

## Betty Garrett—An appreciation

By Ron Rapoport

In 1946, shortly after Betty Garrett became a musical comedy star on Broadway overnight, Nathaniel Benchley wrote this in the *New York Herald-Tribune*: “Would anybody like a punch in the nose? Very well, buster, all you have to do is say you didn’t like Betty Garrett in ‘Call Me Mister.’ Aha, I thought so.”

That set the tone for the belligerence Betty’s friends and fans often brought to their devotion to her that lasted until her death February 12 at the age of 91. Whether they discovered her in the classic musicals from MGM’s Golden Age, her key roles in two of television’s greatest hits or during a theater career that culminated in an L.A. Stage Ovation Award nomination at the age of 90, many of them claimed her with an almost personal pride of possession.

At an appearance in a theater in Boca Raton, Fla., in the ‘90s, for instance, a man called out from the audience that he had been a waiter at Camp Tamiment in the Poconos 60 years earlier and had danced with her in one of its variety shows. Betty called him up to the stage where he demonstrated that he remembered the lyrics of their number down to the last syllable.

Betty told marvelous stories—Louis B. Mayer poking her in the chest, stomping on her feet and warning her not to get pregnant because it upset the shooting schedule; Frank Sinatra needing padding to fill out the rear end of his sailor suit in “On the Town”—but also, and I think this helps explain the admiration so many people had for her, she was resilient in ways that took your breath away.

At the age of 79, she walked off a stage in Chicago, tripped into a stairwell and ripped open her shin to the bone. A few days after the second of two skin-graft operations, she was hosting a non-stop salon in her hotel suite and writing a poem about how loving and supportive her good right leg was behaving toward her mangled left one, as well as a hilarious velvet-shiv ode to hospital food. Three months later, she was tap dancing and turning somersaults at the annual S.T.A.G.E. benefit in Los Angeles for AIDS patients she co-chaired for many years.

But the greatest test of her resilience was not physical but emotional and political. Are there any other victims of the Hollywood blacklist who have funny stories about Sen. Joseph McCarthy? Betty's was about the time McCarthy, drunker than a forest full of skunks, offered to buy her and her husband, Larry Parks, a drink after their performance in Las Vegas, then put his arm around Parks and said, "Are they giving you a tough time, kid?" Years later, when Betty told this to Studs Terkel during a radio interview, Terkel pounded the table in magnificent rage and yelled, "Son of a *BITCH!*"

To open the second act of her one-woman show, "Betty Garrett and Other Songs," Betty sang, "I'm Still Here," the Steven Sondheim song from "Follies" that has become an anthem for women singers of a certain age. (*Been called a pinko Commie tool/Got through it stinko by my pool.*)

One day the phone rang and a man who identified himself as Sondheim's representative said, "We have been informed you have rewritten the lyrics to one of Mr. Sondheim's songs. We must insist you cease doing this. Mr. Sondheim's songs must be sung exactly as they are written."

“Rewritten his lyrics!” she said. “I would never do that. Will you tell him that for me? And tell him something else, too? Tell him I think he’s been spying on me. I’ve done almost everything in that song.” Unlike the women who sang the song defiantly at the top of their voices, Betty approached it with a wistful bemusement. The effect was devastating. (*Seen all my dreams disappear/But I’m here.*)

But as much as Betty could laugh through the apocalypse, the blacklist never ceased to haunt her. Not so much for the harm it did to her own career—she did recover to some extent, making the cult classic “My Sister Eileen” with Jack Lemmon, Janet Leigh and Bob Fosse at Columbia, and acquiring a new generation of fans through her roles on “All in the Family” and “Laverne and Shirley”—but for the toll it took on Parks, who had been nominated for a best-actor Oscar for “The Jolson Story” and whose career as a leading man seemed assured.

The accusation that he had “named names” before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951 was false—the committee handed him a list of people it had already subpoenaed; he was not volunteering but reading—but, as is often the case, the myth left the truth in the dust and the death of Parks’ movie career at the hand of the right wing was accompanied by the snubs of friends on the left.

“I just love Betty and Larry,” said one of Hollywood’s biggest stars, with whom she had starred in several movies, “but it’s really dangerous to be around them any more.” That friendship eventually healed, but others never did. Those who did remain close to her, however, were never far from the realization that through the good times and bum times she had lived a great American life with humor, courage and grace.

“Betty Garrett is not a survivor,” *Times* theater critic Dan Sullivan once wrote, “she is a prevailer.” I’ll leave it there.

*Ron Rapoport collaborated with Betty Garrett on her autobiography, Betty Garrett and Other Songs.*