

# Los Angeles Times

## Jennifer Jones dies at 90; Oscar-winning actress

**Discovered by future husband David O. Selznick, Jones won the Academy Award for 1943's 'The Song of Bernadette.' She also was married to industrialist and art collector Norton Simon.**

By Claudia Luther

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In this June 6, 1997 photo, actress Jennifer Jones gestures during a speech after she was awarded with the "Goldenes Filmband" (Golden Award) for her lifetime achievement in Berlin. (Hans Edinger / Associated Press)

a man, played by Cotten; the western epic "Duel in the Sun" (1946), with Peck; and "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing" (1955), in which she played Dr. Han Suyin opposite Holden. She was also nominated as best supporting actress for "Since You Went Away" (1944), in which she starred with her first husband, Robert Walker.

Jennifer Jones, the actress who won an Academy Award for her luminous performance in the 1943 film "The Song of Bernadette" and who was married to two legendary men -- producer David O. Selznick and industrialist and art collector Norton Simon -- has died. She was 90.

Jones died Thursday of natural causes at her home in Malibu, according to Leslie C. Denk, a spokeswoman for the [Norton Simon Museum](#) in Pasadena.

Jones had an influential role at the art museum, becoming chairwoman of the Norton Simon Foundation Board after her husband's death in 1993 and overseeing a \$3-million renovation of the museum's interior and gardens that was completed in 1999.

But she was best known for her movie career. In all, she starred in more than two dozen films, playing opposite such A-list actors as William Holden, Joseph Cotten and Gregory Peck.

In addition to her best-actress win for "Bernadette," Jones was nominated for an Academy Award for leading roles in three other films: "Love Letters" (1945), a melodrama in which an amnesiac is cured through the love of

The tall, sensitive Jones might never have risen to stardom but for Selznick, who was the first to see something special in the beautiful "big-eyed girl" named Phylis Isley who showed up in his New York

office to test -- although not very well -- for the part of Claudia in the 1943 film of the same name. (Dorothy McGuire won the role.) After seeing her second test, he decided she was "the best sure-fire female star to come along since Leigh and Bergman" --referring to Vivien Leigh and Ingrid Bergman, both then under contract to the producer.

He found the young actress a new name and began grooming her for stardom, finding Jones her first big role in "Bernadette" and, afterward, producing or choosing most of her films. He endlessly pestered Hollywood with his memos about her makeup, her camera angles, her costumes. She was his protegee, his obsession, his crusade, eventually his lover and, finally, his wife.

His adoration of her, said film critic David Thomson, shaped the rest of his life and fueled "one of the great gossip-column melodramas of the time."

"She was an ardent young actress before she met Selznick," Thomson wrote in "The New Biographical Dictionary of Film." "But it is hard now to be sure whether we would know her if his great wind had not picked her up like a leaf."

Jones was born in Tulsa, Okla., on March 2, 1919, the daughter of the owners and stars of Isley Stock Co., a tent show that toured the Midwest. She became interested in acting during her school years and eventually studied at Northwestern University and the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York.

It was at the academy that she met Walker, whom she married in 1939 and with whom she had two sons, Robert Walker Jr. and Michael Walker.

After several failed attempts to break into Hollywood, the two actors settled in New York City, and Jones finally got her chance for a screen test with Selznick.

By that time, Selznick was almost 40 and had already produced the epic "Gone With the Wind" and a string of popular and important films, including "David Copperfield," "A Tale of Two Cities" and "Rebecca." He was looking for another "GWTW" -- and another star to discover.

"The Song of Bernadette," a 20th Century Fox film directed by Henry King, was the vehicle Selznick picked to introduce Jones to the American public.

It was, everyone agreed, perfect casting. Jones, who was Catholic and had gone to a convent school, had the kind of wide-eyed innocence that made her believable as Bernadette Soubirous, the French peasant girl who saw a vision of the Virgin Mary in a grotto.

"I cried all the way through 'Bernadette' because Jennifer was so moving and because I realized then I had lost the award," said Ingrid Bergman, who was nominated for an Oscar for her role in "For Whom the Bell Tolls" the same year Jones won.

At the time, Jones was a wife and mother, but even that tame image was not what the studio wanted for the actress it had playing a virginal mystic. For months, Jones was asked to hide her family life and present herself as a real-life Bernadette.

That changed after Selznick arranged for Jones and Walker to play opposite each other in Jones' second starring film, the World War II tear-jerker "Since You Went Away" from 1944. To promote that film, publicity stories were churned out about "Mr. and Mrs. Cinderella" and their contented home life with their children.

By then, however, the relationship was frayed, and the couple divorced in 1945. Walker, who had starred in "See Here, Private Hargrove," "Strangers on a Train" and opposite Judy Garland in "The Clock," died in 1951.

In 1948, Selznick divorced his wife, Irene Mayer, daughter of MGM mogul Louis B. Mayer. Selznick, 47, and Jones, 30, were married in 1949 on a yacht off the Italian Riviera.

More than 30 years later, Jones told the Washington Post of her relationship with Selznick: "I felt appreciated right from the beginning. I felt totally at ease. I don't know whether that's love at first sight."

But she said the stories of Selznick's domination were overblown.

"I had good roles, and I had David to guide me," Jones said.

Selznick's "Duel in the Sun" a 1946 western, earned Jones one of her best-actress Oscar nominations.

Selznick intended "Duel" as a sweeping epic in the tradition of his greatest triumph, "Gone With the Wind."

But the film, in which Jones played a woman of mixed race caught between two brothers (Peck and Cotten), ran into publicity problems when the Catholic Church issued a statement saying the story "tends to throw audience sympathy on the side of sin" and that Jones "is unduly, if not indecently, exposed." The Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood removed posters of her that showed cleavage, and much was made of the difference between Jones' role in "Duel" and her role as the innocent in "Bernadette."

"Duel," although a box-office hit, today is remembered with some humor by critics. Leonard Maltin, writing in his movie guide, called "Duel" a "big, brawling, engrossing, often stupid sex-western."

Among Jones' other major roles were "Portrait of Jennie" (1948), "Madame Bovary" (1949) and, in the 1950s, "Carrie," "Beat the Devil," "Ruby Gentry," "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit," "Good Morning, Miss Dove," "The Barretts of Wimpole Street" and "A Farewell to Arms." She played Nicole Diver in 1962's "Tender Is the Night."

Starting in the mid-1960s, Jones went through a bleak period. Her film career was on the wane and, in 1965, Selznick died. Two years later, on the day her good friend Charles Bickford died at the age of 78, Jones attempted suicide. She was found by sheriff's deputies in the surf in Malibu, where she had collapsed after taking sleeping pills and, it appeared from evidence at the scene, drinking wine.

"I don't think I wanted to die," she told the Washington Post several years later. "These accidents happen."

Jones' penultimate film, "Angel, Angel, Down We Go" (1969), was so bad that film historian Edward Margulies, co-author of "Bad Movies We Love," referred to the film in labeling Jones "the true standout" among former Oscar winners who "slid into grade-Z trash" in their later careers.

Jones' final film role was a supporting role as Fred Astaire's love interest in the 1974 film "The Towering Inferno." But by then, Jones' life had taken a turn for the better after having met Norton Simon.

He was recently divorced when they met in May 1971 at a reception in Los Angeles for a New York magazine editor. Simon was 64, and Jones was 52.

At that time, Jones had retreated from Hollywood and was raising her daughter by Selznick, Mary Jennifer.

Active for many years with mental-health and charity organizations, Jones was working with the Manhattan Project, a group of Salvation Army residential treatment facilities for young people addicted to narcotics. Simon said later that, of course, he found Jones beautiful but that they connected because of her activism.

Simon by that time had severed his last managerial ties to his business empire and was one of the world's leading art collectors, mostly of old masters. By the end of May, the couple had embarked on a trip to Paris, stopping over in London, where they decided to get married.

Jones said that she had considered museums boring until she met Simon. She changed her mind on a trip to Siena, Italy, with her husband.

Jones, in turn, opened Simon's mind to other cultures. According to Times arts reporter Suzanne Muchnic's 1998 biography of Simon, "Odd Man In," it was Jones, a longtime yoga practitioner, who persuaded Simon to take his first trip to India, where he was "smitten by the art of regions he had scarcely considered before." Simon became a major force in the Indian and Southeast Asian art market.

Jones eventually became an important part of Simon's art empire. When he became incapacitated by Guillain-Barré syndrome, he named his wife president of the Norton Simon Museum. As chairwoman of the Norton Simon Foundation Board, she oversaw the renovation in the late '90s of the museum's interior, designed by museum trustee Frank Gehry, and the gardens, by landscape designer Nancy Goslee Power. She was given emeritus status in 2003.

Jones herself was surprised at the many turns her life had taken.

"Actually," she told the Washington Post in 1977, "every time I stop to think about it, I'm really amazed. I think I've had an extraordinary life. And lots of times I can hardly believe it's me."

Jones is survived by her son Robert Walker Jr., eight grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Her son Michael Walker died in 2007. In 1975, her daughter with Selznick, Mary Jennifer, committed suicide. Services will be private.

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