hallway leading down to the front porch screen, and it

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

was a little bit slanted. And so, I'd kind of feel my way up to the top and then roll down and stop myself on the screen.

00:01:18:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I went back to the old house, years later, and visited it. They let me come in, the family that was there. The skate marks were still there. They said they tried to buff them out for a year and then they gave up. What's really nice is, that was in San Antonio, they moved the old house. They were going to tear it down and build a parking lot or something. But the mayor got in on it and some other people, and they moved the old house. It's going to be an education facility for kids, young kids that might be at risk or have a problem or anything. And they're going to dedicate it, I think, next year in April or something. And I'm going to go back.

INTERVIEWER:

That's great.

CAROL BURNETT:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

What were your parents' expectations of you as a child?

00:02:11:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I don't know that they had any expectations of me. My mother was beautiful. My dad was handsome. He always reminded me of Jimmy Stewart. They came

out to California when I was very little and left me with my grandmother because they had a Hollywood dream. Then they got divorced. Then my grandmother and I followed my mother out here when I was seven, out here to California. We moved into a building in Hollywood, a block north of Hollywood Boulevard. My mother had a room down the hall, and my grandmother and I had a room right adjacent to the lobby. It was one room with a murphy pull down bed and I slept on the couch. But my mother, she had dreams of being a... She wanted to interview and write stories about movie stars.

00:03:06:00

CAROL BURNETT:

She did do a couple of things, freelance for magazines which are now extinct, Pick Magazine and Collier's. She did a story on Bob Hope and another one on Rita Hayworth and so forth. But unfortunately, my dad had the disease of alcoholism. He was just sweet, but he couldn't control it. Then my mother became an alcoholic.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Ina and Joseph Burnett

CAROL BURNETT:

So, my dreams or whatever I wanted to do, she would encourage me to be a writer, which I loved doing. I became editor of my junior high school and high school, Hollywood High newspapers. And I thought I would go into a career in journalism. I surprised myself when I didn't.

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

INTERVIEWER:

So, where did these dreams come from, that you had?

00:03:56:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Well, I had dreams, first, about being a cartoonist and having my own comic strip. I would draw at the drop of a hat. Then I thought, well, I'll be a journalist like my mother wants me to be. We always sang, my mother and grandmother and I, around the kitchen table with the linoleum cover on it. Mom would play the ukulele and we would sing. And so, there was always music around the house. So, I got to UCLA. I was going to major in journalism, but duh, they didn't have a school of jour— a major for journalism. So, I took the course, but then I majored in Theater Arts English to take the playwriting courses. But, if you're in theater arts and you're a freshman, you not only have to take— you have to take acting, you have to take scenery, you have to take lighting, sound.

00:04:59:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I learned how to build a flat and costuming and stuff like that. Well, I got to have the acting class and I got up and did a couple of scenes and they laughed where they were supposed to. And I thought this is really fun. This is a lot more fun than what I had been thinking of doing, at least. Then a friend came up to me on campus. I was a freshman at UCLA, and he was in the music department. He asked if I could carry a tune and I said, "Yeah." So, he put me in a scene that they were doing from *South Pacific* as one of the chorus

nurses. I was so loud he took me out of it. But, then he and I did a scene together from *Guys and Dolls*.

00:05:43:00

CAROL BURNETT:

So, the first time I ever sang in public was "Adelaide" in *Guys and Dolls*. I did it okay. I mean, I was pretty good at it because the character, when she sings, Adelaide's lament has a cold. So, I thought, "Oh good." If I hit a clam and it's bad, I can always cough or sneeze. It would be because she had a cold that she sounds like that. So, I was very brave with that song and that got me going with musical comedy.

INTERVIEWER:

Was that the first time at UCLA that you remember making someone laugh?

00:06:21:00

CAROL BURNETT:

The first time I made someone laugh, actually, I was in a junior high school play that our drama teacher wrote. I played a wise cracking, gum chewing maid. I just had one scene, but it was kind of funny. But I still didn't cotton to it that much. It wasn't until I got to UCLA that... I was what one would call a nerd in high school. So, here I was in the journalism class and the editor of the school paper. I got good grades and stuff, but I was not one of the popular ones, at all. So, when I got to UCLA and some of the big people on campus came up and said, "We saw you in that opera workshop, the musical comedy workshop scene you did. And we saw you in this one act, you did. Gosh, will you come and have lunch with us?" And these were seniors. Here I am a

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

freshman and I'm, "Whoa, I like this." I started to get popular. I thought, I'm quoting Sally Field, "They like me. They really like me." And so I was hooked.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, let me ask you though, because here you are, you're growing up in difficult circumstances, and yet, you go to UCLA. How did that happen? Or how did you even know or dream of that?

00:07:44:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I dreamed about going to UCLA from the time I was a junior at Hollywood High. We couldn't afford it because it was \$43 for a semester. And our rent was a dollar a day, \$30 a month. We were on welfare and my grandmother said, "You're crazy. We don't have that money. Go to Woodbury College for whatever and learn to be a secretary and then you can nab the boss." That was my grandmother. She was married six times. She was always trying to nab somebody. But I wanted to go to UCLA and the weirdest thing is, this has happened to me a couple of times in my life since, I knew I would go. It wasn't I was wishing, that I had faith, it was a known fact. I visualized myself on campus and it hadn't happened yet, but I was not fearful.

00:08:46:00

CAROL BURNETT:

And one morning, our door was right facing the lobby and there was a pigeonhole mailbox above the manager's desk where I'd look out and see if we had any letters in our slot. So, this one morning I saw a letter and I ran across and got it and came back into the apartment, or the room, and opened

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

it up. Oh, it had my name and address typed on the envelope and a stamp. But it hadn't been canceled by the post office. So, it was stamped, and somebody just put it in the slot. I opened it up and out came a \$50 bill. Swear to God, to this day, I do not know who put that in there. None of our friends had that kind of money. It was a poor neighborhood. My best girlfriend was living with her grandmother. They were on welfare. Everybody was struggling. And there it was, that was my ticket to UCLA.

INTERVIEWER:

That's fantastic. Where did your obsession with Hollywood and Broadway come from?

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Senior Yearbook Photo  
Hollywood High School, 1950

00:09:54:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Well, my grandmother and I lived a block north of Hollywood Boulevard and when she could save up enough to go to the movies, we would go. We would go to the second runs, which were double features. And sometimes we went as many times as four times a week, which meant I saw eight movies a week, at times, growing up. So, I fell in love with Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney and Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth and Gene Kelly and Fred, all of them. I would sometimes come home and my girlfriend, Ailah Mae and I, would act out the movie that we might have seen. And so, I was always Betty Grable,

and she was always June Haver. They were stars of a movie called *The Dolly Sisters*. So, we would do that. Sometimes I'd be Mickey and she'd be Judy.

00:10:53:00

CAROL BURNETT:

And so, just, that's where I expressed myself, but I certainly didn't do it in front of my mother or my grandmother. It was really with the kids on the block. So, I got hooked on that. Then when I went to UCLA, I tried out for the varsity show and got the lead in that. It was an original. Then we would do scenes in our musical comedy class from Broadway musicals. So, it was kind of a cross section. So, it was great for me when I got my own show because that's exactly what I wanted to do: musical takeoffs and movie takeoffs.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay, perfect. The odds were so stacked against you, though. Where did that fire in the belly come from that made you so successful?

00:11:42:00

CAROL BURNETT:

The fire in the belly has to be there. I've known so many wonderfully talented people. I used to wonder why didn't they go any farther. Some of these that I went to school with, some I was in a class with in New York. They took the rejection. I was rejected a lot. But I always thought and felt that, "Okay, if this girl in the blue dress gets it and I'm in my pink dress or whatever, and she gets it and I don't, it's because it's her turn." So I knew when it's my turn, it would happen. So, I was never upset about it. I knew something good would come. I didn't know when or what.



# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

00:12:35:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Although I did, when my classmates at UCLA gave me a party, a going away party when I was going to go to New York. They said, "Okay, Carol, tell us what you're going to do." And I said, "Well, my first professional job will be in a Broadway musical, and it will be directed by George Abbott," who was the top musical comedy director at that time. And that's what happened. And that was another time when I had seen myself on campus at UCLA and that happened. I saw myself talking with Mr. Abbott and he was giving me a direction and I knew that would happen.

INTERVIEWER:

Now, how did you get though, once again, here you are at UCLA, you're a struggling student. You come up with this idea of going to New York. How do you make that happen?

00:13:24:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I got to New York in, it was the summer of 1954. And I'd always said I wanted to go to New York because that's where the musicals were. I wanted to be Ethel Merman or Mary Martin or that kind of person, but we had no money. So, I was in this musical comedy workshop and I was doing a scene from *Annie Get Your Gun*. And our professor, there were nine of us in the class and our professor, excuse me, my nose itches. And our professor said that they were going to a black-tie party in San Diego, a big kind of a gala thing, and that if we could get down there, the class, and do our scenes as entertainment

for the party, he would grade us then. So, we had a caravan of cars going down to San Diego and I did my scene from *Annie Get Your Gun*.

00:14:22:00

CAROL BURNETT:

And then I went to the hors d'oeuvre table and I remember they had lovely hors d'oeuvres and I put a napkin there and I was stealing hors d'oeuvres to take home to my grandmother. I was wrapping them in the napkin, I was going to put him in my purse. There's a tap on my shoulder and I thought, "Oh my God, I'm busted." And I turned around and it was this gentleman and his wife, black tie, all very nice. And he said, "We really enjoyed you." And I said, "Thank you very much." He said, "So, what do you want to do with your life?" I said, "Well, someday, I want to be able to go to New York and be in musical comedy and shows on Broadway." He said, "Well, why aren't you in New York now?" And I said, "Yeah, I'd love to, but I have to save up to go." And he said, "I'll lend you the money." Out of the blue. And he said, "Be in my office... ", he gave me his card... "a week from Monday and I'll lend you the money to go."

00:15:19:00

CAROL BURNETT:

So, I thought maybe he'd had a little too much champagne, but I called him that Monday. And he said, "Yes, I remember, come down, come on down." So, I went and he had this huge office in La Jolla, California. I went in and he had this huge, sitting behind this huge desk. And he said, "Okay there. I'm going to lend you a thousand dollars." Now, our rent was \$30 a month. So, you can imagine what that number sounded like to me. That was like, today, giving me 10 million dollars. And he said, "Now there are stipulations to this. You pay it back, if you're successful, within five years, no interest. You use this money to

go to New York on. This is why I'm lending it to you. You must promise never to reveal my name and also to help other people out in the business when you can, if you can."

00:16:29:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Okay. So, I went home and I showed my grandmother the money, and she was feeling her pulse, having a heart attack. She said, "Well, you're not going to take this and go to New York. You know what we can do with all this money?" I said, "Nanny, I promised the gentleman that I was going to use this to go to New York and that's what I have to do." So, that was June. And then July, it took me all that time to get prepared. I used some of the money. I had to have a wisdom tooth pulled. So, I used some of the money for that and got a plane ticket and left in August of 1954.

INTERVIEWER:

So take me on that first ride into New York City. What are you thinking? You've never been there before. It's this overwhelming city, but here it is at your feet and your dreams are there.

00:17:19:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Well, I landed and got a bus to take me into the city. Now here's where I was so naive, but the good Lord was looking out for me. I didn't even have a plan of where I was going to stay. But on the plane, I was reading *The New Yorker*. I saw an ad for the Algonquin Hotel, which was where the round table, all those witty people sat all those years ago. And so, I thought, "Well, I'll go to

the Algonquin Hotel." I had a cardboard suitcase and I got out and walked from the bus port authority, I think it was, and walked to the Algonquin, found it easily. It was \$9 a day for a room. And I thought, "Oh my God, what am I going to do?" But anyway, I checked in and I started to cry. I thought, what?

00:18:19:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I'm a nut for rain and every time I've had something that was going to be difficult to deal with and it rained, I wasn't afraid anymore. Well, the rain started coming and whipping around and the wind and da, da, da. I closed the window, and it was really pelting. I turned on the hotel radio in my room. The name of the hurricane was Carol. I thought, "Okay, I'm going to be okay. I know I'm going to be okay." And I was going through my wallet and checking my money. I had a slip of paper with a girl's name on it that had been ahead of me at UCLA, and she was in the musical comedy department. Her name was Eleanor E.B. I had her phone number. We hadn't been that close in college because she was four years older than I was and she was a senior when I was new, but I had her number.

00:19:19:00

CAROL BURNETT:

She said, "If you ever get to New York, call me." I called her and she said, "Where are you?" I said, "I'm at the Algonquin Hotel." "Oh my God," she said, "Get out of there, please come here." I said, "Where's here?" She lived in a townhouse called the Rehearsal Club, which housed young ladies interested in the theater. And she said, "Get over here and I'll introduce you to the lady who runs the house here and see if we can get you a bed." And I went in and I

met the lady. Her name was Miss Carlton. She was very sweet. She said that the rules are very strict. No gentleman past the parlor, and you must be actively pursuing auditions, and in your classes and stuff like that. So, I went into a big room with five beds, five cots in it. There were five of us in this one room and it was called the transit room.

00:20:21:00

CAROL BURNETT:

If you would graduate, you could go to another room on another floor where you would— may only have one roommate. So, there I was with these five girls and with four other girls and it was \$18 a week room and board. So, then I got a part-time job because I knew I had to earn some money to even pay \$18 a week. And I got a part-time job as a hat check girl in a lady's tearoom. Well, not too many women check their hats. So, it was again, not too bright but I checked packages and things like that. And there was an oyster bar downstairs where the men would go eat, but they had hooks for their coats. But I would try to grab them before they went downstairs, "Take your coat, sir, take your coat." And I remember I had a little bit of my grandmother in me. When a man would leave me his coat, the little thing in the back that you hang up, well, I had little pair of scissors and a thread, a spool of thread. I would clip it so it would be loose. And then I would sew it with a different color. And so, when the man would come up, I'd say, "Oh sir, this came apart and I fixed it for you." I'd get an extra dime. So, I'd get 35 cents instead of a quarter.

INTERVIEWER:

So what was your first big break? How did you find an agent, for instance?

00:21:54:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Well, I was living at the rehearsal club, and I was going to different places and trying to get an agent and you can't get an agent unless you're in something, you can't get in something. It's a catch 22. So, this one night, it was raining, and all my roommates were out on a date and it was raining. I was reading the paper on my cot and I saw an ad for *The Pajama Game*, directed by George Abbot. In *The Pajama Game*, one of the stars was a man named Eddie Foy Jr. In Hollywood, there was a neighbor we had, his name was Jack Shay, who played extra bit parts in movies. At one point, he told me he was in a movie with Eddie Foy Jr. and what a nice guy he was. So, I remembered that. I thought, I'm just going to walk down to that theater tonight.

00:22:49:00

CAROL BURNETT:

And I put on my raincoat and galoshes and went down to where Pajama Game was playing. It was about quarter of 11 at night. So, they were getting into the finale and pouring down rain. I looked like a poor Anne Baxter in *All About Eve*. I knocked on the stage door and this old guy opened the door. Pops, they used to call him that in the movies. He said, "Yeah, kid, get in here. What are you doing here?" I said, "Well, I'm here to see Eddie." He said, "Oh, you know Eddie?" I said, "Well, I'm from California." So he said, "Well, wait a minute. They're taking their bows now." So, I saw Carol Haney run by and John Raitt run by and Janice Paige. And then there was Eddie and Pops said,

"Hey Eddie, this kid wants to talk to you." He said, "Yeah, kid." He had a towel around his neck, and he said, "What can I do for you?"

00:23:51:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I said, "Well, Mr. Foy, I know Jack Shay and he said that he was in a movie with you and that you were a really nice guy. I've been trying to get an agent. But I can't get an agent unless I'm in something and I can't get in anything unless I have an agent. And I was just hoping that maybe you might have an idea." He said, "Well." He said, "Do you sing?" I said, "Yeah, but I can't read music." He said, "Do you dance?" I said, "I can jitterbug." He said, "I was going to hope that maybe I could get you an audition for the chorus here." I said, "Well, I'm not good enough for the chorus. I would have to have a featured role." Why he didn't laugh me right out into the street, I don't know. See, he was not a singer, and he was kind of an eccentric dancer, but he had a great featured role. And so I was just thinking, "Well, I could do that." And he said, "Okay, give me your phone number." I gave him the rehearsal club phone number and he said, "I'll call you tomorrow." And he did. It was a phone on the wall, in the club. He said, "Okay, here's where you go, to my agent."

00:25:02:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Lester Shorr was his agent. So now, I could get past the receptionist because my name was on the books. I went into Mr. Shorr's office and I took my college scrapbook full of good reviews, imitation leather, red scrapbook. He looked through it and he said, "Oh, that's very nice." He says, "So, let me know when you're in something." I said, "But I can't." He said, "Well, go put on your own show." I said, "Okay." Now, I'm going back to Mickey and Judy movies.

They put on a show in the barn and went to Broadway. So, I went back to the club and called a meeting with all 25 girls and said, "Gang, let's put on a show." I mean, I was so naive, but we did. We put on a show and we sent out invitations to every producer, director, agent in town, on a penny postcard. That was their ticket to get in. We said, "You always say, 'Let us know when you're in something.' Well, we're in." We did the show for three nights at the Carl Fisher Concert Hall on 57th Street. They all came, everybody came and I got an agent out of that.

INTERVIEWER:

So you had a lot of chutzpah. Where did that come from?

00:26:29:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I think the reason I was able to do all of this was because I was raised on movies. That everybody was so positive and there was always a happy ending. There was no cynicism, really. The heaviest you got was Warner Brothers movies with Joan Crawford and Bette Davis. So, it just occurred to me, as I said, it occurred to me that when this agent said, "Put on your own show." Sure, sure. Today, I don't think anybody, not too many people would take that advice seriously because they would say, "Oh, that can't be done." But being naive, I didn't know it couldn't be done. And so, it could be done.

INTERVIEWER:



# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

Now you do it on YouTube though, right? Little bit different. Yes. So, you get an agent, you start getting job after job. How do you get a show?

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Carol Burnett Show

CBS, 1967

00:27:29:00

CAROL BURNETT:

When I was just starting out and I got an agent, and I got jobs here and there. I was on the Ed Sullivan show, in different shows like that, in the Jack Paar show. And I worked in- at the Blue Angel night club. I then was offered by Gary Moore, who had a variety show at the time, to be a regular performer on his show. Martha Raye, the wonderful comedian, was to be his guest one week, and she got very sick, laryngitis and everything. Gary knew my work and so they called me to come in and fill for Martha. I had only two days to learn all of the stuff. So, after that, Gary decided to ask me to be a regular performer on his show. That was a major, major break for me. And at the same time, I was doubling in an off Broadway show, directed by George Abbott, called *Once Upon a Mattress*.

00:28:30:00

CAROL BURNETT:

So, I was really going well. It was going well. When I left Gary's show, CBS wanted to sign me to a 10 year contract, which would require my doing two guest appearances on one of their sitcoms or whatever, and one special a year. So that was a 10 year contract, but it also had the caveat that if I decided

within the first five years of that contract that I wanted to do a one hour show of my own, they would have to put it on or they would have to pay me for 30 one hour shows. I thought, I'll never want to host my own show, forget that.

00:29:19:00

CAROL BURNETT:

My husband, Joe, and I moved out to California and I had two kids, but we weren't doing well. It was as, if you want to say as hot as I was, I was as cold as yesterday's mashed potatoes, at this time. We had put a down payment on a house here in California and we weren't sure how we were going to make all the payments or anything. We were kind of sitting on packing boxes and it was December of the fifth year and Joe looked at me and he said, "Maybe we better push that button." And I said, "Oh, okay." I called the CBS people in New York, and they said, "Hey Carol, Merry Christmas. How's it going?" It was just a week before that year would pass, the fifth year. I said, "Oh great. I want to push that button, that clause, that says that I can do a variety show if I want to."

00:30:23:00

CAROL BURNETT:

And there was this pause, "What?" I said, "Yeah, it's in the contract." "Oh, great. Well, we'll get back to you." So, I'm sure a lot of lawyers were called out of Christmas parties that week, right, and they went over the contract and sure enough... The CBS executive called me back and he said, "Carol, the variety is not really a woman's game. No woman has ever done a comedy variety show. Dinah did a variety show, but that was all singing, mostly. And stuff. We've got a great pilot for you to do called "Here's Agnes." I could just see, Here's Agnes. I thought, no. Plus I don't want to do the same character

week after week. I said, "Variety is my love. That's what I did on Gary's show. That's what I know the best, to have dancers and singers and music and guest stars and do sketches and do all different things."

00:31:21:00

CAROL BURNETT:

"Oh, well." So they had to put it on the air. And I remember Joe, my husband, went back to New York to meet with the executive. Behind the executive's desk was a big board with cards on it about the future shows and what was going to happen in February or March or what was going on. And in our time slot, come February, there was a question mark, which meant they had no faith. They had no faith in us. Well, we've got what I wanted. And now what I need is a rep company. That's when we went on the search for Harvey and got him, he had been on the Danny Case show. He was the second banana on that. And I just thought he was brilliant. So, we were able to get him and Vicky and Lyle, as the handsome announcer. And then we started having Tim Conway as a frequent guest. And then finally, the penny dropped, and we signed him on as a regular weekly.

INTERVIEWER:

So this was a big risk for you. I mean, here you are, you're a woman, you're heading up your own show. You must have been nervous as hell going on.

00:32:32:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I was very nervous at first, but not so much so that I would've thought, "Oh gosh, we're going to fail" or anything like that. It was how to get it going. And

I knew I'd be accepted. I knew that because of Gary's show; being on that show. Everybody knew me and stuff. And then our producer, Bob Banner, said, "Carol, what you have to do is you've got to let the audience know you personally before you get into the show and with all the wigs and the changes and different characters." And I said, "Well, how do I do, what do you mean?" He said, "Well, now Gary Moore used to go out in front of his audience and have them ask him questions. He didn't want a warm up person." He said, "Sometimes those jokes are risque or they're funnier than what we were going to be doing." He would go out, but they never taped it. He was the warm up guy on his own show. And I used to sit backstage and listen to him bat back those answers.

00:33:35:00

CAROL BURNETT:

And he was just so on the money, and I was amazed at how he could do that. Bob said, "This is what you should do only we'll tape it." I said, "Oh my God, I can't do. Oh, no." And he said, "Well, just try it a couple of weeks. We'll try it and see how it goes." So, I remember that first time I went out and I was really, I was afraid nobody would ask me a question. And then I was afraid they would. But it went okay. And then after it was on the air and we would come out and I'd start to do that, more people who had seen it, started raising their hand and I started to have fun with it. I never knew what they were going to ask. There were no plants in the audience. I didn't want that. If they asked me something that would stump me, so be it. And at least the audience would know it's for real.

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

INTERVIEWER:

So what was the secret to the success of that show because it went on for 11 years.

00:34:37:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I think the secret to our success was that it showed the audience how much fun we were having. We were, I'm just blessed. We laughed for 11 years and it was my choice to end the show. CBS wanted us back for a 12th year, but Harvey had left after the 10th. And I started to think during the 11th year, and there were some good shows on in the 11th year, but I started to see sometimes that we would be repeating ourselves and I didn't want that. I thought, "Well, it's classier to leave before the network goes, 'Bye, stop doing this.'" So I wanted to leave while we were ahead.

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about doing that last show. That must have been pretty bittersweet.

00:35:23:00

CAROL BURNETT:

The last show we did was very bittersweet. There were a lot of tears, but laughter and we showed a little bit of reruns and outtakes and things like that. And my thrill was, and I didn't know this was going to happen. My idol in the movies, Jimmy Stewart, came on the show and surprised me and gave me a hug and said, "My family, we love you. And you've been part of our family for 11 years." I was crying and I didn't even introduce him. I just like, "Oh, you

know how much I love you and all." But yeah, that was so sweet. He was hiding in a dressing room the whole time.

INTERVIEWER:

And how about singing that song for the last time?

00:36:13:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Singing the song for the last time. Yeah, I started to weep because it was a family. We'd been through marriages, divorces, births, deaths. It was a whole high school or a whole school schedule.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Cast Portrait

The Carol Burnett Show, 1975

CAROL BURNETT:

But, you know, everything has to come to an end and we were able to also do a final show, as opposed to a network coming in and saying, "Don't come back next week." So we were able to really plan it and give ourselves a good send-off.

INTERVIEWER:

I know this is probably a hard question, but do you have a favorite skit from those 10, 11 years?

00:36:49:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I have favorite genres of the show that we did. I don't have one particular favorite skit, sketch actually, I prefer that word. It was whenever we did the movie takeoffs. And of course, in that there's the iconic Gone with the Wind, which Bob Mackie thought up. The writers had originally written that Scarlet, Starlet we called her, would run up the stairs with the draperies and just come down with them hanging. And when I went into costume fitting that week, Bob said, "I have an idea." And I said, "What? Come here." We went into the next room, and he pulled up the curtain rod with the dress on it. I fell on the floor and that's one of the longest laughs we ever got on the show. And it was hard for me not to laugh coming down the stairs. I did show the outfit to Harvey because he's at the foot of the stairs as Rhet Butler, but nobody else, the crew or anything. I hadn't worn it until we were going to tape it.

00:37:49:00

CAROL BURNETT:

And the crew was hysterical, everybody was. And the audience just exploded. I loved doing Mrs. Wiggins and Mr. Tudball, two characters that Tim Conway wrote. Tim's a good writer and he's written some very good sketches for our show. I love doing Eunice, The Family. That was a very interesting one because we all only thought it was going to be a one-time sketch. So, at first, they thought I would play Eunice and we would hire an older lady to play Mama. And then Eunice spoke to me. I felt I could really, actually she reminded me a little of my mother, not the shrew or anything, but the fact that she had all these pipe dreams, all these dreams of being bigger and

better and all of this and being frustrated. And that was my mama. And I thought I can do that.

00:38:49:00

CAROL BURNETT:

And then I think it was Bob Mackie who said, "Well, then let's just put a fat suit on Vicky and take the eyelashes off and a wig on her and let her do that." So, okay. Roddy McDowall was a guest, and he was going to play one of Mama's sons and Harvey was Eunice's husband, Ed. We read it at the table on Monday. For some reason, I just started talking like this, because it reminded me of Texas and Arkansas and that kind of thing. You know, "Mama!" that. Vicky picked up on it right away and Harvey and all. The writers were stunned because they had written about their mothers whom they didn't like and they're from Chicago. They were from Chicago, and they were absolutely stunned on the run through day when we did the whole show in front of the crew and the writers. But they were afraid we were going to alienate the south, completely. But we got such positive feedback that it became a running kind of a thing, not every week, but at least once a month. I think we did all in all, about 35 of those, of the Mama and Euna sketches.

INTERVIEWER:

How do you develop a character? You said that came from your mom. Did it come from people that you would see? Was it from costuming?

00:40:07:00

CAROL BURNETT:



Actually, there are two ways to do... There are two ways. The method way is to go deep into the character and all of that and the non-method way is to just kind of figure out what they're going to look like. That's me. I sometimes didn't know how I was going to do something till Bob put me in the outfit and it just kind of happened. It's like you look at a little kid, say, who dresses up as a pirate. There's no better actor than a little kid in a pirate outfit. They become that character or a little girl dressed up as a princess or a tomboy or any. You become the character. I remember I did meet Laurence, Sir Laurence Olivier. Lord Laurence. I was asking him about it. He said, "I don't know exactly what I'm going to do until I know what my nose will look like." He would put a bump on his nose or elongate it or do something like that and his character would come.

INTERVIEWER:

So you went back to being with your girlfriend and the...?

00:41:16:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I went back to being with my best girlfriend Ailah Mae when we would act out those movies. The wonderful part of it... I mean, it's really, if my grandmother had been alive, it might have killed her. When I had Betty Grable as a guest on my show and Rita Hayworth as a guest on my show and even Gloria Swanson, my grandmother grew up watching in the south. She called us and wanted to come on the show because we were doing a takeoff on Sunset Boulevard, quite often. And to have these icons come on and they're my guests and I get to play with them and sing with them and dance with

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

them. Oh, my! It was just the best time. I'm so glad. You know, everybody wants to be younger. Say, wait a minute. There's not that much time left and all, but we all, if we're lucky, get older. I am so glad I'm where I am today. Because if I were younger, I couldn't ever have that kind of a platform. That was a time when the networks were, even though they didn't want us on at first, but they did nurture, and they did. It would cost a lot of money today.

## ON SCREEN TEXT:

Carol Burnett, Tim Conway and Vicki Lawrence

The Carol Burnett Show, 1977

## CAROL BURNETT:

And now it's reality shows. And what are they, \$1.98? So, the networks like them.

## INTERVIEWER:

So, you've said that you were someone who avoided conflict most of your life, and yet in the 80's, you took on the National Enquirer and you were one of the first people to do so. Can you tell me a bit about that and why you did it?

00:42:50:00

## CAROL BURNETT:

I was in a show. I was going to Washington D.C. to be in a show. I was asked by Betty Ford to come back and do a show at the White House. I had a medley that I had done with Julie Andrews, that I had also done with Helen Reddy, and Helen could go and be with us. The night before the show, a bunch of us

went to a restaurant, a French kind of restaurant in D.C. Also, at another table was Henry Kissinger and Lew Wasserman and his wife Edie. We kind of waved when we came in and we all sat down, and it was a lovely evening. There was a booth behind us with a family from Vermont, I think. We had ordered baked Alaska for dessert, and they looked at that. So, we put some on plates and we handed them over to these people.

00:43:49:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Then there was a young couple sitting in the booth next to us and they had just gotten engaged, so we gave them some baked Alaska. It was all very nice. So, on the way out, I saw Dr. Kissinger and he said, "I'm looking forward to seeing you tomorrow night at the White House." I said, "Well, thank you so much. We're looking forward to doing it." So, we went, we did the show, got back to New York and the next thing I know, there is a column saying, "Carol Burnett in a row with Henry Kissinger in Washington restaurant." Then, it said I was traipsing around the tables and pouring wine on people and handing people across the booth, wine, and drinking and all. And I thought, "Ah, I am not going to put up with that." My parents were alcoholics and they died of the disease. I thought, "Doggone it; they shouldn't be able to do this."

00:44:47:00

CAROL BURNETT:

So, I sued. I sued them. And what was wonderful, it took forever, took five years to even get to trial. What was wonderful was that our lawyers found the family from Vermont. Actually, they called, when they read what was going on, said we were there that night and none of that... Plus, the young couple got in touch with us, and they'd been married and they had a kid and

everything. They all testified. Plus, there was a person who had worked for the *Enquirer* and was no longer working. She got up and said that they get calls from restaurants. And that the restaurant had called and said, "Carol Burnett was there tonight and with Dr. Kissinger." So, she got a memo saying, "What can we make of this?" And she said that. So, we couldn't prove our malice of forethought, but we did prove reckless disregard for the truth.

INTERVIEWER:

Now, let's move on to the ERA stuff. You were not political on your show, at all. So, how did you get involved in something like the equal rights amendment and campaigning for the passage of that?

00:46:03:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I got involved with the Equal Rights Amendment actually through Alan Alda. He was a good friend and we'd worked together. We went out to dinner one night, my husband and Alan. He started talking about it. He's a feminist. And he said, "It's just not right that they don't get equal pay or equal rights under the law. And it just doesn't make sense." And I said, "You're right." So, I kind of started going to ERA meetings and stuff and it got the bad reputation that everybody thought women were going to run around smoking cigars and do—I mean, how stupid.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, now, initially it passed in 30 states, very quickly. And then Phyllis Schlafly got on board and all of a sudden these stories started coming out,

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

things like your life is going to change and it's going to give way to same sex marriages. Like you said, that all of your other rights are going to be gone too. You come up against this in Illinois. Can you tell me a little bit about that? Which is why-

00:47:04:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I went to Illinois and Alan was there and all, and it was the first time I'd ever been yelled at. We were going into a place, an auditorium or something there, and they called me a carpetbagger because I was from California and there I was in Illinois trying to get this passed. Anybody who wasn't from their state was a carpetbagger. And golly, all I want is to just help people. I had three daughters. I wanted them to have equal rights under the law. That's all it was.

INTERVIEWER:

Did you ever meet Phyllis Schlafly? Were you ever encounter her?

CAROL BURNETT:

No, I never met Phyllis Schlafly. No.

INTERVIEWER:

What would you have said to her, you think, at the time?

00:47:49:00

CAROL BURNETT:

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

Why are you like this, Phyllis? That's what I would've said to her. What is what's wrong with people getting equal pay? Of course, I know she would have a stock answer, so I wouldn't be preaching to the choir, that's for sure. But, maybe someday.

INTERVIEWER:

Were you disappointed when it didn't pass?

CAROL BURNETT:

I was very disappointed when it didn't pass. Yes. Very.

INTERVIEWER:

Did you consider yourself of the women's movement, do you think?

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Interacting With The Audience

The Carol Burnett Show, 1968

INTERVIEWER:

I mean, you did break a lot of barriers having your own show, being a female comedian at that time, things like that.

00:48:22:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I never thought I broke barriers or put myself in any kind of a position of the first woman to do this or that. I never thought of that. I was just a performer and I got involved with the Equal Rights Amendment because I just felt I should. I had stepdaughters who were very into it and my husband got into it. So, we all worked for it. That was about as political as I get on a soapbox. I do vote. I do follow politics closely, but I keep my views to myself.

INTERVIEWER:

Were you at all influenced, we heard about how Broadway and musicals and the movies influenced you. Were you at all aware of things like *The Feminine Mystique* when it came out or any of that kind of literature?

00:49:14:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I was not really involved with too much of that, of *The Feminine Mystique*. I'm more involved now, as a matter of fact. I was busy. I was doing my show. I had my three girls and marriage and on and on. So, the only thing that I did get heavily involved in was the ERA.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay, great. Thank you. So, some polls now are showing that many women consider ambition a dirty word or won't admit being ambitious. Do you think women avoid power?

00:49:54:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Ooh. I don't think women avoid power. I think they would welcome it, if they feel that they're up to what it is, up to what they want to do. No. Maybe women say, "I want to avoid power", because they don't feel they have it and they might risk something and fail. But, I don't think that's the case. I think powerful women are women who have the fire in the belly to do what they feel they can do best.

INTERVIEWER:

So when CBS said to you though, "Oh, I don't know about a variety show. Women don't front variety shows." Was there ever a moment where you thought, "I'm going out there and representing," or was it more, "I just want to get this show on. It's going to be good."

00:50:46:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I did not feel, even when they said, "Oh, look Carol, you can't host a variety show. It's not a woman's game. It's Gleason, it's Sid Caesar, it's Milton Berle, it's Dean Martin. It's all these guys." But I wasn't insulted nor did I think, "Well, I'm going to be a pioneer." I just wanted to do the show. I remember saying to Harvey and Vicki and Lyle on the first taping, I said, "You know, what we must do. Let's not think about ratings. Let's not think about anything except going out there, getting in the sandbox and playing and having fun and entertaining the 300 people in the studio. That's what our goal is and to love each other." Harvey always talked about that, that we just put aside



# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

everything else and just went out, put blinders on, went out and let it fly. And I think that's why it was successful.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Harvey Korman & Carol Burnett

The Carol Burnett Show, 1967

INTERVIEWER:

So, were you brought up so that marriage was a given and how did that all work out for you?

00:51:48:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I was brought up in the era of the Eisenhower years and all, you know, when I was in college and the fifties, the Betty Crocker era. You had to be married. You had to get married, and you had to have children. I don't feel that today. I mean, it was a given that you grew up, you got in- were in college. Even if you had a career, you had to get married and you had to have a child. So, that's what I did. I'm glad I had the girls. Joe was a great producer and we worked. We were together 19 years but then events took us apart. He died a few years later of cancer, but we remained friends. Then I recently, well, 10 years ago, remarried a much younger guy. You're looking at a cougar. But he's a throwback. He's terrific. He's got a wonderful sense of humor and a great career. And we dig the same things. So, it's a very happy relationship.

INTERVIEWER:

So you like your grandmother that way too, huh?

00:53:08:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I'm like my grandmother that way. She married a much younger man, at one time. Maybe some others, because I don't know who all she married. She'd only told me she'd been married three times and then I found out, when I was writing my first memoir, she'd been married six. But she was dead so I couldn't ask her about it. If there is an afterlife, that will be my first question to her.

INTERVIEWER:

Can you talk about the roles that you and your husband played in your marriage and how that affected your roles in your career, if at all?

00:53:37:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Joe and I were never married when we were at work. I would have my thing to do and my rehearsals and so forth. He would work with the writers, and he would work with the budget and all of that. So, when we got where everything came together, he would be in the booth with the director and the script woman and we'd be out on stage doing our thing. Where we really got together and talked about it was after the Friday taping. We'd go to dinner, always at Chasen's, and take the guest star. It was just lovely. Then on the weekends, he would have two tapes, one from the dress rehearsal, and one from the air show that we did. He would look at the two and see which was

the better cut of the two. Then he would give those notes to our assistant director who would edit the show in one day and boom, we were off and running for the next Monday rehearsal.

INTERVIEWER:

Now, but were you, because you had this working life with him, were you more of a traditional marriage or did that, because you were working mother, was that a little bit different, as well?

00:54:44:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I was... I deferred to Joe, because in those days, if a woman said, "Wait a minute, we got to stop here" or "I don't like this sketch here" or whatever, she would be a bitch. If a man did it, Jackie Gleason did it, he would be Jackie. That would be accepted. So, I never wanted people to think I was forward and all that. So, I kind of took a backseat. For instance, if we were rehearsing a sketch and it wasn't working, I would call the writers up to say come down and watch this. And then I would say, "Guys, I must be doing this wrong. I'm just not feeling it. Can you help me here? Can you maybe give me a better line here or there?" Whereas again, I'll say Gleason would say, "Hey, wait a minute, guys, this stinks, come and fix it."

00:55:48:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I couldn't do that. So, I would kind of go in the back door. At one time, we were doing a sketch with Tim and Vicki and Harvey— a gangster sketch or something, and it was awful. Just, the audience was looking at us they were

an oil painting. I mean, there was no laughs, no nothing. They were just staring. It was just horrible. But during the week rehearsing it, before we got in front of an audience, I kept saying to Joe, "Can't we just forget this and do something else, find another musical number or something to fill up the time or I'll do more questions than answers or whatever." He said, "No, it's funny. It's going to work. It's going to work."

00:56:34:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Well. We were in the dress rehearsal, and we were doing it. And as I say, the audience was just staring at us. No laughs, nothing. We had flop sweat. I mean, we knew. Right about a little over halfway through the sketch, I look over and Joe is coming towards us on the set, and I screamed. He's in front of the audience. He came out from the booth, walked on the stage and said, "You don't have to do this anymore." I hugged him and I told the audience, I said, "You know what? He just saved our marriage." I said, "I hated the sketch all week." The audience loved it, the fact that we were that honest. I loved it. When he came out, he said, "You don't have to do this anymore."

INTERVIEWER:

But, now you were such a powerful woman in television. Yet, when I hear you speak of it, you didn't think of yourself that way.

00:57:32:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I never thought of myself as a powerful woman, at all. If I had that kind of experience today, I might think that way. I never wanted to be too cocky about

anything. I remember, I did a song in 1957 called "I made a Fool of Myself over John Foster Dulles," which was a comedy song written by my dear friend, Ken Welch. I sang that on the Paar show and I sang it on Ed Sullivan. I was working at this nightclub, the Blue Angel. And now I became the one that they all wanted to come and see. So, I started to get a little full of myself, right. Here now, all these people are coming in and they're seeing me and well, I have the answer to show business. I'm terrific. It's going to be great. And I went out this one night and started to sing that song, which always got a laugh at the end of the first line, nothing. Nothing.

00:58:38:00

CAROL BURNETT:

I kept going. I had about 20 minutes to go in my set and it was like, again, no response. I barely got off the stage to this kind of applause, where I'd usually have to come back for two or three bows. I started to cry. I had a dressing room at the end of a long hall. Now, in that hall was a men's room and the lady's room. Then my dressing room was down there. So, I'm headed down to my dressing room and I'm weeping because— and I had another show to do it midnight. This drunk is coming towards me and he's kind of bouncing off the walls and he is going to the men's room, and he'd have to pass me. I've kind of got my head down like this. He said, "Hey, hey, aren't you the little lady I just saw downstairs?" And I said, "Yes," hoping for the best. He said, "Boy, you stank," and he went into the men's room. That was the best thing that ever happened to me. I never got cocky again because, I guess the audience sensed that I thought I was the cat's pajamas, as they used to say. And never, never again.

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

INTERVIEWER:

Okay. So my last question for you then about that is did you find it difficult juggling your work life and your fame and being a mom and being a wife and all of that at that time?

01:00:04:00

CAROL BURNETT:

Well we had...our show was built around a school schedule. We had all of our summers off when the kids were off for the summer. We had two weeks at Christmas. We had a week off at Easter. Then we built it around their school schedule. For instance, somebody asked me once, how many hours a week I worked. It was about 29 hours a week because we were so organized. I'd go in, I take the kids to school on Monday and go into rehearsal at 10 o'clock. I'd be home in time to pick them up from school. We had dinner every night at six on the dot. The only night we worked was Friday night and the kids would come to the dress rehearsal at five o'clock. I'd see them and then they'd go home. We'd do the show and then we'd be home all weekend. So, it was really an ideal situation. It was almost like a part-time job. It was not those hours that they put in today, at all. I wouldn't do it.

END TC: 01:01:15:00