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Jennifer Jones, Postwar Actress, Dies at 90

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[Jennifer Jones](#), who achieved Hollywood stardom in [“The Song of Bernadette”](#) and other films of the 1940s and ’50s while gaining almost as much attention for a tumultuous personal life, died Thursday at her home in Malibu, Calif. She was 90.



20th Century Fox/Associated Press

In this film publicity image originally released by 20th Century Fox, actress Jennifer Jones is shown as Bernadette in the 1943 movie “Song of Bernadette.”

Ms. Jones, who was the chairwoman of the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, Calif., died of natural causes, said Leslie Denk, a museum spokeswoman. Ms. Jones was the widow of the industrialist and art patron Norton Simon.

After winning an Academy Award in 1944 for her performance in “The Song of Bernadette,” Ms. Jones went on to star in successful films like [“Duel in the Sun”](#) and [“Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing.”](#) She was nominated for Oscars five times.

She was also known for an off-screen life that included bouts of emotional instability; a second marriage to the Svengali-like David O. Selznick, the producer of [“Gone With the Wind”](#); the suicide of their daughter; and a later marriage to another larger-than-life figure, Mr. Simon.

It was Selznick who got Ms. Jones the role of Bernadette Soubirous, the young French peasant girl whose visions at Lourdes created a sensation in 1858. “The Song of Bernadette,” based on Franz Werfel’s best-selling novel, was a huge hit, and it brought the little-known Ms. Jones instant fame.

“After that first big role, there was a kind of stage fright,” Ms. Jones said in 1981. She told another interviewer: “When you’re young, you’re full of hope and dreams. Later you begin to wonder. I did ‘The Song of Bernadette’ without knowing what was going on half the time.”

When she made [“Bernadette,”](#) Ms. Jones was the wife of the young actor Robert Walker and the mother of two small boys. She and her husband had met as students at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York in 1938 and married a year later. They had struggled together until Selznick put Ms. Jones under personal contract in 1941. A year later, Mr. Walker was signed by MGM and had a star-making debut in 1943 as a young sailor in [“Bataan.”](#)

But the marriage didn’t last; they separated in the fall of 1943, and by then Ms. Jones was deeply involved with Selznick. Seventeen years her senior, he would be the mastermind of her career.

Selznick’s wife, Irene, the daughter of the movie mogul Louis B. Mayer, left him in 1945, in part over his affair with Ms. Jones, who divorced Mr. Walker that year. [David Thomson](#), in his biography of Selznick, [“Showman,”](#) said Selznick had found something special in Ms. Jones. “She was so meek, so young, so lovely, so entirely ready to be David’s creation that she left all the responsibility with him,” Mr. Thomson wrote.

Ms. Jones and Selznick were married in 1949 on a yacht off the coast of Italy. Until his death in 1965, he made virtually all the decisions in his wife’s career. He supervised her dramatic training and produced many of her early movies, including [“Since You Went Away”](#) (1944), “Duel in the Sun” (1946), [“Portrait of Jennie”](#) (1948) and a lavish version, the second, of [Ernest Hemingway’s](#) “Farewell to Arms” (1957). The film, which also starred [Rock Hudson](#), was a critical and box-office failure and the last movie Selznick made.

When Selznick lent his wife out to other producers, he often chose badly — turning down the classic film noir “[Laura](#),” for example, or insisting that she star as the mentally ill Nicole Diver in the film version of [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#)’s “[Tender Is the Night](#)” when she was both too old for the role and in precarious mental health herself.

Ms. Jones never set her own course. Though her roles expanded — from the country girl Bernadette to the passionate half-caste young woman lusting after [Gregory Peck](#) in “Duel in the Sun” to the wealthy adulteress of [Vittorio De Sica](#)’s “[Indiscretion of an American Wife](#)” (1954) — the screen image was always as molded by Selznick.

But her acting was admired. She received Oscar nominations as best actress for her performances as an amnesiac cured by [Joseph Cotten](#)’s love in “[Love Letters](#)” (1945), as the wanton Pearl Chavez in “Duel in the Sun” and as a Eurasian doctor in love with a Korean War correspondent ([William Holden](#)) in “Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing” (1955).

Ms. Jones was born Phylis Lee Isley in Tulsa, Okla., on March 2, 1919, the only child of Philip and Flora Mae Isley. Her parents owned and starred in the Isley Stock Company, a tent-show theatrical troupe that toured the rural Midwest. As a child she spent her summers taking tickets, selling candy and acting in the company.

After a year at [Northwestern University](#), she moved to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, where she was cast as Elizabeth Barrett opposite Robert Walker’s Robert Browning in “[The Barretts of Wimpole Street](#).” The two soon married, and on their honeymoon in 1939 they went to Hollywood, where they found bit roles.

Retreating to New York, the couple had a son, Robert Jr., in 1940, and another, Michael, less than a year later. Michael died in 2007. Robert survives her, as do eight grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Ms. Jones met Selznick in New York when she went to his office there to read for the lead in “[Claudia](#),” Rose Franken’s hit stage play, which Selznick was turning into a movie. The title role went to Dorothy McGuire, who had

starred in the play, but Selznick was taken by the lithe, dark-haired Ms. Jones and saw a future for her in Hollywood. (He came up with the name Jennifer Jones during that first encounter.)

Ambitious but emotionally fragile, Ms. Jones placed herself in Selznick's hands. He cast her in a William Saroyan play, "Hello Out There," in a theater season he was presenting in Santa Barbara, Calif., and she received rave reviews. He was already planning to lend her to his brother-in-law, the producer Bill Goetz, at 20th Century Fox, for "Song of Bernadette."

After "Bernadette," Selznick cast her as [Claudette Colbert](#)'s daughter in "Since You Went Away," his bid to make a "Gone With the Wind" about the World War II home front. Ms. Jones was nominated for a supporting actress Oscar as the girl whose first love is a young soldier.

Though Ms. Jones and Mr. Walker were by then estranged, Selznick cast Mr. Walker as the soldier who is strengthened by Ms. Jones's love. Mr. Walker, who later scored a success as the villain in [Alfred Hitchcock](#)'s "Strangers on a Train," died at 32 in 1951 after years of emotional problems and drinking, which he attributed to his loss of Ms. Jones.

Among Ms. Jones's other movies were the comedy "[Cluny Brown](#)" (1946), directed by Ernst Lubitsch; "[Carrie](#)" (1952), a film version of Theodore Dreiser's novel "Sister Carrie" co-starring [Laurence Olivier](#); [John Huston](#)'s "[Beat the Devil](#)" (1954) co-starring [Humphrey Bogart](#); "[Madame Bovary](#)" (1949), co-starring [James Mason](#); and "[Ruby Gentry](#)" (1952), a King Vidor film with [Charlton Heston](#) about destructive passions reminiscent of "Duel in the Sun."

After Selznick's death in 1965, Ms. Jones's film career petered out in "[The Idol](#)" (1966), about a young man sleeping with the mother of his girlfriend; the low-budget "Angel, Angel, Down We Go" (1969); and the ensemble disaster movie "[The Towering Inferno](#)" (1974). In 1966 she made a rare stage appearance, in a revival of [Clifford Odets](#)'s "[Country Girl](#)" at New York City Center.

In 1967, Ms. Jones made headlines when she swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills and was discovered, near death, lying in the surf at Malibu. In 1976, Ms. Jones's 21-year-old daughter, Mary Jennifer Selznick, jumped to her death from a building in West Los Angeles.

Ms. Jones married Norton Simon, in 1971, in a ceremony on a yacht in the English Channel after a courtship of three weeks. Mr. Simon, a multimillionaire industrialist who had turned a bankrupt orange juice bottling plant into a conglomerate that included Hunt Foods and Canada Dry, had retired in 1969 at 62 to concentrate on collecting art.

He spent more than \$100 million on his collection, one of the country's greatest private art collections, housed at the Norton Simon Museum.

After being stricken by the paralyzing neurological disorder Guillain-Barré syndrome, Mr. Simon resigned as president of the museum and was succeeded by Ms. Jones, who also took the title of chairwoman. She oversaw a gallery renovation by the architect [Frank Gehry](#). Mr. Simon died in 1993 at age 86.

Throughout her life Ms. Jones appeared shy and aloof in public, and she rarely gave interviews. She explained why in one of the few she did give, in 1957.

“Most interviewers probe and pry into your personal life, and I just don't like it,” she said. “I respect everyone's right to privacy, and I feel mine should be respected, too.”

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