



# Elizabeth Ashley

BY SUE STRACHAN

**A**RE YOU WAITING FOR MISS Ashley?" asked the maître d' at Lûke. I said "yes," and knew by a subtle change of the atmosphere that Elizabeth Ashley had arrived for our interview. She was led to where I sat – leaving a trail of quizical diners who noticed that whoever she was, she was a presence. So a mojito for her, a vodka on the rocks with lemons for me, and we dived into the world of Ashley – actress for more than 55 years; author of *Actress: Postcards from the Road*, a memoir published in 1978 that happened to be a bestseller; a self-proclaimed gypsy and one-time "tabloid queen before there were tabloids." It wasn't hard to listen: Ashley's voice should be trademarked – husky, dramatic and memorable, eminently quotable. Some early highlights:

- Won a Tony Award in 1963 when she portrayed Mollie in *Take Her, She's Mine*. It was her first starring role on Broadway.
- Had playwright Neil Simon create a role for her as Corie in *Barefoot in the Park*. Robert Redford was her co-star.
- While she was starring in *Barefoot in the Park*, at age 22, she was checked into the psychiatric ward of Payne Whitney Hospital – for what seems, if you read her book, like a massive panic attack – and in true Hollywood style, the press was told it was a "bronchial infection."
- Met, had an affair with, then married her *The Carpetbaggers* co-star George Peppard. The gossip columnists went wild.
- Retired from acting to become a Beverly Hills housewife and raised her



Elizabeth Ashley as "Aunt Mimi," the "Treme" role that was specifically written with her in mind.

son, Christian, a writer and filmmaker.

- Divorced Peppard, and became a single mom. And that was all before she was 30 years old.

Jumping back into the acting fray wasn't easy for Ashley. "I had blown it once before," she writes in *Actress*. "Most of the heavyweights in the business didn't like me much, and they had their reasons."

But Ashley started getting parts on TV, which led to some movie roles, including one in *Rancho* ☞

## At a Glance

**PROFESSION:** Actress/Writer **AGE:** 72 **BORN/RAISED:** Born in Ocala, Fla.; raised in Baton Rouge, La. **EDUCATION:** University High School, Baton Rouge, La. Briefly went to Louisiana State University; The Neighborhood Playhouse under Sanford Meisner; The Actor's Studio under Lee Strasberg; Shakespeare with Phillip Burton; also studied with Richard Lewis and Stella Adler. **RESIDES:** Union Square/Flatiron District, New York City **FAMILY:**

Son, Christian Moore Peppard; Che Guevara, my 8-year-old pug. My mother was Lucille Ayer Cole and father was Arthur Kingman (King) Cole. **FAVORITE BOOK:** OK, impossible for me to answer as I have been a prodigious reader all my life, but here it goes: Probably, in my opinion, the closest to the Great American Novel is *The Executioner's Song* by Norman Mailer. Also by Mailer: *The Armies of the Night* and his writing about actresses in

*Marilyn: A Biography*, writing about the United States and Cuba's relationship in *Harlot's Ghost*, *Clockers* and *Lush Life* by Richard Price – nobody writes language as powerful and beautiful at the same time; *L.A. Confidential* and *American Tabloid* by James Ellroy; *Libra* and *White Noise* by Don DeLillo; *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver; *Legends of the Fall* and *Revenge* by Jim Harrison. And finally, anything by Hunter S. Thompson, Elmore Leonard and Carl

Hiaasen. **FAVORITE MOVIE:** *Day for Night* by Francois Truffaut; *To Live and Die in L.A.* by William Friedkin (for the performance of Willem Dafoe); *The Wild One* with Marlon Brando – anything with Marlon Brando! **FAVORITE FOOD:** Rum roast chicken, cornbread stuffing with raisins and apples with cream gravy. **FAVORITE RESTAURANT:** Arnaud's in New Orleans, Union Square Café in New York City. **FAVORITE TV SHOW (OTHER THAN "TREME"):** "The Wire" – the best thing ever put

on American film – TV or feature. "Deadwood"; "The Good Wife"; "Boardwalk Empire"; and my current guilty pleasure is "Sons of Anarchy." **FAVORITE MUSIC/MUSICIANS:** My favorite song is "A Song for You" when sung by Leon Russell, who wrote it; Bob Dylan; Fats Domino; Warren Zevon; Randy Newman; Bruce Springsteen; Miles Davis; and Johnny Cash. **HOBBY:** Reading **FAVORITE VACATION SPOT:** On an all-wood ocean-racing sailboat in the Caribbean Sea!



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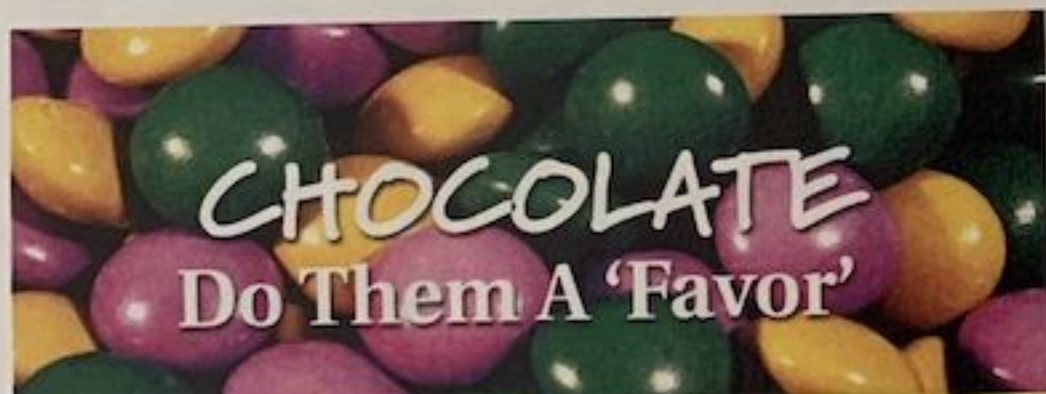
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*Deluxe*, where she met writer Tom McGuane, who soon became her lover. She credits this love affair with reawakening a sexuality that she put to good use when she portrayed Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1974 to great acclaim. (In 2005, she portrayed Big Momma.) During the staging, she met Tennessee Williams and they became close friends. She would go on to portray more of his classic female roles including Alexandra Del Lago in *Sweet Bird of Youth* and Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*.

While finishing up our cocktails I found out she was about to go on a road trip to Nashville. At some point, she was coming back to New Orleans to continue her portrayal of Aunt Mimi in "Treme," a role that was specifically written with her in mind. (Ashley can also be seen on stage in Horton Foote's *Dividing the Estate* at the Old Globe in San Diego, Jan. 14 through Feb. 12.)

I present to you Elizabeth Ashley, aka Bad Bessie Mae (a nickname given to her during her early acting years by an acting teacher who had too many Elizabeths in his class. The bad ... well, I just figured that was added a bit later).

**On driving.** "I like driving. I mean, I grew up in Louisiana; when you're 11 years old you steal a truck and ride on the levee."

**On why certain drug use doesn't work for a stage actor.** Eight shows a week you have to show up, and have to be on it; there are people who have paid money to see you and they're sitting in a not-comfortable chair, they can't smoke, they can't drink, they can't cop a feel. It's one of the last acts of pure faith. So something better happen when those lights go up.

**Why she wrote *Actress: Postcards from the Road*.** It was meant to be a memoir of what it was like – what it was really like – to attempt to be an artist in the 1960s ... Well, let's put it this way, you won't find a chapter called, "Popcorn, Pussy and Pot!" in their books.

[**Edit Note:** While not a chapter in her book, it does figure prominently in a chapter.]

### The difference between actors and actresses getting older.

Women actresses, as we get older, we get tougher and smarter. Whereas the actors, the men, tend to get dumber as time goes by, as it's harder for them – the identity of being an actor is harder for them as they get older, to be comfortable [being older]. Old actresses are tough, crabby creatures. That's actually the upside.

**Three of her statements about acting.** ■ Acting is a racket that will break your heart regularly. ■ I have this theory that we are what people are most frightened of ... Every time, we go to work, we risk humiliation and ridicule, then have to go out there the next night. ■ We're a service industry, we're serving up ideas that hopefully will illuminate who we as a culture are,

**On playwrights Horton Foote and Tennessee Williams.** As writers they're opposite, but they adored and respected each other. Foote said about them: "[Williams] went through the dark door to find the light, and I would go through the light door to find the dark."

**So, a little bird told me that your role as "Aunt Mimi" on "Treme" was written just for you.** I was flattered ... When I was approached, I didn't even ask about the money, because it was them – normally something of that caliber has lots of other actors on it. So I asked my agent, "Who has turned it down, that will give me an idea." The agent said, "No, Bessie, if they can get you, they will write the part." I almost couldn't believe it.

**True Confession:** Years ago at some show business event I had to attend (under duress!), I was huddled in a corner with my back firmly to the wall and Joan Rivers, who I'd known for years since we were both waiting tables in Greenwich Village, was next to me. Joan said, "Who would ever believe we are the two shyest people in this room?!"