

Leslie Caron: how fame discovered a 'Reluctant Star'

Two-time Oscar nominee is the subject of a new doc premiering at the Lightbox

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Two-time Oscar nominee Leslie Caron has danced with both Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, been romanced onscreen by Cary Grant and was Warren Beatty's lover and muse — she convinced him to make *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Yet she's still worried people may not show up for Tuesday's world premiere of the documentary *Leslie Caron: The Reluctant Star* at TIFF Bell Lightbox.

"You think some people will go?" she asked from Sardinia, where the celebrated French star of Best Picture winners *Gigi* and *An American in Paris* was sitting on a bougainvillea-draped terrace, enjoying the sunshine and view.

I assure her they will. The documentary by Canadian director Larry Weinstein (*The Devil's Horn*, *Our Man in Tehran*) is a love letter to the ballerina discovered at age 19 by Kelly during a Paris performance who went on to become a huge star during the 1950s heyday of lavishly colourful musicals.

Caron turns 85 on July 1 and her voice, although a bit deepened by age, sounds much the same as it did onscreen 60 years ago, her French accent melded with round English tones. She makes her home in London now.

It puts her close to her son, TV producer Christopher Hall, as well as her latest job, playing Countess Mavrodaki in the British TV drama *The Durrells*.

She left Paris at age 80 — which is also where the documentary begins — and it was a challenge, Caron admits. Initially, she missed her friends

and the café on the corner. "This makes you feel like you belong. If you arrive fresh into a different neighbourhood, it's very difficult."

Caron is settled and happy with her new life, and sounds proud when she talks of making new friends "and the most marvellous thing is I have a friend who is now 104. She has dinner parties!"

Never terribly interested in a Hollywood career, Caron was just as reticent about appearing in a documentary?

"Yes, I was. That is true. I am by nature... I don't like to reveal myself. I don't like to open up," said Caron. "I am shy about that and it's true: at the beginning of my career I didn't want to be a movie star. I wanted to be a dancer. I wanted to be like Anna Pavlova."

She initially rebuffed co-producer Vanessa Dylwyn when she approached Caron 10 years ago about a documentary. "I said, 'What do you want to talk about?'"

Caron said she'd consider it after the publication of her autobiography, *Thank Heaven*, which came out in 2009.

For someone who was hesitant about the project, Caron is remarkably candid about her life in the documentary, speaking about her controlling mother who influenced Caron to live out her unrealized ambitions and who eventually committed suicide.

Caron also talks about the breakup of her marriage to British theatre director Peter Hall and her disappointment that she wasn't able to have a successful film career in her homeland after she left Hollywood.

The film is also filled with clips from Caron's career and behind-the-scenes stories, from the glamour of shooting *Gigi* in Paris, to the Oscar-nominated work she did on a



Leslie Caron: *The Reluctant Star*, directed by Larry Weinstein, is part of TIFF's showcase on the director.

groundbreaking drama about an unmarried pregnant woman living in a London boarding house in *The L-Shaped Room* (1962).

Caron was also a nonconformist. She stood up to studio brass who insisted she pose for cheesecake publicity shots that had nothing to do with her films and channelled Marlon Brando for her rebel's take on Ella in the 1955 Cinderella musical *The Glass Slipper*.

"I never told Marlon. He would laugh," Caron said brightly of how her obsession with his work on *On the Waterfront* helped her craft the unorthodox approach to the fairy-tale heroine. "I admired Marlon so much. I wanted (Ella) to be a real little ruffian."

As for dancing with Astaire (in *Daddy Long Legs*) and Kelly (*An American in Paris*), Caron says she didn't have a favourite.

"I was blessed to dance with both," she said.

Leslie Caron: The Reluctant Star premieres June 28 at 6:30 p.m. at TIFF Bell Lightbox. Go to tiff.net for tickets and info.



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Leslie Caron starred in the 1958 film *Gigi*, among others, including 1951's *An American in Paris*.