



Bette Davis

April 5, 1908 - October 6, 1989

Neuilly-sur-Seine, undefined

Bette Davis, the New England girl who made Hollywood take a difficult woman seriously, died on October 6, 1989, in a hospital outside Paris. She was eighty-one. She had gone to Spain that fall to accept a tribute at the San Sebasti n film festival, grew too weak to make the long flight home, and spent her last days in France, which had only recently given her the Legion of Honor.

She was born Ruth Elizabeth Davis in Lowell, Massachusetts, on April 5, 1908, the daughter of a patent attorney and a mother who later worked as a photographer to keep the family afloat. She came up through stock companies and Broadway, then arrived in Hollywood in 1930 to a string of forgettable pictures at Universal. Warner Bros. signed her in 1932, and in 1934 she played the coarse, cruel waitress in *Of Human Bondage* so fearlessly that when the Academy left her off the ballot, the outcry helped open the door to write-in votes.

She won Best Actress the next year for *Dangerous*, and again for *Jezebel* in 1938. In between she sued Warner Bros. in an English court to escape her contract. She lost the case and won the war: the studio began handing her better parts. She became the first performer to collect ten acting nominations, and in 1977 the first woman to receive the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award.

Her screen women were rarely nice and never dull, from the faded stage star of *All About Eve*, who warned everyone to fasten their seatbelts, to the grotesque former child star of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* Off screen she was blunt, tireless and unapologetic about the cost of a career.

She walked off her last film, *Wicked Stepmother*, when her health and patience gave out. Years after her death, two of her Oscar statuettes came up at auction; the director Steven Spielberg bought them and handed them back

to the Academy. Her tomb at Forest Lawn in the Hollywood Hills carries the line she picked for herself: She did it the hard way.

Services

Died at the American Hospital of Paris in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, October 6, 1989, of metastatic breast cancer, days after being honored at the San Sebasti n International Film Festival. Private funeral October 12, 1989, First Christian Church of North Hollywood. Entombed at Forest Lawn-Hollywood Hills, Los Angeles. Epitaph: "She did it the hard way." Portrait: 1935 studio publicity photograph (public domain), hosted by Notice Nearby.

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