



“ I’m never left behind. I’m the bionic woman ”

Hollywood starlet, Broadway sensation, and television institution: Angela Lansbury has been famous for longer than she cares to remember. And at 86, she’s in no danger of taking a rest, she tells Ariel Leve

Portrait by Peter Ash Lee

It’s just past lunchtime on a Friday afternoon and Angela Lansbury opens the cupboard in her compact and modern kitchen. It is stocked with Hob-Nobs and she offers to put some on a plate while explaining why she’s going to resist. About a month ago, she woke up with a mysterious stress fracture in her right hip and now, standing in front of the open fridge, she points to the calcium beverage she’s had to constantly drink.

“I’ve put on weight from all the muscle milk,” she says, sounding alarmed. “I had to drink more than a pint – twice a day!” Whatever weight she’s gained doesn’t show. Her trim figure and lively manner betray that of a woman half her age and as she elegantly moves around her kitchen, dressed in a tailored tweed blazer and black slacks, gold earrings that match a gold brooch, it’s hard to believe that she’s nearly 87.

Lansbury has received numerous lifetime achievement awards and she’s earned them. One of Britain’s most beloved, durable and revered actors is now currently starring on Broadway in Gore Vidal’s *The Best Man*, eight times a week. Doesn’t she get tired? “I’m the bionic woman,” she giggles, picking up the tray with tea and biscuits and moving us into the living room to chat.

Other shows have required a lot more energy, she says, citing her performance as Madame Arcati in Noël Coward’s *Blithe Spirit*, as an example.

But then, she prefers hard work and it pays off. She won the Tony Award in 2009 for the role and it was her fifth win, having won previously for *Mame*, *Gypsy* and *Sweeney Todd*.

She leans forward in the armchair and pours tea into white china cups.

The flat here in Manhattan is one of three homes. She still has a house in Los Angeles, and a home in Ireland. The condo we're in now was purchased after the death in 2003 of her husband, Peter Shaw, whose smiling face looks out from a picture frame nearby.

Decorated with a minimalist aesthetic, with furniture in muted colours and a flat-screen television, the apartment is pleasant, contemporary and functional. Hardly ostentatious or glittering with theatricality – there's nothing that would indicate it belongs to a legendary showbusiness matriarch. For a woman who's won five Tony Awards, 19 Emmy Awards, and received three Academy Award nominations, there is a noticeable absence of memorabilia. Or maybe it's just not the sort of place one would expect a Miss Marple to live. Part of what has entrenched Lansbury in the psyche of an audience spanning generations is her ability to disappear into the roles she plays. Whether it's Miss Eglantine Price from *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, Mama Rose from *Gypsy* or Jessica Fletcher, the bestselling author and amateur detective from the television series *Murder, She Wrote*.

There have been many surprises in Lansbury's life, but perhaps the biggest of all is that she has remained current. "It surprises me that I didn't get left behind," she says. "I've always managed to keep up. In the process of keeping busy, I've always stayed relevant. And that is a surprise to me.

"Because they still will allow me to get out there – particularly in the theatre – it's total illusion. If you can sell that you're 50, the audience will believe you." Lansbury made her first film in 1944 when she appeared as the cockney maid in *Gaslight* with Ingrid Bergman (for which she received one of her Oscar nominations). She has never not been in show-business; never not been working. Was there ever a time she felt like giving up?

"Yes, there was a time when I was a young mother when I thought I don't want to do this because it's taking me away from my children. I finally arranged my life so that I could bring them with me. They were young." She takes a sip of tea. "My career has, at times, driven a huge wedge in what I would have liked to have had in my family life. I couldn't have both."

Born in London in 1925, Lansbury reflects on her childhood in an undramatic way, painting a picture of someone who never felt young. Angela Brigid Lansbury wasn't a diligent student, more of a "daydreamer" in school, and learnt from life rather than academia. When the Second World War broke out in 1939, the school she attended in London was evacuated and relocated to the suburbs to avoid the Blitz. Lansbury, then 12, didn't want to leave her mother alone.

"She let me stay at home and had a tutor come for a year or so," she says, "before realising I had a talent to imitate and act and take on personalities. She allowed me to try out for a scholarship in London when I was 13. I was very grown up for my age." Lansbury went to the theatre alone a lot as a child but never imagined herself on the stage. Her paternal grandfather, George Lansbury, was a founder of the

HOLLYWOOD MATRIARCH In a career spanning decades, Angela Lansbury has given us the intrepid Jessica Fletcher; Miss Price in *'Bedknobs and Broomsticks'*; and the unforgettable Mama



"The divorce made me a little bit tough. I said, 'all right, I'm going to show everyone'"

Labour Party – and her father, Edgar, was a politician; they were very close. Her childhood, she says, was filled with the arts and politics.

But this happiness didn't last long. In 1935, Lansbury's father passed away; she was nine years old. "The loss shaped me in ways I've never fully understood," she says quietly. "How it impacted on my young life? I just went on. And on. But I was depressed. Bored. School was something I had to get over. As a youngster, the greatest thing that happened to me was being allowed to go with my sister to Ireland when I was about 11. I went with her, alone." She points to a painting on the wall of a cottage by the sea. It's not the cottage she went to, but reminiscent of it.

"It's on the West Coast in County Mayo – a wonderfully barren, glorious place." This was an escape from London and a taste of freedom. Her sister was a student in acting school and they went there together for three years. It was an "eye opener" and she lived to go back. Ireland became a place of refuge for Lansbury; it still is.

As the Second World War approached and air raid sirens sounded, the family hid in the basement of their house in Hampstead. "My sister was panicked," she says. "We thought bombs would come down then and there." Her sister was 17 and as she describes the scene, I point out that, despite being five years younger, she depicts herself as the calm one. She nods. "I was a stoic. I don't know that I had the understanding. Maybe I wasn't old enough." In 1940, the family left London and moved to America. It was Lansbury, her mother, Moyna MacGill, who had been a successful West End actress, and Lansbury's younger twin brothers. Her sister stayed behind and married Peter Ustinov.

They lived in New York for two years and she received a scholarship to study drama at the Lucy Fagan school for dramatic art. Soon her mother got a green card, and they were both able to work.

How she got from there to *Gaslight* is a leap. She explains her mother went on tour in Canada and instead of taking the train back to New York, where Lansbury was with her brothers, she sent a wire instructing her to give up the flat and come out to Los Angeles. At this point, Lansbury had finished drama school. She was 16 years old when she took the train to California.

"I became someone other than Brigid Lansbury then." As evacuees from the war, they'd been sponsored by an American family and living on a shoestring; finally, they had some money. It was an exciting time. She was given a contract at MGM and was soon going out to lunch at places like the Brown Derby, "Swooning over the actors I had admired." She recalls playing Gin Rummy with MGM head Louis B Mayer. "I was so young – 18 – I used to drive myself in the family car to his house for dinner parties and often he would entertain British royalty – that's why I was invited. It was like a state dinner. I wasn't into drinking but at one of those dinners there were cocktails, then wine – then I'd be driving myself home..." She trails off. "Now I look back, well, he should have had someone pick me up!"

Lansbury was never wild and has nothing but kind things to say about her co-stars. Ingrid Bergman? "Lovely." Elizabeth Taylor? "Beautiful." Despite being what she describes as "an old soul" she was unsophisticated when it came to

romance. She married her first husband, Richard Cromwell, when she was 19. He was a handsome leading man – charming, knowledgeable about jazz, and that interested her. He was quite a bit older, too. “I haven’t thought about it because the marriage was so brief,” she says. She tilts her head to one side adding it up. “I think he was 37 at the time.” The marriage ended seven months later, after she came home to find her husband’s car and clothes gone and a note reading, ‘I’m sorry darling, I can’t go on.’ Cromwell was gay – something she wasn’t made aware of until after they separated. “I knew how to act mature but I wasn’t,” she smiles faintly, referring to being in the dark about this. She found out only when it was about to be in the newspapers. A woman from MGM’s press office called to let her know.

She was in love and suitably heartbroken. “It was a terrible shock. I was devastated. But once I got over the shock, I said, ‘all right then, I’m going to take charge of my life and see that I never hurt like this again.’” They divorced and remained friends until Cromwell’s death in 1960. “It made me in a way, a little bit tough,” she says. “I think it did. I know it did.

“I said, ‘all right, I’m going to show everyone’.” A short time after, she met the man who would become her second husband and lifelong companion. Peter Shaw was a British actor and they met through a mutual friend. They hit it off immediately – bonding over being two Brits in Hollywood. “Oh,” she says, still sounding awed, “He was a dazzling looking man. He had come out of the army and was so good looking people said he had to be an actor.” Shaw later became one of the top agents in Hollywood and managed Lansbury’s career. They were together for 54 years. “We were a unit. We didn’t shut out the world but we were almost too self-contained. He totally controlled my career as time went by and made it possible for me to do what I did – we managed it somehow, somehow.” They had two children, and went through a terrible period when both of them developed problems with drugs. There was also the house fire in Malibu when their home burnt to the ground. So in 1971, the family packed up and moved to Ireland, staying there for 10 years. “It helped us immeasurably,” she says. Reflecting back on it now, she suspects she could have stayed there permanently.

It has been nine years since Shaw’s death and the grief is still raw. When she speaks of him, tears appear in her eyes. “You never get over it. You put it into a compartment.” She is a bit of a loner and admits she desperately misses having a strong person by her side. “You don’t ever get over that need. But that’s...” She exhales. “Well I was lucky to have had it.” Lansbury has a magnanimous nature and never felt anyone was in competition with her. When she considers why, she chalks it up to the fact that she never felt she was



Has she seen Tim Burton’s version of Sweeney Todd? She smiles politely. ‘No comment’



AN OLD SOUL

Clockwise from top left, Angela Lansbury in 1945; when she married Peter Shaw in 1949; and on Broadway in ‘The Best Man’ this year and ‘Blithe Spirit’ in 2009

threatening to anyone else because of her looks.

From the beginning of her career, she has played characters much older than herself. She played the mother of Laurence Harvey in *The Manchurian Candidate* who in real life, was only a few years her junior.

She was never obsessed with looking younger and coasted along without being particularly vain.

“I feel about 50,” she says, cheerfully. “I don’t remember ever saying, ‘oh my god, I’m 40’, I just drifted through and never thought about it.” There was a day when it hit her – she didn’t look the way she felt on the inside. “You see yourself and that’s the shocker. I overheard someone say, ‘well she’s an old lady, you can’t expect her to do that’ and I was shocked.” She is for the most part easy-going unless it’s a project in which she has had to take the reins – in which case she won’t let people interfere. The glaring example of this would be *Murder, She Wrote*, the television show which ran for 12 years, at one point watched by 23 million people a week.

“I felt a strong sense of responsibility for the quality of that show,” she says, with a gentle firmness. “I did put out a strong message that I wanted standards to be extremely high. I wanted it to be something special.” And if something went wrong? It’s not her style to lose her temper on the set. Instead, she would go somewhere private. She lowers her voice and recreates her anger. “*For Chrissakes, get that person out of here.*” Spoken with controlled authority.

She doesn’t miss playing Jessica

Fletcher, perhaps because she did it for so long. The one character she does miss would be Mrs Lovett from *Sweeney Todd*, a role she originated on Broadway. Although Mame, too, was a favourite – “a golden era for me” – and with an uncharacteristically disapproving tone says she thought Lucille Ball in the movie was “a terrible mistake”. She shakes her head. “They thought she would be a box office success.”

When asked if she

saw Tim Burton’s film version of *Sweeney Todd*, she smiles politely. “No comment.” The silence hangs in the air. “It was a different take on the story. I saw it with Stephen [Sondheim] and everybody. We all went.” Again, silence. Then finally, she finds something positive: “I thought Johnny Depp was wonderful.” She pauses for a moment. “I’d love to work with Johnny Depp actually.” As a love interest? She laughs.

Time has passed and the second pot of tea is now empty. After I leave, she’ll have a nap. Then at 5.45pm she’ll head to the theatre for the curtain call at 7pm. In between acts, she’ll read *They Were So Young* – stories of veterans of the Second World War in her dressing room. Around 10pm she’ll head out for supper with friends after the show. The following day she has two shows to do. And when this job is over she’ll be “on the market again”. She likes to feel there is something coming up. Something to look forward to.

