



Click here to visit other RealCities sites



- Our Local Channels
- News
- Business
- Sports
- Entertainment
- Living

- Help
- Contact Us
- Site Index
- Archives
- Place an Ad
- Newspaper

Search

go

Search the Archives

Back to Home > Philadelphia Inquirer > Arts & Entertainment >

Tuesday, Jul 23, 2002

Shopping

Find a Job
an Apartment
a Home



Film

Select a day: M | T | W | Th | F | S | Su



Front Page

News

- Local & Regional
- US & World

Sports

- Eagles
- Flyers
- Phillies
- Sixers
- High School Sports

Posted on Sat, Jul. 20, 2002



My boss, Jill Clayburgh

She was sweet, supportive and away most of the time. Now, she's back.

By Robert Plunket

Not that it's any of my business, but I think that new movie *Never Again* is being marketed all wrong. It's being sold as some sort of sex romp for the over-50



College Sports

Business

Automobiles

Careers

Real Estate

Technology

Hospital & Healthcare

Personal Finance & Investing

Consumer

Daily Magazine

Arts & Entertainment

Books

Art

Film

Music

Theater & Dance

Nightlife

Weekend

Television & Radio

Lifestyle

Food & Dining

Travel

Fashion

set; and while such a movie might indeed be of interest for those of us who see humor in such things, the real importance of *Never Again* lies elsewhere.

It's the first Jill Clayburgh movie in ages. Oh, not the first one she's been in, as any regular viewer of the Lifetime channel can attest. No, this is rather the first one to mark a return of her screen persona from the olden days - the Erica of *An Unmarried Woman*, the Marilyn of *Starting Over*.

For those of you too young to remember, there was a time back in the late '70s when Jill turned out a series of movies that pretty much defined the "liberated" woman of that era. She presented the good side and the bad - the excitement of finding one's identity vs. the loneliness of not having a man. These movies were widely discussed, and one, *An Unmarried Woman*, touched off a national debate. Jill became an icon for women seeking personal growth while still looking fabulous. The resultant traffic into shrinks' offices must have been enormous. I've always felt



Jill Clayburgh returns in the film "Never Again."



▶▶ Home & Design**▶▶ People****▶▶ Religion****▶▶ Family****Education****▶▶ School Report Card****Health, Science & Technology****▶▶ Health & Medicine****▶▶ Science****▶▶ Tech.Life****Opinion****▶▶ South Jersey Commentary****▶▶ Pennsylvania Commentary****▶▶ Community Voices****Sunday Review****Inquirer Magazine****Obituaries****Special Reports****▶▶ Loaded for Trouble****Columnists**

that the American Psychiatric Association should give her a plaque.

And now she's back. A little older, perhaps, but still as funny, as vulnerable, as questing as ever. She makes you laugh, then she makes you cry. All she needed was the right material.

She's back, and watching *Never Again* is like bumping into an old friend. She looks great; but when it comes to emotional neediness, she's right up there with Liza Minnelli. You don't know whether to love her or to shake her.

I used to work for Jill Clayburgh. A mutual friend took pity on me and got me on her payroll. My job was to look for material. Not material for the curtains - although I did that, too, and was quite good at it. No, I was supposed to read scripts, books, magazine articles, or whatever to see if somewhere inside all those pages lurked a Jill Clayburgh movie.

It was quite a feather in my cap. At that time - 1979 - I was a wannabe writer and virtual nobody, and Jill was a big Hollywood star. Her career was at its peak: She'd just had two back-to-back Oscar nominations. Her life was frantic, even overcrowded. She





Looking for some exposure for your band?

Apply to play at the Rolling River Music & Film Festival in St. Paul, Minn. More than 50,000 people are expected to attend the five-day shindig. So what are you waiting for?

🔥 **Apply today...**

Freebies

Win tickets to sporting events, concerts, and more!

🔥 **Play to win!**

Find the best DVD deals online here!

Read reviews, see new releases, compare prices and more.

🔥 **DVD Deals!**

had just gotten married, she was pregnant with her first child, Lily (how she agonized over the spelling, one "l" or two), she was appearing at anti-nuke rallies, flying to Europe right and left for meetings and festivals. ...

Then along came me.

Talk about your dream job. The first thing I did was set up the office, with little notebooks and index cards and a lot of really nice pens. Then I devised an ingenious and elaborate filing system. Jill was speechless when she saw it. But the best part was designing the stationery. That task alone took two weeks.

Once these chores were accomplished, I soon settled into a routine. I got to read all the best-sellers before they were published, and screenplays flew in over the transom from agents, producers, would-be producers, cabdrivers, waiters and waitresses - particularly waitresses, since Jill was a magnet for late-'70s female psychobabble drama. I would write wonderfully condescending letters back saying we weren't interested. And every time the phone rang, it would be someone like Robert Redford.

Jill was a great boss - sweet, supportive, away most of the time.

<http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/entertainment/movies/3680538.htm>

She never demanded pesky receipts, nor did she check the petty-cash drawer that often.

Oddly enough, she was a bit tight in the salary department. I myself was grossly underpaid. I couldn't figure it out, because her personal assistant was making a fortune. And all he did was make Jill popcorn.

He bossed her around terribly. I remember bumping into them once on Amsterdam Avenue. They were taking a rocking chair to have the seat recaned. Jill was eight months pregnant, and he was making her carry the chair all by herself! (He later became a very successful agent.)

But after a while, I became very disappointed with the material coming in from agents and over the transom. It just wasn't Jill.

So during idle moments at the office, I began to dream up ideas myself. Enough with these turgid melodramas and these forced and lifeless comedies! Let's do something different, something with gravitas! I envisioned branching out into movies based on famous women in history, such as Madame Curie or - my own favorite, and one I kept pushing - Peggy Crowley, wife of Malcolm Crowley, a famous editor of his time. Back in the 1930s, Peggy ran

off to Mexico with the poet Hart Crane and nagged him so much about his affairs with handsome young Mexican men that he jumped off a ship and drowned. Now *there* was a movie.

Jill would listen to these ideas with stunned silences and blank looks.

"But what about *Norma Rae*?" she would ask. "I thought it was pretty good."

"*Norma Rae*? I wouldn't paper-train my dog with that script."

"*Terms of Endearment*? Why wasn't I considered for that? They didn't even send me a script."

I didn't have the heart to tell her that they had. Unfortunately, I'd left it on the subway. But I didn't feel the least bit guilty about it because, let's face it: *Terms of Endearment* just wasn't a Jill Clayburgh movie.

But politics can rear its ugly head anywhere, even a star's breakfast nook. The personal assistant was so jealous of me and my growing influence over Jill that he lost his reason. He would

conveniently "forget" or "misplace" important messages, and it was he who told Jill about all the parking tickets I got on her car.

I guess I should have seen it coming, but I didn't. One day, after I'd been slaving away for 18 months, Jill and her assistant announced that he would take over my duties, which would free me up to - pound the pavements, actually, looking for a new job.

For some reason, I'm terrible at getting new jobs. The whole thing was quite stressful. For a while I was forced to teach English as a second language.

In time, Jill began to fade into the background - not just mine but the country's as well.

But by watching her closely for several years at her glorious peak, I do think I've garnered insight into Jill and her remarkable career. What's she like as a person? What's her lifestyle? Who is Jill Clayburgh?

Well, she comes from a wealthy Manhattan family, sophisticated, with roots on her mother's side that go back to the Mayflower. While Jill was growing up, they lived in a brownstone on East 73d; and Jill attended Brearley, one of the most exclusive schools in

New York.

But the Clayburghs had a bohemian streak. Jill's grandmother was a famous opera singer. Her brother is an avant-garde theater director who lives in Brussels. With this background, it was only natural that she'd end up at Sarah Lawrence.

I don't know what it's like today; but back in the early '60s, Sarah Lawrence had a mystique unparalleled in the annals of higher education. It was *the* school for rich, arty girls: no grades were given, and eccentricity was valued the way popularity was at other colleges. One highly admired freshman painted her room black, then sat there for six months in some sort of trance. A typical Sarah Lawrence vignette of the time: A girl in a long skirt, with a stern and haughty visage, performing her own personal rendition of Kurt Weill's "Surabaya Johnny." It could have been Jill. In fact, it probably was.

But Jill was always a little more canny than most Sarah Lawrence girls. She got acting jobs immediately after graduation and worked her way up to Off-Broadway plays, soap operas, then the ingenue roles in two Broadway musicals, *The Rothschilds* and *Pippin* .

Then came *Hustling* .

Yes, Jill first burst upon the public consciousness playing a hooker. But what a hooker: weary and a little shopworn, perhaps, and talking in a deliciously trashy accent, but with a sensational pair of legs packed into those hot pants and a real movie-star face - strong features, beautiful eyes and skin, and a slightly lopsided smile. *Hustling* was that year's television sensation - way ahead of its time thanks to both the subject matter and Jill's performance. Hollywood began to take a serious look at her.

It took Jill a while to find her footing in the movies (*Silver Streak* , *Gable and Lombard*); but once *An Unmarried Woman* hit the screen in 1978, her fame was assured. She was an icon of American womanhood at a particular and crucial moment in time - a role, she once told me, that "frightened and excited" her.

After *An Unmarried Woman* came my favorite, *Starting Over* . I watched it recently, and it's fresh as paint. Jill, Burt Reynolds, Candice Bergen, all at their comic peaks - who could ask for anything more? Jill plays a very gifted nursery-school teacher with low self-esteem. The film explores what happens when she meets Burt Reynolds, a recently divorced man who suffers from the male version of the same thing. Like the best romantic comedies, it just

gets better with time.

In the early 1980s, Jill's priorities changed. This is usually actor lingo for "I can't get work"; but in Jill's case, it was true. She moved to the country and was raising three kids. Her husband, David Rabe, has always needed special handling. He is famously reclusive in a J.D. Salinger sort of way and stays out in the barn all day, writing and playing with the dogs. David is, of course, famous for defining the consciousness of Vietnam-era America in his classic plays *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *In the Boom Boom Room*. Imagine - two icons in the same house. Or rather, the same house and the barn.

But mostly during the '80s and '90s, Jill was a mother, both at home and on film. She was everybody's mother imaginable. She was Ally McBeal's mother. She was Matthew Perry's mother. She was Yasmine Bleeth's mother. She was even Lyle and Erik Menendez's mother. And in one failed sitcom, *Everything's Relative*, she was Eric Schaeffer's mother.

In addition to acting, Schaeffer directs somewhat quirky independent films (*My Life's in Turnaround*); and he was so taken with Jill, and with the chemistry between her and Jeffrey Tambor (who played his father), that while the 1999 sitcom was still

<http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/entertainment/movies/3680538.htm>

running, he began writing a movie for them. He called it *Never Again*.

In *Never Again*, Jill plays a Manhattan social worker so buffeted by unhappy relationships that she vows - never again. Naturally, that's when she meets Jeffrey Tambor, a very nice guy, if not terribly exciting, who runs his own exterminating business. The high point of the movie is the scene in which Jill is found in a compromising position when Jeffrey's mother drops by unexpectedly.

But to my discerning eye, what really makes *Never Again* work is Jill's crying scene. That's her genius as an actress - she understands the power of a crying woman. The blubbery tears, the contorted features, the runny nose - they're all there, never more effective than in this film, and never more heartbreaking. That's the moment you realize Jill Clayburgh is back, and she's crying better than ever.

But perhaps the greatest thrill for me about Jill's new movie is that it has allowed the two of us to reconnect. It's being shown everywhere at film festivals - it was in Philadelphia this spring, prior to its planned summer release - and everywhere it's a big

hit.

I saw it in Sarasota, Fla., in February. The best part was that Jill came along to make a personal appearance.

As I didn't want to upstage the movie, I decided to wait till after the screening to surprise her. But afterward, she was immediately surrounded by a mob of fans to whom I thought she was unnecessarily gracious.

"Jill! Jill!" I screamed ever more shrilly until she finally looked my way.

I must say, her face was a study as it all came flooding back to her - our wonderful friendship lo those many years ago, not to mention everything I had done for her career.

"Bill!" she gasped.

"Bob," I corrected. Then it hit me - oh, my God, she's starting to forget things. Well, the poor woman is almost 60 years old.

What a wonderful little mini-reunion we had!

Unfortunately, it seemed it was over before it began, as her publicist and some people from the film festival literally dragged her off to an outrageously overpriced patron party (\$50) that I wasn't planning to attend.

"Can we talk?" I called out. "I've got some wonderful movie ideas!"

"Yes, let's," Jill said as she hurried off with surprising speed for a woman of her age.

"Where are you staying?"

"The Ritz," she yelled over her shoulder, nimbly jumping into a waiting limo.

But she wasn't staying at the Ritz; and by the time I finally tracked her down, I guess she'd given up on hearing from me. The operator said she was no longer accepting calls. I thought I might catch her at the airport; but with all these new security regulations, it was hopeless. I was finally ordered to leave by a very rude Argenbright employee.

Which is a shame. After all, Katharine Hepburn won four of her six

Oscars after she turned 60. Jill could do that, too. She's got the potential. She's got the cheekbones. Now all she needs is the right material with some really good crying scenes. And I have a feeling I'm just the person to deliver them. •

Robert Plunket is the author of "My Search for Warren Harding" and "Love Junkie." Direct e-mail to Inquirer.Magazine@phillynews.com .



[email this](#) | [print this](#)

[News](#) | [Business](#) | [Sports](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Living](#) | [Classifieds](#)

[Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Archives](#) | [Place an Ad](#) | [Newspaper Subscriptions](#)
[About Philly.com](#) | [About Realcities Network](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Press Center](#) | [Copyright](#)