

WORKING GIRL:

Six decades after her Broadway debut, Shirley Jones is still a working actress. She was Emmy-nominated this summer for her role in *Hallmark Hall of Fame's Hidden Places*.



IF NAME IS DESTINY, THE FATE OF SHIRLEY MAE JONES WAS SEALED AT BIRTH, WHEN SHE WAS CHRISTENED AFTER CHILD SUPERSTAR SHIRLEY TEMPLE. LIKE HER NAMESAKE, THIS SHIRLEY COULD SING. BY AGE SIX SHE WAS PERFORMING, AND BY TWELVE SHE BEGAN FORMAL VOICE TRAINING. AFTER HIGH SCHOOL, SHE FOLLOWED HER DREAM FROM HER SMALL PENNSYLVANIA TOWN TO — WHERE ELSE? — BROADWAY. THERE, THE FAIRY TALE CONTINUED: SHE WAS SIGNED TO THE CHORUS IN RODGERS AND HAMMERSTEIN'S *SOUTH PACIFIC*. THAT LED, WITHIN JUST ONE YEAR, TO HOLLYWOOD AND THE 1955 CINEMASCOPE PRODUCTION OF *OKLAHOMA!* JONES STARRED AS FARM GIRL LAUREY OPPOSITE HER CHILDHOOD IDOL, GORDON MACRAE. COULD A CAREER MOVE MUCH FASTER? THE FOLLOWING YEAR SHE STARRED AS JULIE IN THE FILM VERSION OF *CAROUSEL*.

Also in 1956 Jones married actor Jack Cassidy, becoming stepmom to six-year-old David. The couple had three boys of their own — Shaun, Patrick and Ryan — and all the while Jones kept up her career, even filming *The Music Man* while pregnant with Patrick. Her dramatic turn as Lulu Baines in *Elmer Gantry*, opposite Burt Lancaster, brought her an Oscar in 1960 as best supporting actress.

But as the film business changed in the '60s, roles became scarce. In 1970 an unexpected offer would not only bring steady work to this working mom but elevate her to the television pantheon. What's more, she would learn how to drive a bus. The role was Shirley Partridge, and the show was ABC's *The Partridge Family*. This Shirley was a widowed mother of five who forms a rock band with her brood and drives them

SHIRLEY JONES





around the country in a groovy old school bus. The series thrived for four years, and the group was also a hit on the pop charts (Shirley and stepson David were the only cast members who really sang).

Jones had done television before *The Partridge Family* — she'd debuted on the prestigious *Playhouse 90* back in 1956 — but the sitcom made her a bona-fide TV star. Her television credits multiplied over the next three decades, in movies, series and specials. She was Emmy-nominated for *Silent Night, Lonely Night*, the NBC film in which she starred opposite Lloyd Bridges. In recent years, she has played roles as disparate as Drew Carey's sassy lover in *The Drew Carey Show* and not-so-crazy Aunt Batty in Hallmark's Depression-era drama, *Hidden Places*. Since 1977 she has been married to comedian Marty Ingels.

In December 2005 Jones was interviewed for the Television

Academy Foundation's Archive of American Television by Karen Herman, the archive's director of production and research. Following are excerpts of that discussion; the entire interview may be screened at the archive offices in North Hollywood. For information, call (818) 509-2260.

Q: How were you cast as Laurey in *Oklahoma!*?

A: I was a chorus girl in the Broadway run of *South Pacific* when Rodgers and Hammerstein's office called my agent. They said:

"We're doing *Oklahoma!* as a motion picture — we have Fred Zinnemann as director and Arthur Hornblow, Jr., as producer. We would like Shirley to come in and read and sing for the Hollywood people, for the role of Laurey."

After the audition they said it was wonderful, but the Hollywood people felt I was too inexperienced to handle a major role in a major motion picture. I was about to go back to college when Richard Rodgers said, "Miss Jones, we have another production called *Me and Juliet* which we would like you to go into, in the role of Juliet" — which was a featured part — "and understudy the lead." So I went to Chicago with the show.

In the meantime, they had screen-tested every young woman on both coasts for the role of Laurey in the movie. While I was in Chicago they called me again to screen-test in Los Angeles. Two weeks later my agent called and said, "Hello, Laurey." That was within a year of my first Broadway audition.

Q: What do you think Rodgers and Hammerstein saw in you?

A: In their eyes, I *was* Laurey. I was a farm girl from a small town. I had a golden voice — which is what they called it — the kind of voice they wanted for that role. And I was young, I was naïve. I didn't have a lot of motion picture or stage experience. They found that charming.

If you work on the stage a lot, you can become so broad as an actress that you can't narrow it down for the screen. I didn't have any bad habits like that. I was very malleable. They could see that they could really do what they wanted with me. So they signed me to a personal contract. I was the one and only — first and last — to be under personal contract to Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Q: When did you first appear on television?

A: In 1956 I was offered a role in the *Playhouse 90* production *The Big Slide*. It was a great part. The

EARLY STARDOM: Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein (above) were taken with Jones's voice and cast her opposite Gordon MacRae in *Oklahoma!* (top). Her subsequent major roles included Marian in *The Music Man* and the sultry Lulu in *Elmer Gantry* (top right), which won her an Oscar.

story was set during the 1920s, during the days of director Mack Sennett. Red Skelton played a comic on the skids, and my role was an alcoholic "sunshine girl" in the musicals that they did then. As it turned out, my character committed suicide, so it was a heavy-duty role for me. I was told by everybody, "Don't do television — you'll never make another film."



pulling you in. It's a period picture, so we'll add bows and fringe and flounces to the costumes. If need be, toward the end, we'll just shoot you from the waist up. But don't tell anybody."

Toward the end of the shoot, we filmed the one and only screen kiss that we had in the movie, which was the footbridge scene, where we sing the beautiful ballad "Till

going to be a success. And if it is, I can stay home and raise my kids."

Q: Did you know that your stepson, David Cassidy, would play your son Keith?

A: Not right away. The producer, Bob Claver, asked me, "Shirley, how do you feel about your stepson?" I said, "He's great. Why?" He said, "We're thinking about him for Keith Partridge, but we want to make sure that you have a good relationship...." I said, "I think it's a great idea." I knew that David could sing, and he had already been in a Broadway show and had done some television. They tested and hired him. I came on the set one day because I was testing with the little children, and David was there. He said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm your mama in this." He said, "Oh my gosh, that's great!"

Q: But didn't that somehow lead to *Elmer Gantry*, your Oscar-winning film role?

A: Burt Lancaster happened to see *The Big Slide*. By this time my then-husband, Jack Cassidy, and I were doing a nightclub act on the road. That was truly all I had left, because I wasn't being hired for films anymore. I got this call from Burt Lancaster, and I thought it was a joke because I was a fan. I had Burt's picture on my bedroom wall when I was sixteen! He said, "We're going to do a movie called *Elmer Gantry*, and I think there's a role for you. I want you to come in and meet the writer-director, Richard Brooks. We're producing this together, and I'm playing *Elmer Gantry*." When I read the novel by Sinclair Lewis I thought, "This is heaven. I said, 'I'll do this for nothing — this is an incredible part.'"

Q: From the very dramatic *Elmer Gantry*, in which you played the vengeful prostitute, Lulu, you went on to *The Music Man* and the angelic Marian, the librarian. Is it true you were pregnant during filming?

A: I was pregnant with Patrick. I discovered I was pregnant about three months into filming. And it took about six to eight months to film a musical. I thought, "What am I going to do? This was my second child, and I had already had a ten-pound baby, so it was not good."

I took [producer-director] Morton DaCosta to lunch and told him. He said, "Don't worry. We'll do everything we can to help you. We'll build a corset — we'll keep



WINNING STREAK: Jones, in her most famous TV role as stepmother Shirley Partridge (above) with Burt Lancaster on *Elmer Gantry*, 1960

"OF COURSE, EVERYBODY AGAIN SAID, 'DON'T DO TELEVISION.' I SAID, 'I HAVE A FEELING THIS SHOW'S GOING TO BE A SUCCESS. AND IF IT IS, I CAN STAY HOME AND RAISE MY KIDS.'"

There Was You." Robert Preston takes me in his arms. By this time, I was very pregnant. During the kiss — with our eyes closed and our arms around each other — all of a sudden the baby gave a big kick. Bob pulled back and said, "What the heck was that?" I said, "That was Patrick Cassidy."

Q: How did *The Partridge Family* phenomenon come about?

A: In 1970 I got an offer to play Shirley Partridge. I read the script and I loved it. I loved the fact that she was the first working mother on television. The family, the music — it was such a great idea. I thought, "Wow, there's nothing like this on television! Of course, everybody again said, 'Don't do television.'" I said, "I have a feeling this show's

Q: Was the show an instant success?

A: As I predicted, the show did become a hit. The pilot was wonderful. We got along very well. Danny Bonaduce, who played my son Danny, was wonderful. And the relationship between him and Dave Madden, who played our manager, Reuben Kincaid, was made in heaven. That's where the comedy was. It was one of those things that clicked right from the beginning. Danny had respect for Dave, and Dave sort of acted like a father to him on the set — he'd play ball with him and everything. Danny was a natural comic. At that age, he was one of the best child actors I'd ever seen.

And we had beautiful Susan Dey, as Laurie, who had been a model but who was really superb for the role. The show was so well cast. After we did the pilot, everybody started saying, "When are they going to write an episode about me?" I remember taking them all aside and saying, "Listen, if we're going to have a hit show, we've got to work together. There'll be stories around each of us if the show's a success. We have to work together for whatever the story is." And they really did.

Q: Describe the character of Shirley Partridge.

A: Like me, she was a working mom, and she wanted her children to have values. Show business was secondary to her. The first couple of shows dealt very much with the show-business angle: "Where are we going to perform? Let's rehearse every day...." Finally Bob Claver said, "We're going to tone down the show-business angle a bit. We're going to make the Partridges real people and have stories about teenage sweethearts and maybe about Shirley dating one of the local guys. It's not going to be just show business. There will always be a song in the show — we'll always have a performance. But the entire show won't be built around that performance."

That helped. It made us real people and got every teenager in

America thinking, "We can go to school and we can have a band. *And* we can get a bus." The sad part is that every once in a while, I would find some fourteen- or sixteen-year-old, just off a bus from Iowa or Michigan or someplace, sitting on the lawn saying, "I've come to be in the Partridge Family. I can play an instrument...." These were kids who'd run away from home.

Q: How did you handle that?

A: I had to tell them the truth and say, "This is a television show. We don't have a band. It's all make-believe. And you cannot do this. When you get old enough and you decide you want to sing, dance or you want to play an instrument, do that in your hometown first." I would have to call their parents and say, "I have your daughter or your son." Mostly it was girls. I



ROLE CALL:
As Aunt Batty in *Hallmark Hall of Fame's Hidden Places*, Jones wears men's clothes and quotes Scripture. On stage, she's been a showstopper.

would put them on a bus, train or airplane and get them home.

Q: How was the musical aspect of the show handled?

A: We had a new song every week. I would go into the studio with David and do the recording. The rest of the cast would just mouth the words when we were on the set shooting, and pretend they played the instruments, as I did. I don't play the piano. The only person that did everything was David. David played the guitar — he played in the sessions and he was the lead singer. When the show was at its peak, we got offers to play Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe. I kept saying, "You don't understand. There is no Partridge Family." Of course, nobody realized that.

Q: Did you actually drive the bus?

A: I did. It was not easy! I didn't know how to drive a stick shift, so I had to learn that. At the end of the show, at the closing night party, the Teamsters presented me with a Teamster of the Year award because I'd learned to drive the bus.

Q: You may be best remembered by viewers for *The Partridge Family*, but your résumé has many dramatic TV credits — such as your 1980 CBS film, *The Children of An Lac*.

A: That was a wonderful story because it was true. It was about an American woman who tried to rescue as many South Vietnamese orphans as possible and fly them out before the fall of the country in 1975. She ended up adopting six or eight children from a particular orphanage. She wrote the story about trying to get them away from the war. We actually filmed in the Philippines, in Manila.

Q: You did another important television drama in 1987, for PBS: *There Were Times, Dear*.

A: It's one of my favorite things that I've done. That was a labor of love — everybody did it without pay, including the crew. It was about Alzheimer's disease, and I played the caregiver. Len Cariou played my husband, a person

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afflicted with Alzheimer's. That was when Alzheimer's was relatively new — people were just learning about it, and they were trying to raise money for the foundation. It was tough, because I had never been around an Alzheimer's patient. I had to read up on it, find out what the disease was about and how it affected people.

Q: You played a very unlikely character on *The Drew Carey Show*....

A: I did three shows for Drew — I played his love, Celia. I get more comments about that! To play opposite him as his lover was hysterical. Originally he had thought of Debbie Reynolds, because Debbie does comedy. I'm not known for slapstick, and Debbie is. I think she couldn't do it, and they came to me. I was thrilled, because

"Listen, I can help save this farm. We'll figure it out." A young man, sort of a wanderer, comes by and the niece hires him to work the farm. Of course, the story evolves that they fall in love, the wanderer and the niece, and with Aunt Batty's help, they save the farm. I've never picked so many oranges in my life! Up on a ladder with a bag, picking oranges in a long gray wig, no makeup and men's clothes.

Q: Your children have followed in your footsteps....

A: I discouraged them. I wanted college graduates. I got none. My first college graduate is my granddaughter. But David set the course, and when Shaun saw that, he said, "Why do I have to go to school? I'll make a fortune singing." And that's what he did. Patrick had all kinds of



I got a chance to play a role that was a little different for me.

Q: What are your recent projects?

A: I did a wonderful film for Hallmark called *Hidden Places*. It's set in Indiana during the 1930s. I play an old farm lady who wears men's clothes, spouts the Bible and tells everybody what to do. Her name is Aunt Betty, but they call her Aunt Batty — she's been kept away from the family. Her nephew dies at the beginning of the story, and her niece by marriage is left with two children. They're going to lose their farm — they have an orange grove. But Aunt Batty says,

football scholarships. He was a great athlete, so I thought, at least I'll get a college kid who plays football! Third game of the year, he broke his collarbone. Guess what he did? He went into the drama department. That was the end of my college football player. They're all really great guys. I'm proud, very proud.

Q: What is the secret of your success?

A: Being at the right place at the right time. And having a gift: being able to sing. There were lots of girls who were more talented than me, prettier than me. But I just happened to be right for that role in *Oklahoma!* ☺