



Cicely Tyson, iconic and influential actress, dies at 96

Cicely Tyson, an actress whose electrifying portrayals of resilient Black women — foremost in the 1974 TV movie “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” but also as Coretta Scott King and Harriet Tubman — brought some of the first ennobling portrayals of African Americans to a vast television audience, died Jan. 28 at 96.

Ms. Tyson had shrouded her age until late in life. For much of her career, she convincingly presented herself as 15 years younger than she was, and she continued to appear on screen and in Broadway roles past what was her 90th birthday. Her family announced the death in a statement shared by her manager, Larry Thompson, providing no further details.

Regal in bearing, with willowy beauty and delicately chiseled features, Ms. Tyson was known for embodying women of great poise striving under great pressure.

Her life had been strewn with obstacles and marked by periods of tumult: a childhood of desperate poverty, a deeply religious mother who considered her daughter’s career choice “sinful,” and a tempestuous, much-examined celebrity marriage to jazz trumpeter Miles Davis in the 1980s.

Also looming over her career were the persistent limitations in an entertainment industry that cast Black women in demeaning roles as prostitutes, drug addicts and housemaids.

Ms. Tyson said she refused many such roles offered to her, vowing to accept only parts of “strength, pride and dignity.” Because of her uncompromising selectivity, she was out of work for months and sometimes years at a stretch, even after her breakthrough, Oscar-nominated performance as a sharecropper’s wife in “[Sunder](#)” (1972), a drama set in the Depression-era South.

“I wait for roles — first, to be written for a woman, then, to be written for a black woman,” she told the Entertainment News Service in 1997. “And then I have the audacity to be selective about the kinds of roles I play. I’ve really got three strikes against me. So, aren’t you amazed I’m still here?”

In TV movies, where she made her most enduring mark, she played the abolitionist Tubman, civil rights activist King, the inner-city Chicago educator Marva Collins, and the mothers of Rosa Parks and Olympic track star Wilma Rudolph.

Ms. Tyson also brought layered emotional intensity to fictional characters such as the centenarian Jane Pittman, a role for which she won two Emmy Awards, and the mother of the enslaved but rebellious Kunta Kinte in the ABC blockbuster miniseries “[Roots](#)” (1977), based on Alex Haley’s historical saga.

Her third and final Emmy was for a supporting role as a strong-willed housekeeper of a Civil War veteran in “[Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All](#)” (1994), a

CBS-TV movie based on Allan Gurganus's best-selling novel.

At 89, she capped her career with a Tony Award for her performance as a spirited widow in “The Trip to Bountiful,” a 2013 Broadway revival of the Horton Foote drama. She returned to Broadway in 2015 opposite James Earl Jones in a revival of “The Gin Game,” D.L. Coburn’s two-character play set in a nursing home.

That same year, she was a [Kennedy Center honoree](#), receiving the award for a lifetime of powerful performances in roles that shattered boundaries for African American women. The next year, President Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor. In 2018, she was given an honorary Oscar.



President Barack Obama presents the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Ms. Tyson in 2016. (Alex Wong/Getty Images)

