



America's Dirtiest Dancer

Cloris Leachman could fill a memoir with tales of seducing men half her age, watching Marilyn grind with JFK (and RFK), and her "epic" attraction to Gene Hackman. So that's just what she did.



SONA CHARAIPOTRA 02.06.09 7:37 AM ET

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Cloris Leachman was an overweight octogenarian who wanted to compete on the endurance-testing reality show, *Dancing With the Stars*. "They said I was too old. They're denying it now, so I don't know what to think," she says. "Maybe they just didn't like me?"

If that's the case, audiences disagreed—Leachman argued her way onto the show and became an instant fan favorite, foxtrotting with retired pro Corky Ballas and cracking wise for the cameras. It's a pretty good representation of how her career, now in its sixth decade, has been progressing. At an age when most actresses are settling into occasional cameos and swan-song performances, Leachman is only accelerating. She was nominated for an Emmy each and every one of the six years she played scary Slavic Grandma Ida on *Malcolm in the Middle* earlier this decade. And in February, fresh from the hot tub and clad only in a bathrobe, the 82-year-old Leachman shared a much-hyped makeout scene with Jack Black, 43 years her junior, on *The Office*. He "couldn't be darling-er," she purrs about Black.

"Whether it was Judy, Marilyn, Marlon, or Gene, these were just people in my life, and I cared about them. They're not movie stars to me, they're human beings."

Now the Oscar-winning star of 1971's *The Last Picture Show* has a memoir, *Cloris*. In it, she shares the details of her storied life: helping next-door neighbor Judy Garland climb out of the depths of her depression, watching Marilyn Monroe grind on a dance floor with John and Bobby Kennedy, and having sex with Gene Hackman—"Some giant space magnet was pulling us together. It was epic," she recalls fondly. Leachman spoke to *The Daily Beast* about rehearsing her kiss with Jack Black, working with Val Kilmer and Quentin Tarantino, and why she was happy when her time on *Dancing With the Stars* finally ended.

You're not showing any signs of winding down your career. Why write an autobiography now?

It was kind of a lifetime decision, almost now-or-never. I was looking at my life and thinking, what should I do next? And my former husband, [producer and director] George Englund, was talking with my son and manager, George Jr., and they decided I should do a one-woman show and write a book. So we've done both of them.

In the book, you reveal some intimate experiences with other bold-faced names, like your brief affair with Gene Hackman, or when you talked your neighbor Judy Garland down from her severe depression. Was it hard to decide where to draw the line on what you'd share?

I didn't want to be salacious, but these were my experiences. People are people after all, whether you're a plumber or a movie star. We're just human beings. Whether it was Judy, Marilyn, Marlon, or Gene, these were just people in my life, and I cared about them. They're not movie stars to me, they're human beings. They have the same problems as anyone else.



You stole the show on *Dancing With the Stars* last season. You say they rejected you twice before accepting you?

Yeah, but I just kept pushing. They said I was too old. They're denying it now, so I don't know what to think. Maybe they just didn't like me? But we worked it out. In the end, we had arranged a meeting, there was about six of us. We had a wonderful time, laughing. And I was cursing a lot through it. I don't know if it scared them, but I wanted to be funny. At the end, I said, "I'm not leaving until everybody curses." And we went around the circle and everybody cursed until we got to one woman and she just couldn't do it! She couldn't say it.

Was doing *Dancing* difficult for you physically?

It was. I had gained about 30 pounds, and most of it was in my stomach. It made it really hard to dance. I couldn't even imagine hopping, and to dance, you have to at least be able to hop. I've lost half of the weight now, but I sure didn't lose it when I was on the show. It was wonderful, but it was hard. When you're on the show, that's your life. Three hours a day of rehearsals for me, and that's half of what some of the other contestants did. It went longer than I thought I'd be on it, for sure. I surprised myself. But I was happy when it ended.

What made you want to do the show? *Dancing* usually doesn't score Oscar winners.

Well, they could. They did, didn't they? It was great fun. We had a wonderful time. It was revitalizing in certain ways that I hadn't been revitalized. The fans of the show are so funny—I can always tell that's where they know me from. I guess I got a little out of hand on that show, huh? I'm going to be on again this week or next. Corky and I are both going to be on. We're not in touch, really, but we see each other from time to time. He is a lovely young man.

Speaking of younger men, you also played a cougar on *The Office* in February.

Hahahahaha! Cougar? Is that what they're calling it these days? It's so funny. It was a fun show to do. And Jack Black couldn't be darling-er. He's the sweetest man alive. I played Jessica Alba's grandmother and I stole Jack from her. Jack is a wonderful kisser. We had, ahem, "discussed" the scene for about half an hour in my dressing room. We had a good time. But I didn't have to give him any tips, even though I have more experience than him. I enjoy working with younger actors. I love to give advice, but nobody ever asks me. Everyone has their own approach.

In your book, you say your approach is that you're never afraid to make a fool of yourself.

That's certainly true. Let whatever's going to happen, happen. Don't judge it before you do it. Sure, sometimes it will be terrible, but sometimes it will just be amazing. That's where the gold is. My preference is to be different all the time—that's a conscious decision. I don't want people to think I'm who I just played. That's why I'm always looking for something new.

You also reveal a strong devotion to raising your five children. How did you manage work and family?

It looks like I was working all the time, but I really wasn't. In those early years, when my children were young, I wouldn't do things that would take me away from home for more than three days. And maybe I missed out on a few things, but I decided what was important to me. Now I love spending time with my grandchildren and my great-grandson, Braden. He's an adorable little three-year-old now and he's so funny. He wanted to play ping-pong with me yesterday, and so he just simply put his paddle straight up and waited for the ball to hit it.

This August, you've got Quentin Tarantino's new war shocker, *Inglourious Basterds*, with Brad Pitt.

I adore Quentin. I guess he is a fan. He's a dear, sweet, very talented man, and the script is one of the best I've ever read. It's set in Paris during World War II, and all the things that happened there just shock you. I was shocked that he would write this. I play an old Jewish woman and a young man comes to my door and he asks me to do something for him, which I do. I cannot reveal more than that under penalty of death.

After *Basterds*, what's next?

I've got an indie film movie with that guy who played Batman. What's his name? Val Kilmer. It's called *American Cowslip*. And I'm doing a children's movie this summer, *Oogie Loves and the Big Balloon Adventure*. I get to sing and dance in it, so I can't wait. My great-grandson will like that one. We're also talking about doing a stage version of *Driving Miss Daisy*, with some songs in it. I think that would be wonderful.

And I'm returning to my one-woman show, which got pushed aside a bit for *Dancing With the Stars*. I'm going to do it again. In fact, I just did it on a ship for 2,000 people and they loved it! They gave me a standing ovation before I even finished. It was lovely.

So is the show going national this summer?

I think it will, yes. I'm going to start in [my hometown] Des Moines. We need a new building for the high school, and I'm going to be giving them all the money I earn for that show. I'm a small-town Iowa girl myself, but I left before I even turned 20. When I go back to Iowa, people are always happy to see me. But California is home now.

You'll be 83 this month now, any plans to leave acting behind?

Oh, no! I absolutely love acting. I would never give it up. It's the most fun thing in the world. I get to sing and dance, I meet interesting people, I still get to play the piano. I'm very satisfied with the way things have worked out. I'm in a wonderful place in my life.

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Screenwriter and journalist Sona Charaipotra has contributed to the *New York Times*, *People*, *ABCNews.com*, *MSN.com*, *American Way* and other publications. Formerly an editor at *Teen People* and a reporter for *People* magazine, she writes about travel, food and entertainment at www.fishin4backpack.com.