

How HOLLYWOOD PORTRAYS NURSES

Report from the Front Row

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and

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Nurses are getting seriously annoyed with Hollywood these days. At the end of last year, the Center for Nursing Advocacy launched a campaign against the wildly popular television show “ER.”

According to the center, “ER” presents doctors doing nurses’ work, has hospital doctors firing nurses, and suggests that smart, ambitious nurses can only improve their education and status by becoming doctors.

While the center has focused on television, we decided to go to the movies (thanks to DVD as well as the Cineplex!) to conduct an extensive yet unscientific review of how nurses are portrayed on the silver screen. The news is not good. Nurses as viable film characters are disappearing from American movies as fast as, well, *real* nurses are disappearing from American bedsides. With one stellar exception – albeit from television, so we will tell you about it later – nurses are just not considered to be Suitable Material for major roles any more.

Time was, nurses appeared regularly in prominent roles. There were the military nurses in World War II films. Okay, they were sweethearts





Universal & Paramount © 1954 Patton Inc. renewed 1982 Samuel Taylor & Patricia Hitchcock O'Connell

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In "Rear Window," Thelma Ritter as home care nurse attends to patient Jimmy Stewart and makes an immobile man with broken leg more comfortable during a heat wave. She also gets caught up in his spying on the neighbors, and a murder suspect, in this 1954 Hitchcock classic.

of Our Boys in Uniform. But they bravely saved the day every time. During the 1950s, nurse roles included strong characters, even heroines – think of Thelma Ritter in "Rear Window" or "Audrey Hepburn" in "The Nun's Story." The sexual revolution was a bit of a setback for the nursing profession, leading to a bevy of naughty naked "Night Nurses," "Student Nurses" and "Candystripe Nurses" by the early '70s.

And then things really started to go downhill. In the last generation, three nurse characters have won Oscars for the actresses who portrayed them, but these three RNs could be described as exemplifying the Good, the Bad, and the Crazy.

First, the Bad.

"One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," darling of the 1975 Oscars, starred Louise Fletcher as Nurse Ratched, the archetypal harridan. As the head nurse in a psychiatric ward, she presides over an odd collection of male patients and attendants – mental cripples all. Nurse Ratched is starched to the core, complete with winged cap, white stockings and Clinics. She carries out the will of The Establishment, and as such becomes the nemesis of Jack Nicholson's freedom-loving character, McMurphy.

Even though Nurse Ratched's power to control her charges is derived from the hospital's chief psychiatrist, who describes her as "one of the finest nurses we've got in this institution,"

she is a full-fledged character, a real force to contend with. The dramatic line of the film traces the power struggle between McMurphy the heroic rebel and Ratched the evil witch.

(For those of you who don't remember the '60s because you weren't born yet, McMurphy was originally intended to be something of a Christ figure, but in retrospect appears to be a garden-variety misogynist and public nuisance.)

"Misery," the 1990 adaptation of a Stephen King thriller, starred Kathy Bates as the Crazy Nurse. Nurse Annie Wilkes isn't a force of evil like Nurse Ratched; she is a florid wacko. We know that from the moment Annie rescues romance writer Paul Sheldon after a car accident and ominously proclaims herself to be his "No. 1 fan." She starts nursing him back to health in her home. Sheldon is completely helpless, with compound fractures in both legs, multiple lacerations, contusions and so forth. She sets his fractures, hydrates him intravenously, administers antibiotics and painkillers, and begins his rehabilitation. Then she discovers that his new book has killed off her beloved heroine, Misery Chastain. Worse still, she learns that that he now plans to write "serious" fiction, and she becomes completely unhinged. She destroys his novel, locks him up, re-cripples him and forces him to write Misery back to life. She kills the kindly sheriff who comes looking for Sheldon. Turns out, in fact, she's one of those famous killer nurses, who was jailed for murdering babies in her hospital and has been barred from practice. (As a courtesy to Mr. King, we'll overlook for the moment how a jobless "baby nurse" came to have a home stocked with IVs, casting equipment, syringes and a roomful of Schedule II drugs.)

Our question about this character is: Why did this psycho killer have to be a nurse? It's clearly because the character needs to have total con-

trol over the helpless Sheldon, while having the complex knowledge needed to deal with his injuries. This requires a certain skill set that, at the time the book was written, was then possessed by only two kinds of professionals: doctors and nurses. A doctor could have assessed and treated the patient's injuries and administered medications. Although most of Stephen King's readers probably don't know this, only a nurse would be able to conduct bedside care and the meticulous rehabilitation that Annie lavishes on Sheldon before she decides to kill him instead.

The author couldn't make the character a doctor because Annie Wilkes has other characteristics that are incompatible with the public's perception of an M.D. Annie is fat and unattractive. She has no taste, no class. And most important, Annie has to be a passionate fan of trashy romance fiction – *definitely* not doctor material! If Stephen King had published a book with a psycho killer doc who *loves romance novels*, the AMA would have had him run off the road.

The Annie Wilkes of "Misery" is what we call a Transitional movie nurse. Unlike Nurse Ratched, she is a plot device with a necessary skill set rather than a full-bodied character who happens to be a nurse. The next stage in character evolution of the movie nurse is the Good Nurse, exemplified by Juliette Binoche in "The English Patient" in 1996.

Binoche's nurse Hannah devotes herself to the care of a severely burned man during World War II. The story requires a nurse because *somebody* has to keep the enigmatic English Patient alive long enough for his mysterious past to be revealed. In addition to her useful skill set, Nurse Hannah provides eye candy and a romantic subplot to offset the tortured revelations of the main, male characters. After the denouement, when All Is Revealed, Hannah assists

her patient's suicide. (Mind you, she's one of the good nurses!)

The 1999 film "Magnolia" continues the diminishing presence of cinematic nurses. Philip Seymour Hoffman plays Phil Parma, the private-duty nurse caring for a dying Jason Robards. Nurse Phil is definitely a good nurse. His skill keeps his patient alive for the film's epic-length 188 minutes, and his heroic compassion enables a beyond-dysfunctional family to achieve something resembling reconciliation in time for the final frames of the movie.

In Hoffman's masterly portrayal, Phil is the only sane person amongst a gaggle of grotesque and tortured souls who are, however, more interesting to the screenwriters. Poor Nurse Phil is the film's only major character who doesn't have a history and thus doesn't deserve any flashback sequences that explain How He Got That Way. Nurse Phil also gets no respect from the Academy Awards: the



Oscar for Best Supporting Actor went to Tom Cruise, who played one of “Magnolia’s” more twisted characters.

Nurse Phil tugged on our heartstrings. But some movie nurses today are only good for laughs. The nurse character as Sight Gag goes back at least to “M*A*S*H*” in 1970. Nurse Margaret Houlihan was, like Nurse Ratched, an instrument of The Establishment and thus an object of

will his fiancée’s family respond to the fact that, amazingly, a guy is a nurse? They express incredulity. When he reports that he’s just been transferred to triage, his future mother-in-law asks, hopefully, “Is that better than a nurse?” And the audience laughs out loud.

Stiller’s character only reconciles with The Parents when it is revealed that he coulda been a con-

cuss “Nurse Betty” because she was a complete dingbat and not even a real nurse. We congratulate Renee Zellweger and Morgan Freeman on having subsequently found honest employment elsewhere.

Things may be looking up for Zellweger, but things are looking worse for movie nurses. That’s because the latest trend is what we call The Vanishing Nurse.

“Living Out Loud” (1998) exemplifies this development. One of the few recent movies with a nurse as its main character, it stars Holly Hunter as a home-care nurse whose physician husband has divorced her to acquire a trophy wife – a young pediatrician. The film follows Hunter’s progress from being a miserable, lonely divorcee to her rebirth as a New Woman. How do we know that she finally has her act together? She goes to medical school! What happier ending could be possible?

This is, by the way, the theme of “ER’s” portrayal of its two major nurse characters, nurse managers Carol Hathaway and Abby Lockhart. Like the screenwriters of “Meet the Parents,” the producers of “ER” believe that an upwardly mobile nurse should be reborn as someone more successful and interesting, preferably a physician. Thusly, the lady vanishes.

That’s exactly what happens in the recent hit comedy “Something’s Gotta Give.” The only nurse in this film’s medical universe actually gets fired. The film stars Diane Keaton as a wealthy playwright and Jack Nicholson as, well, himself. Then there’s a supporting cast who are all very thin, very rich, very successful and fluent in French. Nicholson is dating Keaton’s daughter and the two are planning to enjoy a tryst at Keaton’s luxurious beach house in the Hamptons. But the plan is foiled when he suffers a Viagra-induced, minor heart attack.

Nicholson is taken to a hospi-



Meet The Parents © Universal Studios 1999 Photographer: Phillip V. Caruso

Ben Stiller’s career choice, a nurse, is the subject of laughs in “Meet the Parents.”

derision to Our Heroes. But unlike Nurse Ratched, “Hot Lips” Houlihan was successfully put in her place by the merry band of sexist physicians she had to work with. (We are pleased to report that both doctors and nurse were ultimately rehabilitated during the ensuing television series based on the movie.)

“In Meet the Parents” (2000), Ben Stiller’s nursing career is a running joke for the entire movie. How

tender: He actually aced the MCAT but chose nursing instead, for reasons that remain unfathomable to his prospective in-laws. Take-home message to the audience: The only way a nurse can prove that he is intelligent is to demonstrate that he could have gone to medical school.

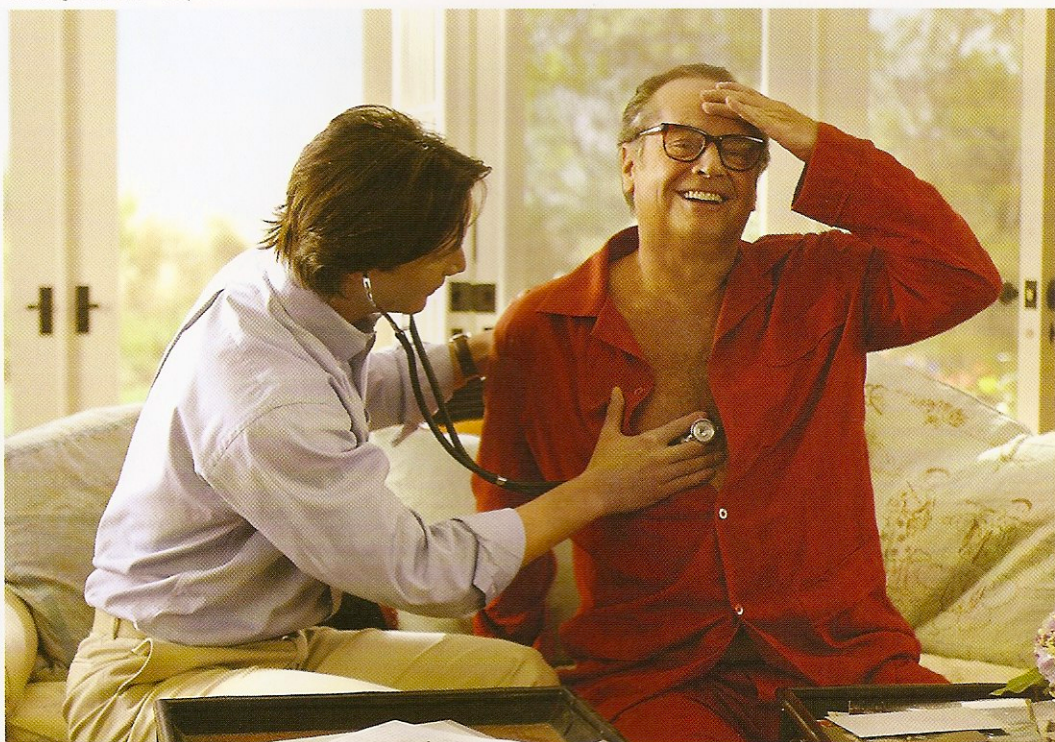
“Nurse Betty” was released in the same year as “Meet the Parents,” and it also uses nursing for comic effect. We are not even going to dis-

tal in which there are no identifiable nurses, only walk-ons in scrubs who push stretchers and IV meds. Keanu Reeves, playing the MD as SNAG (Sensitive New Age Guy), monitors the patient and answers questions about sexual function. When Nicholson is rushed to the emergency room with a suspected second heart attack (it turns out it was only an anxiety attack), a female physician in the ER takes the time to teach him how to meditate.

So Nicholson is discharged from the hospital, but he obviously needs home-based care. He also has to fall in love with Keaton and she with him. So the plot requires that the two be thrown together in spite of their initial antipathy. How best to do this? Make sure Keaton is his nurse. So the home care nurse the doctor sent over has to be fired.

The scene: Keaton returns home after running an errand to find Nicholson giving the bum's rush to his assigned nurse. The two women pass each other in the elegant entry of Keaton's house, a cream-colored décor washed in soft golden light. Keaton is slim and elegant, garbed in tasteful, neutral tones. Then there is The Nurse: a zaftig middle-aged lady with screaming red hair in a white uniform. She obviously *has* to go – she clashes with the color scheme! She just doesn't meet the standards of the movie for taste, class and physique. (Neither does Nicholson, but don't get us started.) This nurse embodies all the attributes we see in the modern movie nurse: She is a plot device, she provides comic relief *and* she vanishes.

At this point, we're going to get serious. We think that "Something's Gotta Give" illustrates one of the most profound contemporary shifts in the cinematic portrayal of the world of



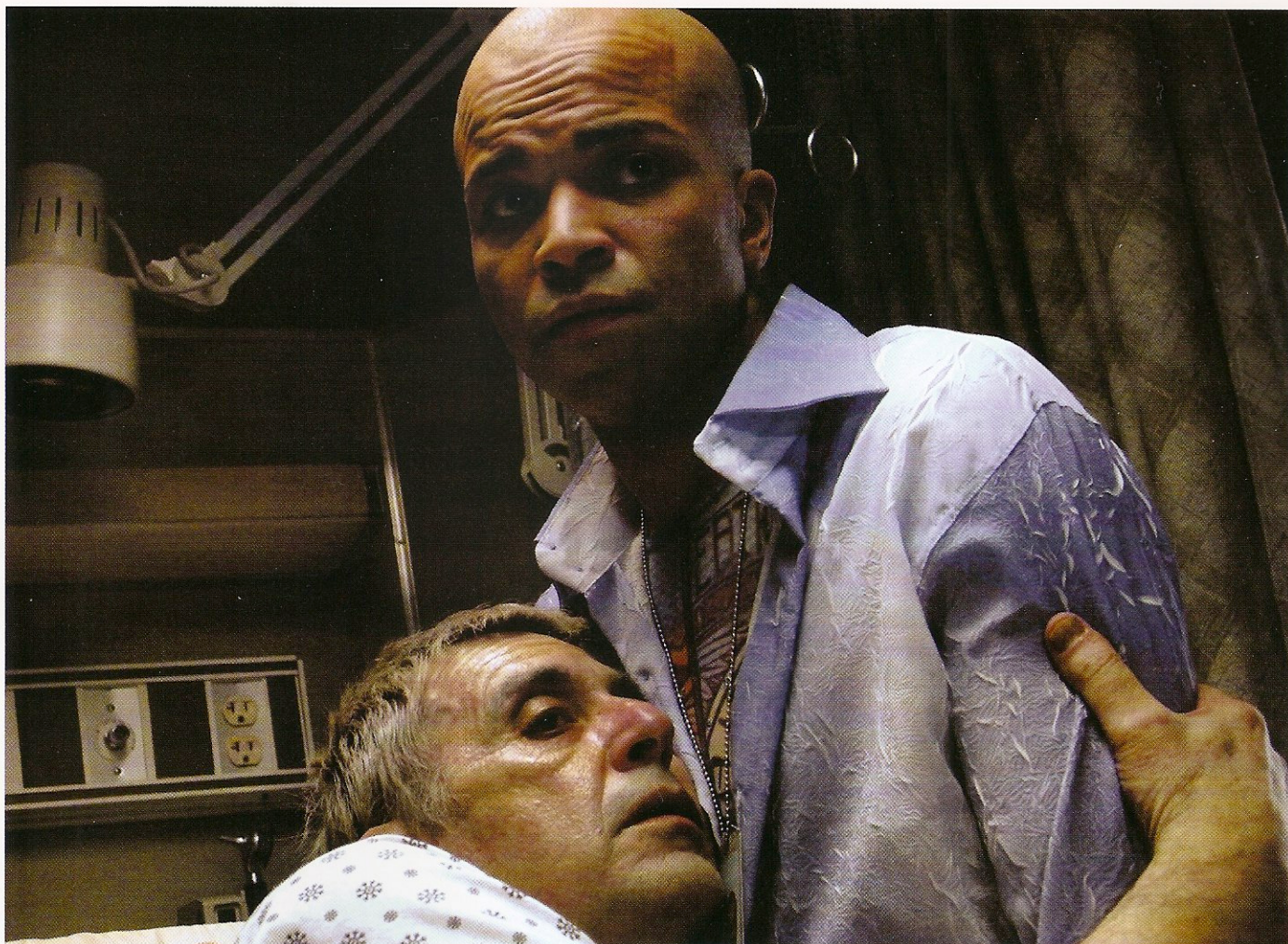
When Jack Nicholson suffers a Viagra-induced heart attack in "Something's Gotta Give," Keanu Reeves, playing the attending MD, monitors the patient and answers questions about sexual functions. Meanwhile, nurses are just passing scrubs, except for the one home care nurse who is fired so Diane Keaton can become his caregiver (and love interest).

health care. Since the days of Nurse Ratched and Hot Lips Houlihan, women have taken up traditionally "male" occupations to become, for example, doctors, lawyers, politicians and journalists. But the public view of traditionally "female" (aka caregiving) work has not expanded to include an appreciation of its complexity and importance.

While women climbing the professional ladder are complaining about the glass ceiling, workers who do "women's" work are still crashing up against a shatter-proof roof of gender and class prejudice. Nurses – male and female – are looked upon as having made a second-class career choice. In her 1991 op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, nursing pro-



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*Angels in America® Courtesy HBO

One positive, gripping portrayal of a nurse in recent films is that of Belize, played by Jeffrey Wright, in HBO's "Angels in America." The black, gay nurse cares for his worst nightmare, gay-hating (and self-loathing) Roy Cohn, played by Al Pacino. Belize's triumph is his capacity to provide meticulous care for someone he finds to be despicable.

fessor and historian Ellen D. Baer describes what she calls "The Feminist Disdain for Nursing." Her successful feminist friends look down on nurses and desperately try to rehabilitate and improve them. Baer describes her appearance at a party given by a lawyer friend with whom she had worked on feminist causes. The woman introduced Baer to her guests as "almost a doctor."

"No," I protested, 'I am a nurse' – to which she replied, 'Oh no, Ellen, you're more than a nurse.'"

"I know her intent was to enhance my status in her friends' eyes

by describing my expertise in non-nurse terms, to rescue me from the indifference or even denigration that being 'only a nurse' often engenders," Baer analyzes the exchange.

"This has happened so often over the years that it has come to exemplify for me the terrible paradox of feminism, which glorifies women who emulate masculine behavior while virtually ignoring women who choose traditionally female roles and careers," she concludes.

Movies are faithfully reflecting the cultural values of what one of us (Gordon) has called Dress for

Success Feminism. In the 21st century, a successful, intelligent, *worthy* protagonist cannot, by definition, be "just a nurse." If the character is involved in health care, she or he must be a physician or someone who aspires to become a physician. According to the unwritten rules of Hollywood, it is now politically incorrect to confer Main Character status on a nurse – unless the nurse is a physician wannabe.

The politically correct movie script can now include sensitive physicians doing extensive bedside care – and this is not considered to be comic relief. Women and members of minority groups can become movie doctors,

and movie doctors can now have emotional crises and breakdowns just like ordinary mortals. In short, movie doctors can now do anything movie nurses used to do, *and* doctors can wear more expensive clothes and drive better cars than movie nurses ever could.

So what does the employment future look like for movie nurses? Bleak as it looks now, we see hope on the horizon. In order to end on an encouraging note, we have to move from the big screen to the little screen, where HBO recently broadcast Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning play, "Angels in America."

In the six-hour-long production, Kushner presents Emily, a nurse practitioner, and Belize, a hospital staff nurse. While Emily is assertive, competent and compassionate, she has a much more truncated role. Belize, the black gay, male nurse, is a central character throughout the play, as he literally struts his nursing stuff.

Assigned to care for the odious anti-communist lawyer Roy Cohn when he's admitted with terminal AIDS, Belize has several priceless confrontations with both a doctor and his patient. In the middle of the night, Cohn's doctor arrives on the unit and marches testily up to the nurses' station. Glancing suspiciously at Belize – who conforms to none of his notions of who a nurse should be or how a nurse should look – he barks,

"Are you the duty nurse?"

Belize says defiantly, "Yo, I said."

"Why are you dressed like that?" the doctor asks.

"You don't like it," Belize responds.

"Nurses are supposed to wear white," the doctor insists, in a clearly racist and sexist jab.

Without batting an eye, Belize retorts, "Doctors are supposed to be home in Westchester, asleep."

Belize is equally unbowed when he deals with Cohn, a closet homosexual who treats nurses – particularly homosexual ones – like dirt. While putting Cohn in his place, Belize also displays both knowledge of the disease and its treatment and a peculiar empathy for the suffering of his despicable patient. He advises Cohn to refuse radiation treatment "because radiation will kill the T-cells and you don't have any to lose," and to resist enrolling in clinical trials of anti-retrovirals because Cohn may be randomized to placebos. Get the real thing because if you don't, you die, he

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tells Cohn. Belize hisses, "So if you have any strings left, pull them, because everyone's put through the double blind and with this, time's against you, you can't fuck around with placebos."

While Hollywood is hampered by its insistence on creating stereotypical nurses who are black-and-white characters – all bad, all mad or all good – Kushner has given us a black nurse who is painted in shades of gray. Belize isn't just an authentic nurse, he's an authentic person. He's smart, he's expert, he gets angry and he deals with things directly. His profound compassion does not prevent from being assertive with his patient, the doctor or the deadly virus itself.

Kushner also presents the reality that nurses often must care for patients who are themselves abusive and ungrateful, and who the nurse cannot abide. Belize's professional triumph is his capacity to provide meticulous care for a despicable human being.

Kushner has given us one of the few inspiring models of what a nurse can and should be. Is anyone in Hollywood paying attention? Real-life nurses should make sure that Hollywood does.

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