

A *History* of the Life Achievement Award



Charles Durning will join an impressive roster of past recipients on January 27, 2008, when he accepts the 44th Screen Actors Guild Life Achievement Award at the 14th Annual Screen Actors Guild Awards, to be broadcast on TNT and TBS.





Past Life Achievement Award recipients, clockwise from top left: Eddie Cantor with then SAG President George Chandler; Katharine Hepburn; Barbara Stanwyck; Gregory Peck and Brock Peters in *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

WHEN THE AWARD WAS CONCEIVED IN 1962, AND FOR THE NEXT FEW DECADES, THE RECIPIENT'S NAME WAS KEPT "TOP SECRET"—NEVER REVEALED UNTIL THE ACTUAL PRESENTATION.

The idea for what finally evolved into the "Life Achievement Award" was put forth at a board meeting on September 4, 1962, by then-President George Chandler. Chandler suggested that the board "give consideration to the possibility of honoring at the annual meeting some of the industry's past 'greats' who have been of service to the Guild, such as Eddie Cantor, who served as the second president of the Guild at a most critical period."

At the next board meeting, Chandler appointed an awards committee of Wendell Corey, Darryl Hickman, Robert Keith, Ricardo Montalban and Gene Raymond, chaired by Guild founder and former president Leon Ames. The committee ultimately agreed with Chandler's recommendation and the first recipient was to be the 72-year-old Cantor, in the form of a gold Screen Actors Guild membership card encased in clear Lucite.

It was hoped that buzz surrounding this new award would increase attendance at the annual membership meeting. *Screen Actor* magazine enticed members with:

"Who Will Receive the First Annual Screen

Actors Guild Award? For the answer, come to the Guild's Membership Meeting. Monday evening, November 12, in the International Ballroom of the Beverly Hilton Hotel. Free Parking. ... A special feature of the meeting will be the presentation of the First Annual Screen Actors Guild Award to an individual 'for outstanding achievement in fostering the ideals of the acting profession and advancing the principles of good citizenship.' The name of the individual selected by the Guild Board to receive the award will not be announced until the night of the meeting."

But disappointing news came: Eddie Cantor could not come to the meeting due to his doctor's strict orders. Cantor had

SCREEN ACTORS GUILD LIFE ACHIEVEMENT AWARD RECIPIENTS

- 1962 Eddie Cantor
 - 1963 Stan Laurel
 - 1965 Bob Hope
 - 1966 Barbara Stanwyck
 - 1967 William Gargan
 - 1968 James Stewart
 - 1969 Edward G. Robinson
- 1960s

- 1970s
- 1970 Gregory Peck
 - 1971 Charlton Heston
 - 1972 Frank Sinatra
 - 1973 Martha Raye
 - 1974 Walter Pidgeon
 - 1975 Rosalind Russell
 - 1976 Pearl Bailey
 - 1977 James Cagney
 - 1978 Edgar Bergen
 - 1979 Katharine Hepburn

- 1980 Leon Ames
 - 1982 Danny Kaye
 - 1983 Ralph Bellamy
 - 1984 Iggy Wolfington
 - 1985 Paul Newman & Joanne Woodward
 - 1986 Nanette Fabray
 - 1987 Red Skelton
 - 1988 Gene Kelly
 - 1989 Jack Lemmon
- 1980s

- 1990s
- 1990 Brock Peters
 - 1991 Burt Lancaster
 - 1992 Audrey Hepburn
 - 1993 Ricardo Montalban
 - 1994 George Burns
 - 1995 Robert Redford
 - 1996 Angela Lansbury
 - 1997 Elizabeth Taylor
 - 1998 Kirk Douglas
 - 1999 Sidney Poitier

- 2000 Ossie Davis & Ruby Dee
 - 2001 Edward Asner
 - 2002 Clint Eastwood
 - 2003 Karl Malden
 - 2004 James Garner
 - 2005 Shirley Temple Black
 - 2006 Julie Andrews
 - 2007 **Charles Durning**
- 2000s



Past recipients, clockwise from top: Audrey Hepburn, James Stewart, William Gargan, Rosalind Russell and Guild co-founder and former president Leon Ames.

heart trouble and had also lost his wife of nearly 50 years exactly three months earlier. It was too late to do anything but present the award to Cantor at his home, with his good friend, popular comedian Jack Benny, accepting at the meeting on Cantor's behalf.

FRUSTRATINGLY, THE FOLLOWING YEAR'S RECIPIENT was not able to accept in-person, either. The choice was Stan Laurel (see "Snapshot" photo and story on page 46), the much-loved comic of "Laurel & Hardy" fame, who also had to decline the invitation due to, like Cantor, "doctor's orders."

In 1964, 2nd Vice President Charlton

Heston informed the board that the Awards Committee recommended that no award be bestowed that year, and that perhaps its value could also be enhanced by *not* being presented annually.

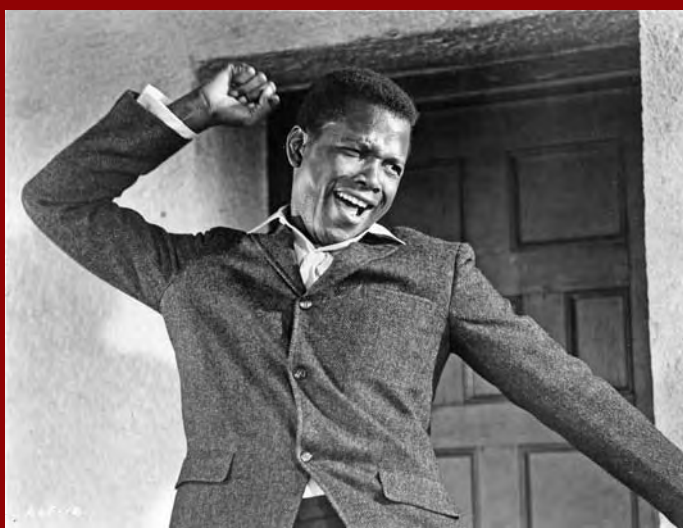
But a year later, the idea of an annual award returned after a questionnaire was sent to members asking their opinion on various aspects of the Guild. As a result, the Questionnaire Committee recommended that the award be presented "every year at the Annual Membership Meeting." An awards committee comprised of Nick Adams, Jack Lemmon, Stuart Whitman and Marie Windsor, and chaired by Tony Curtis, was appointed and got to work. The committee desired to establish "a unique

and distinguished Award to be bestowed upon actors by actors, as a noteworthy honor year after year."

Permanently.

After Curtis left that August for Europe to film *Arrivederci, Baby*, Ricardo Montalban was appointed to fill his position, and the work continued. The committee's final recommendation was to hire an artist to create the award, and the resulting statuette, designed by Richard Hayes Woodard of Franzen-Woodard Associates, is the same design as the one that Charles Durning will receive on the Screen Actors Guild Awards telecast: an antique bronze representation of the masks of Comedy and Tragedy, mounted on a black onyx base.

Clockwise from top left: first joint-recipients Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward; Gene Kelly; Sidney Poitier in *Lillies of the Field*; Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.





Clockwise from top left: Martha Raye, Bob Hope, Ralph Bellamy, Pearl Bailey and Burt Lancaster.

THE REDESIGNED AWARD WAS UNVEILED at the Hollywood Palladium on November 14, 1965, by Heston, who had risen to Guild president. The recipient's name was, of course, a secret from the membership until announced.

"We have chosen the wording of the award very carefully," Heston said. "The recipient of the award is to be honored for outstanding achievement in fostering the highest ideals of the acting profession. We hope and expect that this award will receive world-wide recognition as the greatest accolade that a group of actors can bestow on a fellow actor. ... I am very proud to introduce someone who, we are sure, qualifies for this Award many times over:

Mr Bob Hope."

As the stage curtain drew back, Hope stepped out to a thunderous standing ovation from the membership, and Heston continued, "For more than a quarter of a century, Bob, you have devoted your talents to serving others and spreading goodwill. You have traveled 3 million miles in entertaining more than 10 million G.I.s. You have brought to multitudes around the world a little time for laughter. ... We know that you have received countless other awards. You have been honored by perhaps more distinguished gatherings, certainly received awards in better weather, but we like to take pride in the fact that the special significance of this award is that it comes

from fellow actors."

Deeply touched, yet ever the quipster, Hope remarked he should "get another award" just for lifting the heavy statuette. He kept the members chuckling as he concluded, "It is really something just to have the Screen Actors Guild admit publicly that I am an actor. I just want to say that I am proud to be a member of the Screen Actors Guild. I thank you very, very much for this award, and it just proves that a miracle can happen if you pay your dues regularly."

Then the news cameramen swarmed in to record the momentous event.

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UNLIKE THE JOCULAR BOB HOPE, the 1966 award recipient, Barbara Stanwyck, burst into tears at the Hollywood Palladium podium upon receiving her statuette—which she was told she would be presenting to Ronald Reagan, who was a former Screen Actors Guild president and then governor-elect of the state of California.

In order to convince the shy and humble Stanwyck to attend, the Guild board resorted to this affectionate bit of subterfuge, and Stanwyck tearfully declared to Reagan, “I thought I was supposed to present this to *you*.”

Reagan said the reason for the award was “the tremendous amount of time and energy Stanwyck puts into un-publicized works of charity and good citizenship.” He elaborated that “the love and devotion she bestows on the blind, the poor, the crippled and other unfortunate persons in our country and abroad” demonstrated that Hollywood was more than just “tinsel, colored lights and make believe.”

Other recipients followed, including:

- William Gargan, the self-proclaimed “Luckiest Man in the World,” who lost his larynx to lung cancer but survived the deadly disease and became a spokesman for the American Cancer Society.
- James Stewart, who put his stellar career on hold during World War II to serve as commander of a bombing wing, for which he was highly decorated.”

- Gregory Peck, who was also California and national chairman of the American Cancer Society, director and first chairman of the American Film Institute, chairman of the Motion Picture and Television Relief Fund building and endowment campaign, president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and recipient of the Academy’s 1968 Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award.
- Martha Raye, noted wartime (World War II, Korean War, Vietnam Conflict) entertainer.
- Rosalind Russell, who was praised by the Guild’s newly-elected president Kathleen Nolan for a list of charitable works so long they took up 1/3 of a *Screen Actor* magazine page!
- Pearl Bailey, who in addition to her acting, singing and writing talents, had been the USO Woman of the Year for 1968 and appointed as special advisor to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in 1975 by President Gerald Ford.
- And 1993 recipient Ricardo Montalban, who was the last member to receive the Life Achievement Award at an annual meeting.

THE PRESENTATION BECAME PART OF THE TELECAST of the first Screen Actors Guild Awards show in 1995. The recipient was a 99-year-old actor born in 1896. He was a vaudeville, television and

movie star, and a “straight man” to his wife Gracie Allen (who had passed by the time of this honor)—George Burns.

For the first time, an audience of thousands, rather than hundreds, witnessed the presentation of the Life Achievement Award, delivered by Ann-Margret, who considered Burns her mentor. She spoke in tribute and explained how he had also fulfilled the dream of every actor and politician: “He got to play God, not once, but three times. and he’s never stopped helping other performers or giving of himself to countless charities.”

Burns stood at his table to a standing ovation, concluding his acceptance with, “Now I’m going to do something that’s not easy to do. I’m going to sit down.”

And thus concluded the first televised presentation of the Screen Actors Guild Life Achievement Award. ■

Note: Two Life Achievement Award trophies, listing the names of all recipients, are on display in a case in the first floor lobby of the National Headquarters. The 1977 award to former Guild president James Cagney is mounted on a pedestal in the James Cagney Board Room, also located at Screen Actors Guild Headquarters.

From left: Iggy Wolfington, Red Skelton, Jack Lemmon and Nanette Fabray.

