The Triumph and Tragedy of Suzanne Alexander

Samuel Clemens

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By Samuel Clemens

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Dedicated to the models of *Queen for a Day*

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Introduction

Suzanne Alexander was one of the most talented, gorgeous, and likeable women in Hollywood. She was also one of the most underrated. Her dark hair, distinct voice, and flawless complexion was popular with audiences on television, as she was seen daily on Queen for a Day and weekly on Juke Box Jury. She was one of the go-to models for agencies who needed an attractive, yet classy woman to showcase everything including fashion, swimwear, appliances, and cosmetics. Her impressive measurements of 36-23-35 at 5ft 6in and 118lbs fit the requirements of Hollywood's unbelievable high standards of beauty.

She was phenomenally talented; in fact, she was more talented than audiences realized. She was a fine actress who had immense range. She could portray anyone in any genre. She was a great dramatic actress who a gift of comedy, which was rare for actresses of that era. This was expected considering that she studied acting alongside stars like Grace Kelly.

Anyone who was close to Suzanne remembers her as being a kind person. Hollywood is bombarded with people who are pretentious, assuming, and disrespectful. This never applied to Suzanne. Even as her career progressed, she maintained humility. As her career declined, she stayed positive. She had class that was unmatched by anyone in Hollywood.
I decided to write about Suzanne Alexander because I was impressed by her talent and charm, but saddened by her death. I found it ashame that Hollywood didn't see Suzanne as a star the way that I saw her after seeing her in Cat-Women of the Moon (1953). I saw that she starred alongside Fred Astaire, Joan Collins, Rita Moreno, Jane Russell, and Debbie Reynolds, but was confused as to why she didn't achieve the same success that they did. Suzanne Alexander was an icon of glamour in the 1950s, and I am honored to tell her story.

Early Years

Gwendolynne “Suzanne” Alice Ann White was born on September 8, 1931 in Toronto, Canada to William White and Gwendolyn Haynes. Her father was a renowned concert entertainer, while her mother was -an unofficial- Miss Canada of 1918. Unfortunately, her mother didn’t achieve the success that she yearned for, so she tried to achieve it through her daughter Suzanne. A controlling and authoritative mother would create enormous difficulties for Suzanne throughout her childhood.

Suzanne began performing as a teenager when her mother enrolled her and her brother Will J. White in figure skating. Although they weren’t among the best athletes, they were recognized for their abilities to perform in the presence of an audience. Seeing their potential, their instructor recommended that they study acting. They were gifted, particularly Suzanne with her glamourous image and natural abilities to portray in-depth characters. Their family moved to Pennsylvania and later New York after Will was accepted to the renowned American Academy of Dramatic Arts. Suzanne

lived with her aunt until she got accepted into the institution. Suzanne had ambitions to be a dramatic actress and vocalist, while Will focused on being a “character” actor. She officially immigrated to the United States of America on March 25, 1947.

Suzanne graduated from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in 1948 -with actress Grace Kelly- where her brother had graduated from years prior. She moved with her family to Los Angeles, California to pursue a career in Hollywood, where she was fortunate enough to be hired as Dinah Shore’s secretary; it was a position that she held for three years, and it gave her the opportunity to rub shoulders with actors, producers, and directors.

The Finalists in Queen of the Home Show - July 29, 1952

She began building her resume by competing in pageants, in which she was successful. She was crowned Miss Studio City of 1949, Miss San Fernando Valley of 1949, Queen of the Fiesta of 1950, Miss Vegetable Plate of 1953, and was a finalist in Queen of the Home Show in 1952. She received the "key to the city" by Studio City's Chamber of Commerce after being crowned Miss San Fernando Valley. The last surviving contestant of that pageant, Teri Reid (her stage name), described Suzanne as being unusually withdrawn, shy, and reserved. Although that seemed unusual for an aspiring actress, Marilyn Monroe had exhibited those qualities too.

Suzanne Alexander with Stephanie Griffin, Grace Brown, Barbara Wilson, Jean Moorhead, and Nancy Woodruff in Miss Rheingold – September 1954

After being crowned Miss San Fernando Valley on May 7, 1949 by Frank Galpin, she competed for the title of Miss California in Santa Cruz, California. The competition began on June 9th and concluded on June 12th with 21 contestants. This all-expenses-paid trip was one of the most memorable parts of her career. She stayed at the Rio Del Mar Hotel and dined at the Cocanut Grove. She was truly given the 5-star treatment.

The festivities were hosted by Bill Baldwin with music provided by the Santa Cruz Beach Symphonic Band. She placed an impressive fourth after performing a monologue that was telecasted on KPIX, which critics described as breathtaking. She accepted honors onstage -bestowed by Lieutenant Governor Goodwin Knight- in a white swimsuit in front of roughly 25,000 spectators. Her prizes included a radio and a handbag. Joan Pederson of Santa Rosa, California would be crowned Miss California of that year, and would compete for the title of Miss America shortly thereafter.

A lot of publicity followed, with producers and agencies expressing interest in casting her. She was considered for stage productions like Aunt Sarah and Detective Story while appearing at venues like the Studio City Community Fair and the grand opening of Glendale Federal Savings.

On April 28, 1950, Suzanne finally got her first televised role on the series Club Time opposite Bob McLaughlin where she portrayed a secretary. She retired from contests afterwards and focused on her career as an actress, while continuing to live with her recently-divorced mother on Moorpark Street in Studio City, California. A brief engagement to music mogul Jerry Lester followed, but ended partly because of Suzanne's fear of leaving her mother.

Her relationship with her mother was unusual and co-dependent. Even after reaching adulthood, Suzanne and her mother had an evening ritual where they would soak their hair in water for several minutes, drink a glass of red wine, and hold hands as they fell asleep in separate beds that were perpendicular with each other. Although Suzanne discussed this ritual with friends as though it was normal, it could've been a reason for her fear of marriage as she would have to leave her mother.

Gwendolyn Anne Haynes

Suzanne's mother, Gwendolyn, one raised by John J. Haynes Sr. and Alice Maud Mottram who immigrated to Canada from England. Her mother was -ironically of course- an actress and part-time stenographer who achieved modest success by starring in a stage production of Daddy Long Legs. She was the oldest of several daughters, thus constantly competed for

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