

# Sylvia Miles, flamboyant scene-stealer with two Oscar nominations, dies at 94

By [Harrison Smith](#)

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Sylvia Miles, a character actress whose appearances in “Midnight Cowboy” and “Farewell, My Lovely” lasted less than 15 minutes altogether but earned her two Academy Award nominations, died June 12 in Manhattan, where she had been a flamboyant fixture of the city’s social circuit for five decades. She was 94.

Her friend Mauricio Padilha, a fashion publicist, did not know the precise cause but said Ms. Miles died in an ambulance, adding that she had been in poor health after suffering a fall late last year. Her niece Holly-Jane Rahlens told the Associated Press she was pronounced dead at Mount Sinai Hospital.

Ms. Miles appeared in more than 30 films as well as about a dozen productions on and off-Broadway, working with director José Quintero at the Circle in the Square Theatre and once using a motor scooter to drive between performances in Greenwich Village, riding from Act I of Jean Genet’s play “The Balcony” to Act II of Tennessee Williams’s “Camino Real.”

With thick blond hair and bawdy charisma, she was known for playing cantankerous, sexually exuberant characters, including what she once described as “a mad dead crazed German zombie lesbian ballet dancer” in the 1977 film “The Sentinel,” and a spinster who [sprinkles her chocolate ice cream](#) with lithium in an episode of “Sex and the City.”

In her breakout role, she portrayed a poodle-walking hooker in “Midnight Cowboy,” director [John Schlesinger’s](#) 1969 classic about a young Texan (Jon Voight) who moves to New York to become a prostitute, befriends a part-time pimp (Dustin Hoffman) and picks up Ms. Miles, mistaking her for a wealthy client.

“You were going to ask me for money?” she asks Voight as they [prepare to leave](#) her apartment. “Who the hell do you think you’re dealing with? Some old [woman] on 42nd Street? In case you didn’t happen to notice it, you big Texas longhorn bull, I’m one hell of a gorgeous chick!”

Ms. Miles received an Oscar nomination for best supporting actress, following by a nod for “Farewell, My Lovely” (1975), based on a novel by Raymond Chandler and starring [Robert Mitchum](#) as detective Philip Marlowe. “As a drunken widow,” wrote New York Times reviewer Richard Eder, “Sylvia Miles plays a role that seems an overdone cliché until you realize that she is doing it with such subtlety that her lost beauty keeps flickering back.”

She also starred in “Heat” (1972), an R-rated riff on “Sunset Boulevard” directed by Paul Morrissey and produced by Andy Warhol. Ms. Miles — who played an older actress in a relationship with a floundering, onetime child star (Joe Dallesandro) — drew rave reviews, with Times critic Vincent Canby calling her “something special, a persona.”

“She looks great even when she looks beat,” he added, “and because she’s a good actress she automatically works 10 times as hard as everyone else to enliven the movie.”

Off-screen, Ms. Miles was a ubiquitous presence at Manhattan cocktail parties, theater premieres, film receptions, museum openings, book launches, charity luncheons and most every other occasion that offered A-list company and the chance of finding work.

Her reputation as an omnipresent partygoer — “the Great Attender,” as some called her — spurred an oft-repeated joke, “Sylvia Miles would attend the opening of an envelope.” The line was variously credited to comedian Wayland Flowers and gossip columnist Earl Wilson, much to Ms. Miles’s dismay.

“I said it about myself, and unfortunately, everything I say sounds like a press release,” she told [the Times in 1992](#). “Okay, so I did once go to the opening of a delicatessen. I heard Jackie [Kennedy Onassis] would be there, too. Turned out to be Jackie Mason.”

Despite all the plaudits she garnered as an actress, Ms. Miles said she struggled to maintain her standing as a serious performer, in part because of a notorious 1973 confrontation with theater critic John Simon. Reviewing her performance in the play “Nellie Toole & Co.,” he seemed to focus more on her offstage appearances, calling her “one of New York’s leading party girls and gate-crashers.”

Ms. Miles got her revenge at a New York Film Festival after-party, filling a plate with steak tartare, coleslaw, potato salad and cold cuts and dumping it on Simon’s head. “You called me a gate-crasher, now you can call me a plate-crasher,” she said, according to a report in *Newsday*.

When Simon replied that he would send her the cleaning bill, Ms. Miles was unfazed, declaring, “It will probably be the first time that suit’s been cleaned.”

The daughter of a furniture maker, she was born in Manhattan on Sept. 9, 1924, and rarely discussed her early life, when she was known as Sylvia Lee. “There are so many great contemporary stories about me,” she told *People* magazine [in 1988](#). “Don’t get hung up on the past.” She sometimes shaved several years off her age, and she studied at the Pratt Institute and the Actors Studio in New York City.

Ms. Miles began her acting career in the theater and appeared in Broadway productions of “The Riot Act” (1963), a comedy about three siblings in the New York Police Department, and a revival of Williams’s “The Night of the Iguana” (1976-77), starring Richard Chamberlain and [Dorothy McGuire](#).

She made her film debut in 1960, with the gangster movie “Murder, Inc.,” and was later featured as a theatrical producer in “Evil Under the Sun” (1982), an aggressive real estate agent in “Wall Street” (1987), a bagel-munching matchmaker in “Crossing Delancey” (1988) and Meryl Streep’s bombastic mother in “She-Devil” (1989).

Ms. Miles also appeared in television series such as “Naked City” and “Miami Vice” and performed in a short-lived 1981 solo show. Following after her father, she developed an interest in furniture-making, building her own chairs, dressers and chess set. (Before devoting herself to acting, she said that she was [practically a “chess bum,”](#) competing in tournaments at which women were outnumbered 100 to 1.)

Her marriages to William Miles, Gerald Price and radio talk-show host Ted Brown ended in divorce. Survivors include a sister.

For years, she kept the same Manhattan apartment near Columbus Circle, a cramped, museum-like space that she likened to the burrow of “an elegant mole.” The home was filled with movie posters and magazine clippings that chronicled her life, letters from Williams and Bob Dylan, art by Keith Haring and Richard Bernstein, a sleigh bed topped with an enormous Warhol silk-screen of Marilyn Monroe, and a cardboard cutout of Rod Stewart that she used to hang her feather boas.

One of Ms. Miles’s last wishes, Padilha said in a phone interview, was for the items in her home to be featured in an exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, as a way of “keeping her career alive” in an era when young publicists sometimes forced her to wait in line at parties — a painful slight for a star who had long made her way to the front.

“I’m always thought of as controversial or avant-garde or erotic or salacious,” she told People magazine [in 1976](#). “But there isn’t anybody I know who wouldn’t live my life if they could.”


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### **Harrison Smith**

Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post’s obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago. [Follow](#) 

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