

Hollywood survivors

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Two grande dames discuss the industry's youth obsession

By Glenn Lovell
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One sips hot lemonade with ginger, the other likes her Virgin Mary "on the spicy side, please." One smiles demurely and leans in to be heard, the other pontificates and stares into space. One has an Oscar, the other two Emmys.

Cicely Tyson, who transformed herself for "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman," and Louise Fletcher, who earned an Oscar for her dreaded Nurse Ratched in "one Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," met for the first time on the set of "Fat Rose and Squeaky." The low-budget movie is about elderly friends Celine and Bonnie, who are coping with Alzheimer's and the fear of living alone.

We sat with Fletcher and Tyson during breaks in rehearsals last month. The actresses, both 71, talked about how they're faring in an industry notorious for its mistreatment of women well past 40.

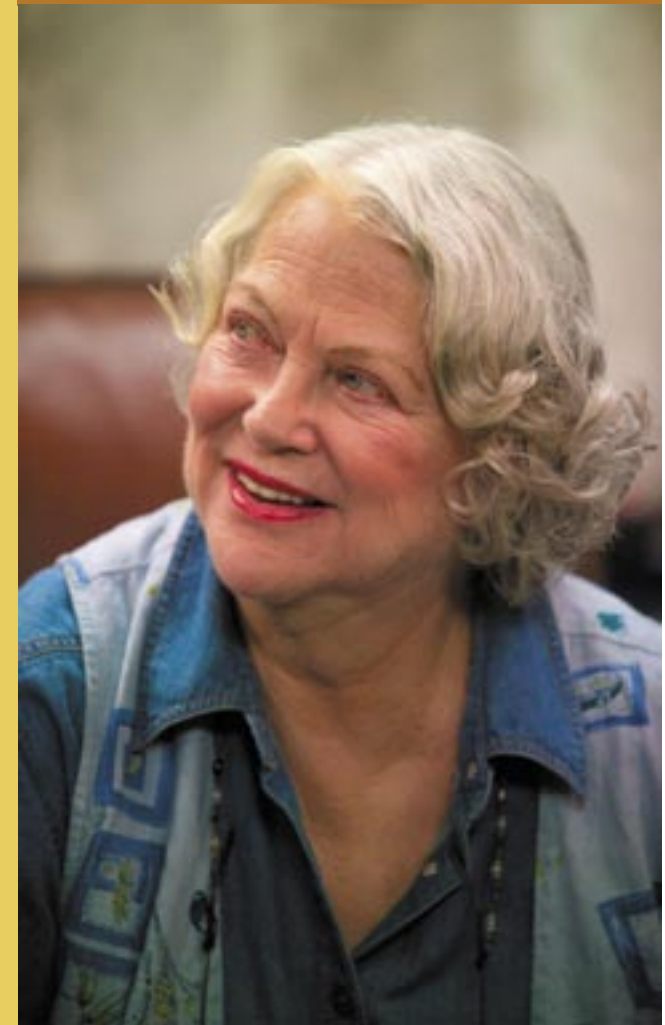
Even for a low-budget picture, this one is pretty low budget. What drew two distinguished actresses to "Fat Rose and Squeaky" (the names of Bonnie's fantasy friends)?

Fletcher: (cradling her Virgin Mary): The script, it's a very good script and the role is a very good role. A lot of the screenplay takes place in Bonnie's head. I have some scenes that are 10-12 pages long. Scary.

Tyson: (in between sips of lemonade): Size didn't have anything to do with it. For me, it was the character and the part she plays in the scheme of things. I would have done "Jane Pittman" if it had been done in the basement of a church.



Cicely Tyson



Louise Fletcher

Tell me about Bonnie and Celine.

Fletcher: Bonnie is 83 years old. Pretty broken down...living alone and on the verge of not making it. She's not going to die any day, but she's in danger all the time. And she has a best friend who lives down the street, who's played by Cicely.

Tyson: Celine is in her early 70s. She was born in France and came to America with the dream of becoming a great ballerina...Interestingly, the character was written for a white actress. It's very comforting to know that.

For your characters, do you do anything special to age--use makeup or padding?

Fletcher: No padding. Believe me, I don't need any padding! They're just going to accentuate the age that I have. The rest is just attitude, body language. And I have a cane.

Tyson: Celine grew up as a dancer. She's physically better off than Bonnie; she doesn't have all those discomforts that are indigenous to aging. Physically and mentally, she is very adept. So I don't use any aging makeup or props.

Did you visit homes for the elderly as part of your research?

Fletcher: I have a long list of places in this area. I just came from the Willow Senior Center in Willow Glen. A really nice place. I think the citizens in San Jose for the most part have a more of a conscience than those in Los Angeles.

Tyson: No, no visits this time. I worked more on Celine's French roots. When I did "Jane Pittman," I did a tremendous amount of research. I visited a home for the aged in L.A. and interviewed three women, ages 105, 103 and 97. I was fascinated by how different they were. If you didn't have a thought, you have nothing to say.

With a large segment of our population over 60, this film is particularly timely.

Tyson: Absolutely. It's a very fearful time because of ironically, the miracle of medicine and what the medical profession has done in terms of extending one's life. I question what the point is of having that if you are not able to function. Quality of life is foremost here, and if you're going to live into your 80s and 90s and you cannot even remember who you are, what is the point?

Fletcher: We live in a very youth-worshipping culture. When people get over a certain age, they become invisible to most other people. As a woman of 40-something, I used to say, "My God, I'm invisible--men don't even look at me anymore!"

Any hints on how to stay vital into your sunset years?

Tyson: Bonnie and Celine have become vegetarians. They say they abstain from vices like smoking and drinking, but you find out that they're a little deceptive there.

Fletcher: Regular interaction is important. I talked to this elderly woman at the Willow Center who was physically challenged, but mentally she was so alert, so vital. Her humor and her attitude were just amazing.

Hollywood has always been ageist. If you're a 35-year-old woman, forget about it--you're "over the hill." Has anything changed?

Fletcher: Hollywood has never been a very realistic place. I notice movie grandmothers are about 45 now. After "Cuckoo's Nest" I got work on a more regular basis, but I wasn't in competition for the leading lady or romantic interest parts. I found myself playing women much older than I am, simply because that's Hollywood's approach.

Tyson: Things have changed for men, but not for women. When a man ages, he becomes a lot more attractive to Hollywood. As a woman ages, she becomes less attractive to Hollywood because youth is the scale on which everything is weighed.

How has this affected you personally?

Tyson: I'm known as the actress who works every couple of years. When a few years go by, and I don't get a call, it's not unusual for me. Last year, I had the miraculous good fortune of doing two movies--"Diary of a Mad Black Woman" and "Because of Winn-Dixie"--which ended up on the highest-grossing movie list the same week. But prior to that, I don't know that I had done anything.

Fletcher: It's appalling what actresses do to hook roles--take injections, cut up their faces. Look at what Meg Ryan has done to herself, those collagen injections. Why? I don't consider the age of the character; it's just whatever comes up and if I think I can do it. And if I think it's gonna be fun.

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