

Peek at the Past

She made a life in Hollywood but left her heart in Lock Haven

By MATT CONNOR - For The Express

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Is there any of us who hasn't fantasized about dropping everything and heading off to Hollywood to try to make a name for him- or herself as an actor?

Maybe those dreams manifested themselves during a particularly inspiring speech on an Oscar telecast, after receiving a round of applause during a school play, or after the 12th viewing of your favorite old film.

In your mind's eye you see yourself on a huge, 50-foot movie screen, engaged in a sword fight with Errol Flynn, or in a clinch with Rita Hayworth or Cary Grant, or trading riotous barbs with Hope and Crosby.

Well, Lock Haven native Christina Hart entertained those fantasies and then actually pursued them. One day at age 19 she packed up her car and drove to Los Angeles, with nothing but her dreams to sustain her.

"Acting is the only thing that I was ever really good at, the only thing I was ever really good at doing," Hart said recently during a telephone interview from her home in L.A. "I was 19 when I moved to California and joined theater companies and took classes and started working pretty quickly as soon as I got here."

Her first movie role was the female lead in "The Stewardesses." Made for a paltry \$100,000 in 1969, the movie went on to become a huge hit, grossing over \$25 million and making the previously obscure producers rich beyond dreams.

Sadly, it didn't do the same for Hart. "I'm pretty sure they paid me about \$600," she said dryly.

"The Stewardesses" is an odd film, to say the least, and the story behind the film is actually a lot more compelling than the hot mess that appeared on movie screens throughout 1970 and '71.

It started out, frankly, as an "adult" movie suitable only for the seedier theaters that specialized in that type of material. These were the days when neighborhood movie palaces were rapidly going out of business, many of which were then converted into low-rent porn emporiums.

The Roxy Theater on Main Street in Lock Haven was at one time in danger of just such a fate. During the 1980s, it held a once-a-week X-rated night, where the once-glorious facility (now beautifully restored) played host to drunken male college students who hooted over the antics of the randy undressed actors and actresses up on screen.

"The Stewardesses" would have fit perfectly in that setting, and it had already begun to turn a tidy profit in the "softcore" format when the producers, Louis Sher, Alf Stillman and Christopher Bell, decided to revamp it for a more mainstream audience. And that's where Christina Hart comes in. It's an intriguing, and very funny, story.

"The Stewardesses had no script when I auditioned for it," she said. "It had been a film in release before I ever signed to it. Now, I'm from Virginia, and I got my first agent out of the Yellow Pages. Her office was on top of a gun shop. Downstairs they sold guns and upstairs was this office with this Filipino woman and she was my agent. When I tell people that now, they're like, 'There are no agents in the Yellow Pages.'

"So I went to this audition," she continues. "I had no idea there was a previous movie. I had never seen the previous movie. They said they were going to write the script around me and the male lead - I think his name was Michael - where my character gets with this guy and she's sorry she did, and kills herself. So I said, 'That's interesting. I can do that.' So we did it, and all that I saw of the movie to that point was what I did, and it was pretty good. The producers were really nice. And I never saw one other piece of the movie at that time."

Using the new material shot with Hart, the producers spliced her few scenes into the already existing footage of randy stewardesses doffing their clothes and hopping into bed with any available man or woman.

Seeing the film today, it must be said, Hart's acting is almost Meryl Streep-like in its competence compared with everything else that is going on around her. It's not hard to see in this early piece of work that she was capable of much more. And best of all her character gets to keep her clothes on through 99 percent of the film, right up until the moment where she leaps off a 30-story balcony in the all-together.

Just a few weeks after Hart's work was completed, "The Stewardesses" was re-released with an R rating and a spiffy new promotional campaign. It was a box-office sensation.

"I finished the movie, and then shortly after that I went to see it downtown with my high school boyfriend and my mother," Hart said. "So the movie starts and I said, 'What the hell?! Are you kidding me?! What is this?!'"

Now, 40 years later, "The Stewardesses" is being released in a special two-disc "deluxe edition" DVD, complete with two sets of 3-D glasses and a documentary featuring Hart, who is rather understandably disdainful of the entire project.

Article Photos



Christina Hart is shown with John Ritter and Joyce DeWitt in an episode of the TV sitcom "Three's Company." PHOTO PROVIDED

A complimentary copy of "The Stewardesses" was obtained from the distributor for review in preparation to writing this column, and though it's billed as a "cult classic," it has little of the "so bad it's good" campiness of other motion pictures of this ilk, like Ed Wood's "Pretty Models All in a Row" or the immortal "Six Swedes and a Pump."

Happily for Hart, it wasn't her only movie. For the next 20 years the beautiful blonde worked almost constantly on the big screen and on television, in projects decidedly more respectable than her debut film.

"I've worked with a lot of wonderful people," Hart said, including Claire Bloom, Jason Robards, Walter Matthau and Janet Leigh.

A guest spot on the TV program "The Rookies" brought her to the attention of prolific producer Aaron Spelling, who put her under contract. From there she landed guest-starring gigs on Spelling-produced shows like "The Love Boat," "Charlie's Angels" and "Dynasty."

There were also appearances on "Happy Days," "The Streets of San Francisco," "Hawaii 5-0" and "The Odd Couple."

"My scenes were with Tony Randall and Jack Klugman on that show," she says, "And they never did the lines as written in the script. Jack Klugman told me they both knew each other like the backs of their hands. He knew when Tony was going to stop talking, 'So I'll just tap you on the leg when it's time to do your lines.'"

She shot a promising pilot called "The Daughters of Joshua Cabe Return" in 1975, based on an earlier, highly-rated Spelling-produced TV movie.

Unfortunately its leading man, Dan Daily, a 60-year-old former 20th Century Fox musical star, had something of a drinking problem, according to Hart, and the project was scuttled.

But she was never at a loss for work, and one project followed another. "The Incredible Hulk," "Barnaby Jones," "BJ and the Bear," and film projects like "Johnny Red Cloud" and "Keep off My Grass!" kept her busy through the 1970s and 80s.

"Mad Dog Blues," teamed her with George Kennedy, who sponsored her membership in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, giving her a vote in the Oscars every year.

The most challenging role of her career, she says, was as mass killer Patricia Krenwinkel in "Helter Skelter," the chilling 1976 TV movie based on the Charles Manson-engineered Tate-LaBianca murders of 1969. It was a ratings blockbuster, nominated for three Emmys.

"It's such a fascinating story," Hart said of "Helter Skelter." "It was so well done. They've done several other versions of it since, but they've never done anything as good as 'Helter Skelter' was."

Her last screen credit to date was in a 1989 episode of "Murder, She Wrote," starring Angela Lansbury. At that point, she said, she was growing tired of television work and began looking for other challenges. She leased a small theater in L.A. and began producing and starring in plays locally, which she says is very rewarding.

She also provides guidance for her two actress daughters, Kaitlin and Portia Doubleday, both of whom have had some success in the big and small screens. (Portia's next film project, "Youth in Revolt," teams her with the hot young actor Michael Cera, of "Superbad" and "Juno" fame.)

All of this is a world away from Christina Hart's early days in Lock Haven, where she was born in 1949 and visited frequently throughout her life after her family moved out of the area when she was 2 years old.

"My grandfather had a store in Lock Haven, a corner store, some kind of a market," Hart said. "We did a walking tour of Lock Haven two summers ago, to the varying houses that we lived in, and the house that my father was raised in.

"It was really neat. My grandfather Hartzell had three boys, Uncle Francis, Uncle Vick and my father. I'm sure they all went to Lock Haven High. My mom, who was a Hawkins, lived on Church Street. My father taught elementary school in Lock Haven. He lives in Florida now. He loved Lock Haven and probably would have stayed there, but economically he wasn't able to support his family there. Except for a few years of travel that took us too far away, we went back at least two times a year."

Hart says that the memories she has of the Susquehanna Valley "really shaped my personality, for sure. It represented stability. We moved a lot, so a lot of my stability came from that little house on Church Street. Where I live now, and where I've lived in the past, is the antithesis of Lock Haven.

"For some people that part of yourself never goes away, that wonderful sense of stability and heritage. Even as a child I understood the fact that my grandmother had a swing on her porch was one of those things that were really important to me, and I couldn't wait to run up that walk in front of her house. My grandparents were very poor. I want to say 665 East Church Street was their address."

Visiting her grandparents on the east side of town, Hart learned to love the smell of fresh cut grass, swimming in the Susquehanna and playing on a neighbor's wraparound porch.

"And I loved running through the alleys between the houses, which didn't exist in a lot of the small towns in which I lived, and certainly not in Los Angeles," she said. "I loved the railroad tracks, and I loved the sound of the train going by and I loved the nights there with the fireflies and the fact that it stays hot at night in the summer it gets cool here (in LA) at night and I just treasure those things and I try to recreate those experiences as much as I can in my own life and in my children's lives."

Indeed, listening to Hart tell of her obvious affection for the city and its residents is enough to make one appreciate better what we have here, and often take for granted. Sitting in her home office, she said, was a table and chairs built by her grandfather, who worked at the old Griffin Chair Factory, which burned down in the 1950s. These are objects she cherishes because of the memories they stir.

"Two years ago, when I was sitting in the Texas Restaurant, this lady came over to me and told me, 'I was one of your mother's best friends. She would never come downstairs when we would go out dancing until her hair was in place, and it would take her so long!' This lady was like, 80!" she says in wonderment, rarely having met anyone who had lived in the same small town for over 50 years. "The core of what I see in family members that stayed here is a simplicity and a contentment in their lives. All of the people that I'm still close to in Lock Haven have a beautiful sense of contentment about them.

"And that's not a part of city life."

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Two of the original Peek at the Past books are available for purchase at the Ross Library. Matt Connor can be reached at mbconnor4265@comcast.net

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