**Civil Rights Activist Cicely Tyson**

The actress and civil rights activist Cicely Tyson died Thursday at the age of 96, after decades of singular, ground-breaking roles on Broadway and in Hollywood. Born in East Harlem in 1924, Tyson worked as a typist at the Red Cross before becoming a model for Ebony Magazine and studied at the Actors Studio.

Her career often defied the stereotypical roles that Black women were relegated to during her seven decades of acting, at times going without work because of her principles. “She was critical of films and television programs that cast Black characters as criminal, servile or immoral, and insisted that African-Americans, even if poor or downtrodden, should be portrayed with dignity,” She was committed to roles that she felt uplifted Black womanhood in some way, and though it sometimes led to periods of inactivity, it sustained a body of work as significant as it is gripping.

Her decision to act infuriated her deeply-religious mother and led to estrangement between them that lasted for years. Performance was a platform for Tyson. She used that platform to address civil rights issues at a time when the country was raging through turbulent change. “I was on the stage. Every play I did had to do with the civil rights movement. Every single piece addressed it.” Her natural hair on full display on television and in movies was a revelation and a revolution; she became an icon of a burgeoning movement for Black women. As a prominent darker-skinned woman, her visibility flew in the face of ongoing colorism that was always attached to the systemic racism Black actresses were facing in Hollywood.

After several minor roles, Tyson found stardom in her role in *Sounder* in 1972, where she portrayed a Depression-era loving wife of a sharecropper 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. She was nominated for an Oscar and Golden Globe.

In 1974 she won an Emmy for *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, becoming the first Black woman to win a Lead Actress Emmy. 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.

Her resume reads like a list of some of the most iconic roles on film and screen. According to the Times, Tyson had an incredible stretch where she played “Kunta Kinte’s mother in a mini-series based on Alex Haley’s *Roots* in 1977...Coretta Scott King in the 1978 NBC mini-series *King*, about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s final years...Harriet Tubman, whose Underground Railroad spirited slaves to freedom, in *A Woman Called Moses* (1978); and...a Chicago teacher devoted to poor children in *The Marva Collins Story* (1981). In 1994, she won a supporting actress Emmy for her portrayal of Castalia in the mini-series *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*.

Cicely Tyson’s life and career were not just a study in longevity but in extended grace and determination. She made her name portraying a series of unforgettable women, while also communicating her own brand of righteous resistance in the face of racism and sexism and abuse. Throughout her career, she was honored by the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame, the Congress of Racial Equality, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the National Council of Negro Women. She earned three Emmys, in 2013, at the age of 88, and became the oldest person to win a Tony. She was named a Kennedy Center honoree in 2015; and in 2016 was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama.

Her legacy also includes decades of civil rights work and community building. At the height of the Civil Rights movement, Tyson became a founding board member of the Dance Theater of Harlem. She won an honorary Oscar in 2018—again, the first awarded to a Black woman. Early in her career, Cicely Tyson promised herself that she would only portray strong women. Harriet Tubman. Coretta Scott King. Miss Jane Pittman, and so many others. An Honorary Oscar winner in 2019 for her extraordinary body of work, she led by example. Tyson was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame in 2018 and into the Television Hall of Fame in 2020. She also won a career achievement Peabody Award in 2020.

Tyson’s memoir, [*Cicely Tyson: Just As I Am*](https://www.amazon.com/Just-As-Am-Cicely-Tyson/dp/0062931067), was released on Jan. 26, just two days before she passed. “Cicely Tyson was a Black actor who knocked down doors so other women of color could walk through them.