

Pioneering Black Actress Cicely Tyson Dies at Age 96

Those in Hollywood and beyond remember Cicely Tyson as a brilliant thespian who broke barriers for Black actresses.

February 1, 2021 By Alicia Green

As Black History Month kicks off, the Black community continues to mourn the loss of beloved actress and icon Cicely Tyson, who died January 28 at age 96.

“With heavy heart, the family of Miss Cicely Tyson announces her peaceful transition this afternoon,” said her longtime manager, Larry Thompson, in a statement issued January 28, according to [The Associated Press](#) (AP). “At this time, please allow the family their privacy.”

No further details were released about Tyson’s passing, including what caused her death.

Tyson, who achieved fame in the early 1970s, was very selective about the roles she played. For example, she refused to play drug addicts, prostitutes or maids, according to [Variety](#).

For her, it wasn’t about the money. In 2013, she told the AP that whatever work she did had to have real substance to it.

Tyson garnered praise for her role in the 1972 film *Souder*, which earned her both Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations. In 1974, she won two Emmys for her role as the title character in the television film *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. (She received several Emmy nominations during the span of her 60-year career.)

At age 88, Tyson won her first Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play for the Broadway production of *The Trip to Bountiful*.

Last year, Tyson starred in the Tyler Perry film *A Fall from Grace* and the hit TV series *How to Get Away with Murder*, in which she performed alongside Viola Davis. Her final role before her death was as Miss Luma Lee Langston in *Cherish the Day*, a new TV show by filmmaker Ava DuVernay.

Following the news of her death, tributes from costars, fans and even two former presidents flooded social media. Davis, who played Tyson’s daughter on *How to Get Away with Murder*, said Tyson “made me feel loved and seen and valued in a world where there is still a cloak of invisibility

for us dark chocolate girls.”



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by VIOLA DAVIS (@violadavis)

Former presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama remembered Tyson for her work both onscreen and off. Clinton said Tyson “brought complex characters to life with dignity and heart, and humanity and depth, always remaining true to herself.”

Obama wrote, “In her extraordinary career, Cicely Tyson was one of the rare award-winning actors whose work on the screen was surpassed only by what she was able to accomplish off of it. She had a heart unlike any other—and for 96 years, she left a mark on the world that few will ever match.”

Hillary and I mourn the passing of Cicely Tyson. She brought complex characters to life with dignity and heart, and humanity and depth, always remaining true to herself. Our thoughts and prayers to all who were

inspired and empowered by her performances and
extraordinary life.

— Bill Clinton (@BillClinton) [January 29, 2021](#)

In her extraordinary career, Cicely Tyson was one of the rare award-winning actors whose work on the screen was surpassed only by what she was able to accomplish off of it. She had a heart unlike any other—and for 96 years, she left a mark on the world that few will ever match. [pic.twitter.com/JRsL3zIKtP](#)

— Barack Obama (@BarackObama) [January 29, 2021](#)

Duvernay said she'd always remember Tyson's hugs and how her petite arms wrapped around her like "mighty branches of a sunlit tree, strong and warm." She continued, "Your love I'll remember. You loved me for some reason and told me often. Thank you, Your Majesty. And bless you as you journey ahead. Until we meet again..."

Your hugs I'll remember. How your petite arms wrapped around me like mighty branches of a sunlit tree, strong and warm. Your love I'll remember. You loved me for some reason and told me often. Thank you, Your Majesty. And bless you as you journey ahead. Until we meet again... [pic.twitter.com/Z6f3dp7AA1](#)

— Ava DuVernay (@ava) [January 29, 2021](#)

Perry, who starred Tyson in four of his films, grieved the loss of Tyson, calling her “the grandmother I never had and the wisdom tree that I could always sit under to fill my cup.”

On January 26, just two days before her death, the actress released her memoir [Just As I Am](#). Tyson called the book her truth and said it was her “plain and unvarnished, with the glitter and garland set aside.” Since her death, the book has now become an Amazon best seller.

In a statement appearing on Variety.com, Thompson said, “Cicely thought of her new memoir as a Christmas tree decorated with all the ornaments of her personal and professional life. Today, she placed the last ornament, a Star, on top of the tree.”

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