

Born-Again Christian Actress Cicely Tyson Dies at 96

Born-again Christian and actress Cicely Tyson, who was honored as the first recipient of the International Faith and Family Film Festival Award at Bishop T.D. Jakes' inaugural Legends Awards in 2017, died Thursday at 96.

Tyson's death was announced by her family via her manager, Larry Thompson, who did not immediately provide additional details.

After Jakes presented Tyson with the award at the prestigious ceremony, Tyson was quoted as saying, "I am absolutely speechless, breathless. My cup runneth over."

Tyson earned an Oscar nomination for her role as the sharecropper's wife in *Souder* and a Tony Award in 2013 at age 88 for the revival of Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*. She touched viewers' hearts with her starring role in the 1974 television movie, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.

A one-time model, she began her screen career with bit parts but gained fame in the early 1970s when Black women were finally starting to get starring roles. Tyson refused to take parts simply for the paycheck, remaining choosy.

"I'm very selective as I've been my whole career about what I do. Unfortunately, I'm not the kind of person who works only for money. It has to have some real substance for me to do it," she told The Associated Press in 2013.

Tributes from Broadway and Hollywood poured in, including from Tracie Thomas who thanked her for paving the way. "A queen and a trailblazer indeed," she wrote on Twitter. Marlee Matlin wrote: "She was a consummate pro and all class."

Besides her Oscar nomination, she won two Emmys for playing the 110-year-old former slave in the 1974 television drama *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. A new generation of moviegoers saw her in the 2011 hit *The Help*.

Writing in *Blacks in American Film and Television*, Donald Bogle described Tyson as “a striking figure: slender and intense with near-perfect bone structure, magnificent smooth skin, dark penetrating eyes, and a regal air that made her seem a woman of convictions and commitment. (Audiences) sensed... her power and range.”

Sounder, based on the William H. Hunter novel, was the film that confirmed her stardom in 1972. Tyson was cast as the Depression-era loving wife of a sharecropper (Paul Winfield) who is confined in jail for stealing a piece of meat for his family. She is forced to care for their children and attend to the crops.

The New York Times reviewer wrote: “She passes all of her easy beauty by to give us, at long last, some sense of the profound beauty of millions of Black women.”

Her performance evoked rave reviews, and Tyson won an Academy Award nomination as best actress of 1972.

In an interview on the Turner Classic Movies cable channel, she recalled that she had been asked to test for a smaller role in the film and said she wanted to play the mother, Rebecca. She was told, “You’re too young, you’re too pretty, you’re too sexy, you’re too this, you’re too that, and I said, ‘I am an actress.’”

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, based on a novel by Ernest J. Gaines, Tyson is seen aging from a young woman in slavery to a 110-year-old who campaigned for the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

In the touching climax, she laboriously walks up to a “whites

only" water fountain and takes a drink as white officers look on.

"It's important that they see and hear history from Miss Jane's point of view," Tyson told *The New York Times*. "And I think they will be more ready to accept it from her than from someone younger."

New Yorker film critic Pauline Kael offered her praise: "She's an actress, all right, and as tough-minded and honorable in her methods as any we've got."

At the Emmy Awards, *Pittman* won multiple awards, including two honors for Tyson, best lead actress in a drama and best actress in a special.

"People ask me what I prefer doing—film, stage, television? I say, 'I would have done *Jane Pittman* in the basement or in a storefront.' It's the role that determines where I go," she told the AP.