

Susan Blakely Girl on Film

Über-successful model and actress **Susan Blakely** shares with us some memorable roles — the most important role being her amazing life.

Early childhood

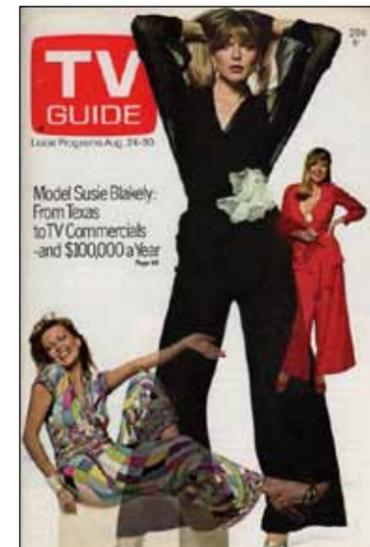
I was rather studious as a kid. I actually loved learning and I was always reading. My later interest in acting probably started from the joy I got losing myself in the characters I read about. My dad was a career U.S. Army officer so we moved frequently from town to town, base to base. It prevented me from making long-term friendships and made me very shy. We didn't have a TV and rarely saw a movie.

High School

I went to four different schools after junior high. One in Korea, one in Hawaii and one in Pennsylvania. You often hear models talk about how they were unpopular in high school. Like everyone, I had trouble believing them but in my case it was really true. Kids already had their cliques and most boys wouldn't ask me out.

Modeling

I arrived in New York when the "All American Look" was at the height of its popularity. Cheryl Tiegs had been on the cover of *Glamour* magazine for almost two years straight. I went to Ford on my first day and they sent me right over to a Clairol commercial, which I got. So they signed me. I was never drop-dead gorgeous. In some of those old pictures, with the lighting and everything, of course I looked great. My mother was not vain at all, so I didn't grow up with that sort of value attached to my looks. I'm grateful for that.



Transition to acting

I started studying acting right away, but back in those days there were only a few models who did, like Lauren Hutton, Jennifer O'Neil and Ali McGraw. I loved doing commercials and had a lot of them airing at the time. An agent at The William Mor-

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reconnecting: **susan blakely**

ris Agency had seen me in a highly popular series of Canada Dry commercials. It was such fun. I played “Baby-Face.” I had lines like, “It’s the ginger ale with the jolt! — It’s got real Bang Bang Flavor!” I wouldn’t sign with them because I wanted to just study for at least a couple more years. I remember that he got furious and said to me, “Do you know who we are?” I was literally that green about the business. But eventually I signed with them. Thank God. Saved from myself.

The Lords of Flatbush

I recently ran into one of my favorite directors, Quentin Tarentino who was a huge fan of *Lords*. It



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was so bizarre to hear him quoting all of my dialogue from *Lords of Flatbush*, a film that I had made in 1973. We almost got into a tiff because although I think the film was great, I wish my work was better, that I had more experience. He was adamant that I was wrong and angry at me for putting down my performance. What a weird predicament. I didn’t want to disagree with a master and I certainly wasn’t fishing for compliments but I was as tenacious as he was and neither of us could let it go. Fortunately, since he also remembered every detail about my work in my next film, *Report to the Commissioner*, which I liked too, our “tiff” ended peacefully.

Rich Man, Poor Man

I never really had any idea how I got the role until years later when I ran into Carol Burnett, one of my idols, shortly after [*Rich Man, Poor Man*] started airing. She said to me, “Oh, you ruined my Monday nights!” I couldn’t believe that Carol Burnett was staying home to watch a show that I was in! Years

later I learned that she was a close friend of Harv Bennett, who was the [*RMPM*] producer. She had seen me in *Report to the Commissioner* and told him that he had to see it. He did and that’s how he came to request me. Still my favorite acting story.

She was actually a composite of four characters from the book by Irwin Shaw and she aged from 17 to 40. It was the best role any actress could wish for. Once again, I really lucked out.

The Towering Inferno

I was so lucky. Not just to be able to work with but to get to know them. To have lunch at the Apple Pan with Bill Holden and share popcorn and beer with Paul Newman.

Believe it or not, having not grown up seeing movies, I knew Fred Astaire was a famous dancer but to me he was just this really sweet guy. We would hang out and talk and he was amazingly humble. Sometimes after a take, he would even come over to me and ask what I thought of his performance. He probably wasn’t used to people being that comfortable around him.

Then, one weekend there was Fred Astaire retrospective on TV. Of course, I was stunned. He was incredible to watch. Moving across the screen with more grace than I had ever seen in nature. His acting was so effortless. I returned to the set so star-struck that I suddenly could barely talk to him. True to form though, after hearing why I had turned so shy, he put me at ease again. It was like dancing.

The Bunker

(playing Eva Braun opposite Anthony Hopkins, Emmy-Winning role as Hitler)

I don’t think I realized, when I took this role, what it was going to entail. Of course, I was elated to work opposite Anthony Hopkins. Working opposite Hitler was a different story. As I started to research my role, it affected me more than I ever thought was possible. I was literally sobbing sometimes reading about the history. But since I believe a lot of the Germans had to have been sheltered from the brutal truth of the Holocaust, and I could see that Eva could have been easily naïve and I could play it as if she didn’t know. Like many Germans she obviously thought that Hitler was a great man, their savior. So basically she was elated to marry what she thought was the most important man in the world and even impressed by the honor to get to die with him.

How to take a good picture

Think of someone you love dearly (like your dog or kitty). 