

# An Unforgettable Woman



## A Tribute to Jill Clayburgh

By Jarrod Emerson

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Jill Clayburgh at the *Running with Scissors* World Premiere  
Beverly Hills, California, October 10, 2006 © Jody Cortes /WENN/NewsCom

On November 10<sup>th</sup> of 2010, Leukemia claimed the life of Jill Clayburgh. No run-of-the-mill actress, Clayburgh led a long, diverse career, was nominated for two Academy Awards, and most of all, set a new image for women on the silver screen. Her roles ranged from dramatic to comedic, stable to in-crisis. In short, she was versatile.

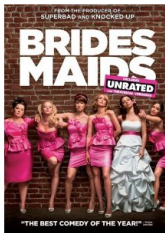
Born into wealthy family on Manhattan's Upper East Side on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944, Ms. Clayburgh expressed interest in the arts from a young age and, as a student at Sarah Lawrence College, she began her training as an actress. After graduation, she joined Boston's Charles Street Repertory Theater before moving on to establish herself on Broadway, in television and on film.

Clayburgh had a knack for playing strong and complex female characters, and she established this through many memorable performances across the decades and genres. Although her stardom faded after the early 1980s, she graced the screen until the very end. And while ashes may be all that remains of her body, Jill Clayburgh's work and the impact she created are everlasting.

For this tribute, I viewed the following Jill Clayburgh films:

- ***An Unmarried Woman***
- ***Bridesmaids***
- ***First Monday in October***
- ***I'm Dancing As Fast As I Can***
- ***Never Again***
- ***Running With Scissors***
- ***Silver Streak***
- ***Starting Over***

**Based on this sampling,  
I highly recommend  
these six Clayburgh films »**



**1) AN UNMARRIED WOMAN (1978):** “Erica Benton” (Jill Clayburgh) has a good life: A beautiful Manhattan apartment, a good relationship with her daughter, and a wealthy and loving husband in “Martin” (Michael Murphy). But Erica’s world is rocked when Martin abruptly divorces her for another woman. Initially confused, vulnerable and shaken by her divorce, Erica soon learns to embrace her newfound freedom; seeking the help of a therapist she begins functioning well as a single parent, explores her sexuality by dabbling in one-night stands, confidently confronts her wormy ex-husband, and eventually finds a new lover in sensitive painter, “Saul” (Alan Bates).

Released at the height of the sexual revolution, *An Unmarried Woman* may be Paul Mazursky’s most acclaimed film. His screenplay and direction are amazing. In many ways, the film set a huge precedent in its depiction of a leading female character: Independent, smart and three-dimensional. A massive part of the film’s success is Jill Clayburgh’s unforgettable portrayal of Erica, for which she received her first Academy Award nomination. Ms. Clayburgh flawlessly brings Erica to life off the page, giving us a believable look at Erica’s journey. The supporting cast also works extremely well. Rather than some stylized villain, Michael Murphy plays Martin as a pathetic weasel, who never realizes the error of his ways until it is too late. Alan Bates is terrific as Saul, who proves to be everything Martin wasn’t: sensitive, open-minded and honest. Jill Clayburgh and a strong set of supporting players make this film timeless.

**2) STARTING OVER (1979):** “Phil Potter” (Burt Reynolds) is having a difficult time coping with the abrupt departure of his career-focused, self-absorbed wife, “Jessica” (Candice Bergen). While trying to regain his footing in life, Phil begins an unusual, but heartfelt, romance with schoolteacher, “Marilyn Holmberg” (Jill Clayburgh). Unfortunately, Phil is still dealing with inner demons about his ex-wife. Matters are further complicated when Phil and Marilyn move in together, only to receive an unannounced visit from Jessica. Is Phil really ready for a new life with Marilyn? Or will Jessica lure him back? Hilarity ensues as Phil struggles to discover the answer.

Thanks to a James L. Brooks script, Alan J. Pakula's smooth direction, and a marvelous cast, *Starting Over* is witty, funny – and doesn't miss a beat. The film cleverly manages to capture the awkwardness of finding a new romantic partner to fill the void left by an old one. Jill Clayburgh received her second Academy Award nomination for this film, and rightfully so. Like Erica from *An Unmarried Woman*, Marilyn is strong, smart and unafraid to speak her mind. However distinct from that character of Erica, Marilyn is also somewhat neurotic, and at times as clueless as the newly single Phil. This makes their bumbling romance particularly fun to watch. She and Burt Reynolds (who turns in one of his very finest performances) have magnificent chemistry together. Candice Bergen also delights as the narcissistic, melodramatic singer Jessica, who memorably tries to speak to Phil with one of her songs. Charles Durning, Frances Sternhagen, Austin Pendleton, and Mary-Kay Place round out a stellar supporting cast.

**3) BRIDESMAIDS (2011):** An out-of-work baker, “Annie” (Kristin Wiig), has agreed to be the maid of honor for her newly engaged and long-time best friend, “Lillian” (Maya Rudolph). Annie soon finds herself overwhelmed with the responsibilities that come with being the maid of honor, particularly when it comes to trying to lead the colorful characters that are the bridesmaids (Melissa McCarthy, Wendi McLendon-Covey and Ellie Kemper). In addition, a rivalry springs up immediately between Annie and “Helen” (Rose Byrne), Lillian's well-connected and wealthy new friend who can seemingly do no wrong. Adding to her already stressful situation, Annie begins a new relationship with “Officer Rhodes” (Chris O'Dowd).

Funny, disgusting, and emotional, director Paul Feig and co-writer/star Kristen Wiig clearly had had two words on their minds: Judd Apatow. His name even appears under a producing credit, and *Bridesmaids* has the same magic as *The 40-Year Old Virgin* and *Superbad*. A sincere story, with some scattered gross-out gags, the film succeeds at balancing these.

The entire cast is hilarious. Though this would prove to be Jill Clayburgh's final film role, her limited screen time is not wasted. As Annie's mother, Clayburgh's biggest moment in the film comes when Annie comes for a visit. Aghast, Annie listens as her mom quietly rants about her ex-husband's kinky sexual tastes. What better send-off for Ms. Clayburgh than to be surrounded by a new generation of female talent in this genuinely funny film!

**4) I'M DANCING AS FAST AS I CAN (1982):** Jill Clayburgh portrays Emmy-winning TV Producer “Barbara Gordon”, who is struggling with her latest project - and Valium addiction. When Barbara quits cold turkey, she goes into a severe withdrawal confining herself to the apartment with her boyfriend “Derek” (Nicol Williamson). Barbara's erratic behavior and deteriorating mental state drive Derek to lose patience, becoming controlling and violent. Upon escaping Derek, Barbara arrives in a mental Institution where she embarks on a painful path to recovery, under the guidance of “Dr. Addison” (Dianne Wiest).

Based on a memoir, *I'm Dancing As Fast As I Can* was neither a critical or box office hit when released. Barbara Gordon herself reportedly hated the film. Some have

accused David Rabe's screenplay of focusing too little on Barbara's addiction and too much on her recovery. And while the nature of Barbara's addiction is not explored in great detail, the downward spiral and the aftermath are. In spite of its shortcomings, the film is boosted by some magnificent performances. Jill Clayburgh takes us on a painful roller coaster ride that is Barbara's withdrawal. Unlike some of Clayburgh's other characters, Barbara is seemingly stable but hits a terrifying rock bottom, and we're left uncertain of whether or not there is any chance of recovery for her.

Jill Clayburgh's intense, powerful performance makes Barbara's journey particularly unsettling to watch. Geraldine Page is also fantastic as Jean Scott Martin, a bitter, terminally ill poet who scorns Barbara for her problems. Dianne Wiest also brings credibility to the film, as the doctor who tells Barbara what she needs to hear, not what she wants to hear. These three top-notch performances make this relatively obscure film one to see.

**5) NEVER AGAIN (2001):** Exterminator/Jazz musician "Christopher" (Jeffrey Tambor) and Administrator "Grace" (Jill Clayburgh) both struggle with middle age. Christopher is sexually confused after a period of impotence, while Grace finally realizes the need to get out more after daughter goes off to college. Sparks fly when their paths cross one night at a gay bar. While both have vowed never to fall in love again, it's easier said than done!

Even though Eric Schaeffer doesn't quite accomplish the New York love story he sets out to, what we get is an enjoyable, humorous little dramedy. Clayburgh has settled into maturity nicely as Grace, a restless, jaded 54-year old who needs to spice up her life. She and Jeffrey Tambor share a believable chemistry as they find they each have room for one more romance in their lives, despite the reservations. Though the film could have used more character development, especially outside the leads, both Clayburgh and Tambor carry it well. We are also treated to a couple genuinely hilarious scenes, including a farcical sex toy gag. Bill Duke, Sandy Duncan and Michael McKean co-star.

**6) RUNNING WITH SCISSORS (2006):** When aspiring poet "Deirdre Burroughs" (Annette Benning) begins to mentally deteriorate, she divorces her husband "Norman" (Alec Baldwin) and leaves her teenage son "Augusten" (Joseph Collins) in the care of "Dr. Finch" (Brian Cox), her eccentric psychiatrist. Augusten spends his adolescence living in the equally bizarre Finch Household with the Doctor's kibble-eating wife "Agnes" (Jill Clayburgh), and his two disturbed daughters (Evan Rachel Wood & Gwyneth Paltrow). He also begins a turbulent romance with family's other adopted son, "Neil Bookman" (Joseph Feinnes). Augusten is in for a youth of dreams, lust, and betrayal.

All of the elements of a classic are here: the roster of great character actors, dark/twisted humor, and a great 70s rock soundtrack. However, I was very conflicted on whether or not to jump behind this adaptation of Augusten Burrough's bestselling memoir. Too many underdeveloped characters, messy plotlines and overreliance on dramatic moments mar the film's potential. Still, *Running With Scissors* does have redeeming qualities, most notably in the female portion of the

ensemble. Ms. Clayburgh has fun here in one her more unusual roles. Agnes shares some of the film's best moments with Joseph Collins' fictionalized Augusten. While she is initially appears as another brain-fried member of Dr. Finch's mad household, she emerges as more motherly and supportive of Augusten's dreams, than even Deirdre. If only the performances of Clayburgh, Benning and Evan Rachel Wood had a better film to support them!

**However, even an actress as talented as Jill Clayburgh has projects that may not stand the test of time. I could not recommend the following:**

**1) SILVER STREAK (1976):** "George Caldwell" (Gene Wilder) anticipated a peaceful, scenic train ride to Chicago. What he did not expect was that he would end up in bed with the beautiful "Hilly Burns" (Jill Clayburgh), be entangled with terrorist/art dealer "Roger Devoreau" (Patrick McGoohan), or teaming up with a smart-ass thief (Richard Pryor), as the Federal authorities pursue. And all of this **before** he arrives in Chicago!

Director Arthur Hiller and writer Colin Higgins clearly are making a love letter to Alfred Hitchcock, sprinkled with touches of Irwin Allen's disaster flicks and a dash of comedy. The film is also notable as the first of four collaborations between Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor and they do work well together. Unfortunately the result has not endured as well as one might hope. Much of the dialogue is campy, and a good, diverse cast is not given much to work with. As for Jill Clayburgh, she does the best she can with some very flirtatious scenes with Gene Wilder. But much of her dialogue feels rather corny, and she's given very little to do, aside from acting as an old-fashioned damsel-in-distress. But for a few decent moments, Hilly is one of Clayburgh's least interesting roles.

**My Bottom Line:**

**Jill Clayburgh is an important figure in cinema, playing many strong enduring and interesting characters. While some of her work has not aged well most still holds up and is not to be missed!**

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A graduate of Columbia College film school, JARROD EMERSON has been working with Films42.com since 2007. With interests ranging from screenwriting to improv, he is grateful to Jan and Rich for their support, and for giving him a reason/excuse to watch even more movies! The bottom line is there can never be too much cinema in Jarrod's life!