

Thelma Ritter: Actress, Mother, Neighbor

Tony Award Winner and Six Time Best Supporting Actress Oscar Nominee Was Well Loved Resident of Forest Hills Gardens

By Cheryl Cuddeback

You might recognize her in the Alfred Hitchcock movie *Rear Window* as Jimmy Stewart's visiting nurse, Stella, or in *All About Eve*, playing Bette Davis's maid for which she was nominated for an Oscar. Her characters were real, gutsy and often with a twinkle in her eyes. Murphy Smith, a past resident of Forest Hills, in a recent e-mail to me, wrote, "I remember how much Thelma seemed exactly like her actual self on the screen in the Rock Hudson - Doris Day movies. Her NY accent was the real Thelma. She was perfect in the supporting roles in so many movies, even non-comedic roles. I remember *Birdman of Alcatraz* with Burt Lancaster in the lead; Thelma was his mother."

And yet despite her career as a movie actress, Thelma Ritter was a private person. Little material is available on her personal life. What I did learn about Thelma Ritter came from a telephone conversation I had with her daughter, Monica Moran, and insights from those who knew her while she lived in Forest Hills. Born in Brooklyn in 1905 on Valentine's Day she proved herself to be quite the thespian at the ripe age of 8. She followed her dreams which resulted in 6 Oscar nominations for Best Supporting Actress, a Tony in 1957 for her role in the Broadway musical "A New Girl in Town" and an Achievement Award from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, her alma mater. While she may not have won an Oscar, she won the hearts of movie audiences everywhere.

While living at 85 Greenway Terrace, with her husband, Joseph Moran, two children, Monica and Joseph Jr., and Beany, their pet bull dog, she was known as Mrs. Moran. Thelma Ritter may not have been a member of The Women's Club of Forest Hills Gardens, or The West Side Tennis Club, it just didn't seem to be her style, but she was a regular at The Church-in-the-Gardens. Every church member I spoke to who attended services in the 50's and 60's can remember the Moran Family sitting in the front left area of the church. Like clockwork, they'd all show up every Sunday, sitting side by side.

Ms. Ritter and her family became church members in 1952. In an article from the church's September newsletter, Reverend Franklin Cole, the current minister at the time, wrote about his first visit to the Ritter/Moran household; "I was led into a friendly 'lived in' living room. There was not a single trace of Hollywood, despite their 'glamour jobs'; they were a "neighborly and unpretentious couple".

Thelma Ritter met Joe Moran in the late 1920's at summer troupe in New England. Joe had just graduated from John Hopkins but wanted to "revisit his old love, the theater". At first Thelma was not impressed with Joe. She thought he "regarded himself as the world's gift to the theater." Yet it didn't take long for her to change her tune. The two were married shortly thereafter, "just in time for the depression". According to Ms. Ritter, their ace in the hole was Joe's gift with words. Looking for ways to earn quick cash, he would write winning limericks in numerous radio contests. Most win-

nings weren't always in cash but in products. More often than not, their closets were often stuffed with a variety of 'radio loot' such as cereals and watches of all things. It was Joe's flair for the language that made the prominent advertising agency, Young & Rubicam, stand up and take notice. He eventually became the vice-president and associate director of its radio television department.

One thing you can say about Thelma Ritter and Joe Moran is they were definitely resourceful. While Joe created jingles, Thelma worked in radio. She made several appearances in *Big Town*, a crime drama starring Edward G. Robinson, the original movie gangster and often traveled to Chicago reading dramatic roles for The Theater Guild on the Air. Like her husband, Ms. Ritter also entered contests to supplement their income. During one she 'stumped the experts' winning a set of Encyclopedia Britannica and \$500 which "came in very handy when the children were smaller". Like Joe, her stick-to-it-tiveness got her places, like an audition for a walk-on part in a 20th Century Movie about a Christmas miracle on 34th Street in 1947. As fate would have it, Darryl Zunick reviewed the filmed auditions and took note of the feisty woman from Queens. He offered Thelma Ritter a small part in, you guessed it, *Miracle on 34th Street*. She was the shopper who is impressed by Macy's Santa for suggesting she go to another department store to purchase a fire engine for her son Peter. In the scene, she tells the head of Macy's toy department, that she will become a loyal Macy's customer. The part was so small that she's not listed in the credits but it was the beginning of Thelma Ritter's career as a movie star. She was 45 at the time. It was also around this time the Moran Family moved into The Gardens after many years of living on the other side of the Queens Boulevard, which is Forest Hills way of saying 'the other side of the tracks'

Fortunately the film was shot on location, or she may have turned down the opportunity. As Ms. Ritter said, "I don't want to live in Hollywood. Why should we move after we've lived for fourteen years on the wrong side of the subway tracks?" Besides, like most New Yorkers, she didn't drive. She got around using the subways just fine. But years later she needed to learn how to maneuver a jeep for a movie. As another one of Monica and Tony's friends, Stan Peck, recalled, "I remember her whizzing around the Gardens when she was learning how to drive a jeep for some movie."

Notwithstanding both parents having demanding careers, they didn't allow it to interfere with their personal life. Theirs was a healthy home. Monica and Joseph Jr., who were known by their neighborhood friends as Nikki and Tony. During a recent telephone conversation I had with Monica Moran, I asked how 'Monica' became 'Nikki'? "My only guess is my brother may have come up with the name when I was a baby".

Because of their parents' standards of maintaining a normal life, without the glitz and glamour of Hollywood, each lived regular childhoods and have



Thelma Ritter (left) on the set of "The Misfits" with none other than Marilyn Monroe

to this day on-going relationships with the friends they made while growing up in The Gardens. Monica Moran attended Kew Forest and eventually followed in her mother's footsteps by entering the acting profession. She made her acting debut in the movie, *Take Her She's Mine*, starring Jimmy Stewart and Sandra Dee. Monica plays the part of a super cool beatnik with straight jet black hair strumming away on her guitar. I learned from Monica that the black hair was actually a wig worn by Elizabeth Taylor in the movie *Cleopatra*. Tony, who wanted to be a farmer when he grew up, joined the Marine Corps and was stationed on Paris Island. He recently retired as a 'rig' man while working in various movie studios. Today both Monica and Tony have children and even grandchildren of their own.

In March of 1968, tragedy overcame the Moran family. Shortly after doing a show with Jerry Lewis, Ms. Ritter died of heart failure. Rev. Alvin Brewer, who had replaced Dr. Cole at the Church-in-the-Gardens, presided over the funeral service. Despite one of the worst snow storms to hit the area, it was standing room only in the church. Such notables as Tony Randal attended. By then both the Moran kids were full fledged adults and lived with their own families. Joe Sr., continued living in Forest Hills yet eventually moved to California where he passed on. Their house was recently sold last year.

Thelma Ritter had become a familiar presence in the neighborhood and church, volunteering behind the scenes yet expecting no credit. What she did in her personal and professional life she did for the simple experience of it. She was the real stuff. Thelma Ritter and her family were the kind of neighbors and friends anyone would be proud to have.