

# Actor to Actor

SAG National President Ken Howard sits down with Betty White to talk about her remarkable life and career.



**KEN HOWARD:**

Betty, I'm just tickled to be able to interview you formally. We've had lunch together,

we've had wonderful times out together, so I have a little bit of an edge. I even have some questions in my mind to ask you because I know some of the answers. Thank you so much for joining us and ahead of time congratulations on your Life Achievement Award from SAG.

**BETTY WHITE:** Well, darling... I shouldn't call you darling... thank you so much. I am in awe of you, Mr. President. I'm so proud of you and so thrilled, and we are so lucky to have you.

**KH:** Thank you. I have a series of questions for you and the second to the last question is where I want to start because I want you to talk about

your involvement with animals, and the protection of animals, and what an important part of your life that is. Because I think it has a great deal to do with you and how you work and your artistry and the whole thing that you bring to the work place.

**BW:** Oh Ken, bless your heart. I'm the luckiest old broad on two feet because my life is divided absolutely in half; half animal work, and half show business. The two things I love the most and to still be able to work at them. A lifetime with animals and 61 years in show business. How lucky can you get at this late date in your life?

I'm not into animal rights and activism, I'm into animal health and welfare. I've been with the Morris Animal Foundation for 43 years now. We're a health organization. We fund humane research into special health problems of dogs, cats, horses, and zoo [animals] and wildlife. We helped develop the feline leukemia vaccine and the parvovirus vaccine. And I've been with the Los Angeles Zoo for

that long. It's a different zoo than it was 43 years ago.

**KH:** We were out years ago and I asked you what the first time was that you were on television, and your answer just caught me by surprise. It was way earlier than one might expect.

**BW:** I was a student at Beverly Hills High School. They were doing an experimental TV thing and it was 1939. The audience walked around among the Packard cars down in the showroom and we were up on the fifth floor in this little hot room doing *The Merry Widow*, the senior class president and I. I wore my graduation dress and we sang this wonderful [Franz] Lehár music. It got so hot. We had brown makeup on. And it got so hot, we were trying to be so romantic and our makeup was running. We didn't have television out here then. That was just an experimental feed from New York.

**KH:** I think that it's only right that not only were you a pioneer in television but that you were on television before anyone knew there was television.

**BW:** Literally, nobody knew that there was.

Betty is that their writing has to at least be as funny as she is.

**KH:** I know you did stage work...

**BW:** Summer stock, never Broadway...

**KH:** But I wondered even there, because of your facility, I would think you would like the change in television rather than the same show night after night.

**BW:** I know theater people get upset when you say that, and they say, "But it's a different experience every night." But you're still saying the same lines every night. I'm just not a theater person. Theater people look down on movie people and movie people look down on television people. Well I've been in television all of my life, so I was at the bottom of the barrel. (laughs)

**KH:** There are going to be young people who want to know the special thing you can

**BW:** There was no straight man in our family. I was an only child and my mother, dad and I would have Sunday breakfast, and we'd have driving vacations and dinners together. We'd have wonderful conversations but we were always kidding and teasing each other. Dad was a salesman and he'd bring jokes home. They would never explain them to me, and if I got them fine, but if I didn't that was fine too. He'd say, "Honey you can take *that* one to school, but I wouldn't take *that* one to school." The game shows were wonderful because they were doing the same kind of kidding with the other game players. It really was like going to television college. It was great.

**KH:** I'd love to hear you talk about the impact of that kind of experience on then acting in sitcoms. That had to have been a great training ground.

**BW:** You had to think on your feet in the game, and the beauty of it is that you get so involved in playing the game that you don't get self-conscious of your image. That's why I enjoyed watching celebrity game shows; people got so involved playing the game that they were themselves.

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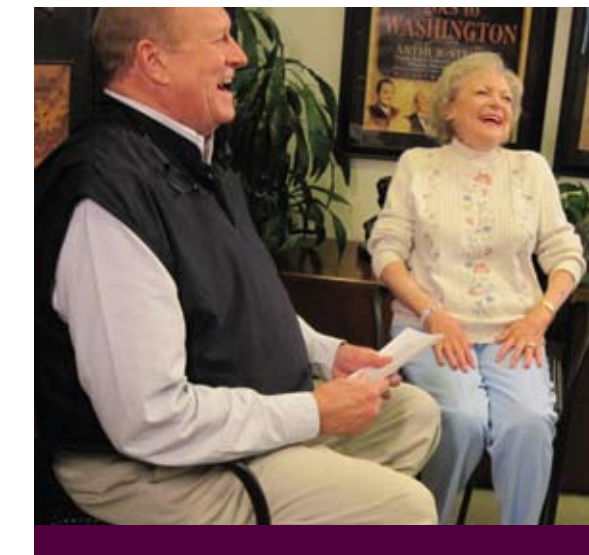
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**KH:** There are going to be young people who want to know the special thing you can

share from your own experience.

**BW:** I get that question a lot from young people and I would say, don't come on to the set with an attitude. And don't pick out the people you like and the ones you don't like ahead of time. Be prepared to like everybody. I don't mean be a goody two-shoes. I'm saying don't start with a negative. Negatives breed and if you bring something negative on to the set, it's there and you can't sweep it under the carpet.

And I say always come in prepared. Don't say, "I didn't get a chance to look at the script," "I like the illusion of the first time so I didn't learn my lines." Know your lines!



**KH:** Coming from you that's great. Let's talk about how great you are at playing naughty. Everyone loves the way you can come in with that sweet smile but then be so naughty.

**BW:** Sue Ann Nivens was such fun. She was the neighborhood nymphomaniac. She thought she was the most gorgeous, glamorous wonderful person in the world. Nobody else thought that about Sue Ann except Sue Ann. She went to Chicago once on a convention and she couldn't wait to call up all the men she knew there, but



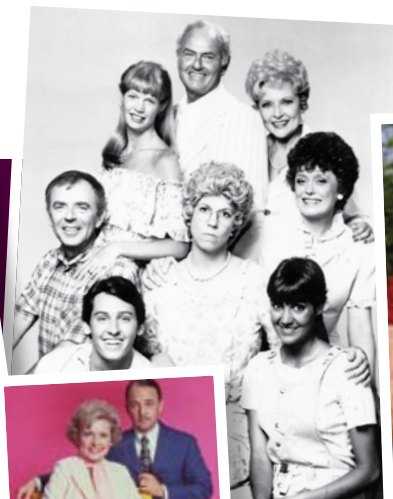
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FROM LEFT: White, shown here in 1962, served as co-host of the annual Tournament of Roses Parade for more than 20 years; a game show veteran, White married *Password* host Allen Ludden in 1963; White was part of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* from 1973-77; Ludden and White at the 1973 American Humane Association's PATSY Awards with Morris the Cat; the 1977 *The Betty White Show*, co-starring John Hillerman; recreating a recurring role from *The Carol Burnett Show*, White portrayed Ellen on *Mama's Family* from 1983-86; she played Rose Nylund on *The Golden Girls* from 1985-92, and its CBS spinoff *The Golden Palace* in 1992.



nobody was home or they had moved, or they never called her back. It was great fun.

Going back to the advice for young actors. . . Did you by chance ever see Bette Davis on one of the late shows. She was asked what advice you would give to young actors trying to get started in Hollywood. She said, "Take Fountain." (laughs) That just killed me. Take Fountain! For those who are not Los Angeles oriented, Fountain is a street where you miss a lot of traffic. So if you take Fountain you can get into many of the studios much quicker. I fell off the couch.

**KH:** Speaking of Bette Davis, she talked about how she missed the big personalities on the screen. You have a big personality that we're used to and expect on the talk shows and game shows, and you have a process of infusing that into a role. The latest films that you've done... audiences are just so tickled that it's you being Grandma Annie in *The Proposal*. From the moment you show up there is such a history that you bring to it. People are laughing ahead of time knowing you are going to bring something special to the part.

**BW:** Bless your heart. I just did another Disney movie with Jamie Lee Curtis and Sigourney Weaver where I'm Grandma Bunny. I'm always Grandma Something.

**KH:** Tell me about do-overs. I don't mean regrets, but if you had something you could do over, or a choice you could make differently.

**BW:** In all honesty, Ken, I'm sure I could say I could make better choices, but I don't think I'd ever want to do over something. I never tried to cheat or sneak, and those are things you'd want to do over. I've been so lucky and so much has come to me out of sheer blind luck, that I'm just so grateful at this point in time to still be working. In January I'm going to be 88 years old and I'm still working, and I'm still enjoying and still having fun. And I'm blessed with good health.

It's not a do-over that I could do, but losing Allen [in 1981] was a tough one. I'd do anything [to have him back]. I think I first fell in love with Allen Ludden for his enthusiasm. He was interested in everything. He was always, "Yeah, tell me about it." That's fun to live with.

**KH:** You were both inquisitive and had bright minds and I love the idea of the combination of you two. You told me some wonderful stories of how much fun the two of you had just talking the hours away into the night.

**BW:** He would call me up when we'd be working in separate places and say, "How about a date tonight? Want to go out to dinner?" Well going out to dinner meant he would stop on the way home and pick up a chicken and we'd throw it on the barbecue, and then we'd put on some records, have our chicken and dance. It's silly maybe to the rest of the world but it was fun for us.

**KH:** Sounds wonderfully

romantic. I'm dealing with more and more young performers because of this job. A question I get asked a lot is what is the image you had in your mind when you started. I remember being so excited the first time I got a job on summer stock. I'm not sure I had a big overwhelming picture other than wondering if I could make a living at this. I wonder if you had an image you remember all the way back to *The Merry Widow* days?

**BW:** I wouldn't be in show business if it weren't for Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy. I saw *Naughty Marietta* 48 times. I could have put myself through college for what I spent seeing *Naughty Marietta*. I was about 13 or 14 at the time and I didn't just like Jeanette McDonald, I was Jeanette McDonald. And of course I was in love with Nelson Eddy, and I thought he needed a much younger woman, *much* younger woman.

**KH:** That's great. Thank you. Just your spirit and your goodwill and what you represent is this union over quite a long remarkable period of time and career, going back to the very beginning of television and the business as we know it. You're a force of nature and we love you and love that we can honor you.

*Editor's Note: You can watch the entire, interview at [SAG.org](http://SAG.org) and [sagawards.org](http://sagawards.org).*



Kerry Hayes/Touchstone Pictures

FROM LEFT: *Bringing Down the House* in 2003; White appeared as a recurring guest star on the daytime drama *The Bold & the Beautiful*, 2006-09; she played the recurring role of Catherine Piper on ABC's *The Practice* and *Boston Legal* from 2004-06; White returned to her *Password* roots in 2008, appearing on the Regis Philbin-hosted *Million Dollar Password*; White teamed up with Sandra Bullock for *The Proposal* in 2009.



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