

# Comic, effervescent Teri Garr, US actress, dies at 79

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American actress Teri Garr died October 29 at the age of 79. Reportedly, she succumbed to the multiple sclerosis whose symptoms she first experienced in the early 1980s. Garr made her medical condition public in 2002, by which time her career had significantly slowed. She retired for good in 2011. The Associated Press reports that “Garr battled other health problems in recent years and underwent an operation in January 2007 to repair an aneurysm.”

The actress brightly and endearingly enlivened numerous films and television series in the 1970s and 1980s in particular. Her appearance in Mel Brooks’ comic *Young Frankenstein* (1974) was undoubtedly a high point in the early days of her career. Garr played the seductive, vivacious, slightly dizzy Inga, assistant to Dr. Frederick Frankenstein (Gene Wilder), complete with faux German accent (“the feeling is mu-tu-al”). Brooks’ film, of course, was also blessed with the presence of two other great female comic talents, Cloris Leachman and Madeline Kahn.

Garr was born in the Cleveland suburb of Lakewood, Ohio (or Los Angeles, depending on the source) in 1944, but raised primarily in North Hollywood. Her father Eddie Garr was a performer, an actor and a comedian, who struggled in show business. Her mother Phyllis had been a model and a dancer. In her memoir, she revealed that her father had tried to warn his children away from pursuing a career in Hollywood: “Don’t be in this business. It’s the lowest. It’s humiliating to people.”

According to biography.com,

She was only 11 years old when her father died. Years later, in her 2005 memoir, Teri described Eddie’s propensity for drinking and gambling as well as his declining health that kept him in bed or drove him to the hospital. Propelled back into the

workforce, Phyllis supported Teri and her brothers by working in the wardrobe department at NBC and later other studios.

Garr told the *Chicago Tribune* in 1988 that her father’s death

left us bereft, without any kind of income. And I saw my mother be this incredibly strong, creative woman who put three kids through college—one of my brothers is a surgeon. Any kind of lessons we wanted, we had to have scholarships or sweep the floors. It had to be free. And so we always had to try harder. That was instilled in me very early.

Garr studied ballet dancing intensely, practicing “three, four hours a day; my feet would be bleeding,” she told another interviewer in 1983.

After two years in college in the Los Angeles area, she took off for New York City where she occupied herself “dancing in Broadway chorus lines by night and studying at the Actors Studio by day, interrupted by occasional commutes to Hollywood for dancing parts in beach party and Elvis Presley movies.” (*Chicago Tribune*)

Garr appeared in a number of television series in the 1960s and early 1970s (*Dr. Kildare*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Star Trek*, *That Girl*, *M\*A\*S\*H*) before coming to greater prominence in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Conversation* (1974), a film very much of the Watergate era, in which she played the girlfriend of tormented surveillance expert Gene Hackman.

Her appearance in *The Conversation* led to an interview with Mel Brooks, who reportedly indicated he would hire her for his new film if she could speak with a German

accent. According to Garr, she learned the accent from a German woman who made wigs for Cher.

Her standing with the public was forever changed by Brooks' *Young Frankenstein*, a film with an irreverent attitude toward almost everything, science, Hollywood, the police, sexuality and more.

Dr. Frankenstein and Inga fall into one another's arms, while he awaits the arrival of his fiancée, Elizabeth (Kahn). The prim Elizabeth eventually shows up.

Freddy: I'd like you to meet my assistants Inga and Igor.

Elizabeth: How do you do? How do you do?

Freddy: This is my financier Elizabeth.

Inga: Oh, I'm so happy to meet you at last.

Freddy: Financee.

Elizabeth: Excuse me darling, what is it exactly that you do do?

Inga: Uh, well, I assist Dr. Frinkensteen in the laboratory. We have intellectual discussions on we-. As a matter of fact we were just having one as you entered, aren't we now? What?

Her role in the Brooks film opened numerous doors, and Garr remained active throughout the rest of the decade in film and television. In 1982, she was nominated for an Academy Award for her role as the friend of cross-dresser-by-necessity Dustin Hoffman in Sidney Pollack's satirical comedy *Tootsie*.

She co-starred with Michael Keaton (who paid a kind tribute to Garr following her death) in *Mr. Mom* (1983, Stan Dragoti), about an engineer in the auto industry who loses his job and finds himself, unexpectedly and unwarily, in charge of the children and the household chores.

The same year, Garr appeared with Donald Sutherland in *The Winter of Our Discontent* (Waris Hussein), a television film based on John Steinbeck's final novel, about an unhappy suburbanite. On the whole, however, in conventional Hollywood fashion, she was "typecast" as a comic performer, something about which she later expressed regret.

Many of her later films are fairly inconsequential, through no fault of Garr's. She had a small part, along with dozens of others, in Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), a scathing picture of the movie industry. She later performed in the same director's *Ready to*

*Wear* (1994), about the fashion business.

"It was also during those years," reports *Shoot*, "that Garr began to feel 'a little beeping or ticking' in her right leg. It began in 1983 and eventually spread to her right arm as well, but she felt she could live with it. By 1999 the symptoms had become so severe that she consulted a doctor. The diagnosis: multiple sclerosis."

For three years Garr didn't reveal her illness.

"I was afraid that I wouldn't get work," she explained in a 2003 interview. "People hear MS and think, 'Oh, my God, the person has two days to live.'"

*Brainandlife* explained that after appearing

in more than 100 films and TV series, garnering an Oscar nomination for best supporting actress in *Tootsie*, and earning a large and loyal fan base for such roles as Inga in *Young Frankenstein* ("I love to roll in ze hay!!") and Caroline in *Mr. Mom*, she found that the work had dried up.

"I think my career would have changed anyway at a certain age, but Hollywood's very finicky about everyone being perfect. When things slowed down, it was either the MS or that I'm a stinking actress, so I chose to believe it's the MS," she says. "There's definitely fear and misunderstanding out there about what MS is, and that's one of the reasons why it's so important to me to go out and talk about it."

Garr was also well-known for her many appearances on various talk shows, where her gift for spontaneous humor and her vitality made her a favorite with the public.

As the result of a brief interaction in 1988, this writer can report that Garr was as funny, charming and down-to-earth in "real life" as she was on the screen.



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