

Louise Fletcher, 88, Dies; Oscar Winner for ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’

She was largely unknown to the public when she was cast as what the American Film Institute called one of cinema’s most memorable villains.



Give this article



54



Louise Fletcher in 1976, when she won an Academy Award for her performance in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” Associated Press

By **Anita Gates**

Sept. 24, 2022 Updated 10:37 a.m. ET

Louise Fletcher, the imposing, steely-eyed actress who won an Academy Award for her role as the tyrannical Nurse Ratched in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” died on Friday at her home in the town of Montdurausse, in Southern France. She was 88.

The death was confirmed by her agent, David Shaul, who did not cite a cause. Ms. Fletcher also had a home in Los Angeles.

Ms. Fletcher was 40 and largely unknown to the public when she was cast as the head administrative nurse at an Oregon mental institution in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” The film, directed by Milos Forman and based on a popular novel by Ken Kesey, won a best-actress trophy for Ms. Fletcher [and four other Oscars](#): best picture, best director, best actor (Jack Nicholson, who starred as the rebellious mental patient McMurphy) and best adapted screenplay (Bo Goldman and Lawrence Hauber).

[Ms. Fletcher’s acceptance speech stood out](#) that night — not only because she teasingly thanked voters for hating her, but also because she used American Sign Language in thanking her parents, who were both deaf, for “teaching me to have a dream.”

The American Film Institute later named Nurse Ratched one of the most memorable villains in film history and the second most notable female villain, surpassed only by the Wicked Witch of the West in “The Wizard of Oz.”

But at the time “Cuckoo’s Nest” was released, Ms. Fletcher was frustrated by the buttoned-up nature of her character. “I envied the other actors tremendously,” [she said in a 1975 interview with The New York Times](#), referring to her fellow cast members, most of whom were playing mental patients. “They were so free, and I had to be so controlled.”

Estelle Louise Fletcher was born on July 22, 1934, in Birmingham, Ala., one of four hearing children of Robert Capers Fletcher, an Episcopal minister, and Estelle (Caldwell) Fletcher; both her parents had been deaf since childhood. She studied drama at the University of North Carolina and moved to Los Angeles after graduation.

She later told journalists that because she was so tall — 5 feet 10 inches — she had trouble finding work in anything but westerns, where her height was an advantage. Of her first 20 or so screen roles in the late 1950s and early ’60s,

about half were in television westerns, including “Wagon Train,” “Maverick” and “Bat Masterson.”

Ms. Fletcher married Jerry Bick, a film producer, in 1959. They had two sons, John and Andrew, and she retired from acting for more than a decade to raise them.

Ms. Fletcher and Mr. Bick divorced in 1977. Her survivors include her sons; her sister, Roberta Ray; and a granddaughter.

She returned to movies in 1974 in [Robert Altman’s “Thieves Like Us,”](#) as a woman who coldly turns in her brother to the police. It was her appearance in that film that led Mr. Forman to offer her the role in “Cuckoo’s Nest.”

“I was caught by surprise when Louise came onscreen,” Mr. Forman recalled of watching “Thieves Like Us.” “I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She had a certain mystery, which I thought was very, very important for Nurse Ratched.”

Image



Ms. Fletcher in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.” “She had a certain mystery,” said Milos Forman, the film’s director, “which I thought was very, very important for Nurse Ratched.”Credit...Herbert Dorfman/Corbis via Getty

Reviewing “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” in *The New Yorker*, Pauline Kael declared Ms. Fletcher’s “a masterly performance.”

“We can see the virginal expectancy — the purity — that has turned into puffy-eyed self-righteousness,” Ms. Kael wrote. “She thinks she’s doing good for people, and she’s hurt — she feels abused — if her authority is questioned.”

Ms. Fletcher is often cited as an example of the Oscar curse — the phenomenon that winning an Academy Award for acting does not always lead to sustained movie stardom — but she did maintain a busy career in films and on television into her late 70s.

She had a lead role as the Linda Blair character’s soft-spoken psychiatrist in “*Exorcist II: The Heretic*” (1977) and was notable in the ensemble comedy “*The Cheap Detective*” (1978), riffing on Ingrid Bergman’s film persona. She also starred with Christopher Walken and Natalie Wood as a workaholic scientist in “*Brainstorm*” (1983). But she was largely relegated to roles with limited screen time, especially when her character was very different from her Nurse Ratched persona.

After a turn as an inscrutable U.F.O. bigwig in “*Strange Invaders*” (1983), she appeared in “*Firestarter*” (1984) as a fearful farm wife; the police drama “*Blue Steel*” (1990) as Jamie Lee Curtis’s drab mother; “*2 Days in the Valley*” (1996) as a compassionate Los Angeles landlady; and “*Cruel Intentions*” (1999) as Ryan Phillippe’s genteel aunt.

Only when she played to villainous stereotype — as she did in “*Flowers in the Attic*” (1987), as an evil matriarch who sets out to poison her four inconvenient young grandchildren — did she find herself in starring roles again. And that film, [she told a Dragoncon audience](#) in 2009, was “the worst experience I’ve ever had making a movie.”

Later in her career, she played recurring characters on several television series, including “*Star Trek: Deep Space 9*” (she was an alien cult leader from 1993 to 1999) and “*Shameless*” (as William H. Macy’s foulmouthed convict mother). She also made an appearance as Liev Schreiber’s affable mother in the romantic drama “*A Perfect Man*” (2013). She appeared most recently in two episodes of the Netflix comedy series “*Girlboss*.”

Although Ms. Fletcher’s most famous character was a portrait of sternness, she often recalled smiling constantly and pretending that everything was perfect

when she was growing up, in an effort to protect her non-hearing parents from bad news.

“The price of it was very high for me,” [she said in a 1977 interview with The Ladies’ Home Journal](#). “Because I not only pretended everything was all right. I came to feel it had to be.”

Pretending wasn’t all bad, however, she acknowledged, at least in terms of her profession. That same year she told the journalist Rex Reed, “I feel like I know real joy from make-believe.”

Mike Ives contributed reporting.

Library.photoslibrary/resources/renders/D/D48FA591-33EA-4BDF-81DB-2D8A2C3426E7_1_201_a.jpeg

We very much need great actors who can portray great villains. We need to believe such are real. We need to be able to recognize them amongst us. TJB