

LEE GRANT INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON THREE

Lee Grant, Actress
September 16, 2024
Interviewed By: David Bender
Total Running Time: 27 minutes and 47 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

00:00:13:00

LEE GRANT:

Fighting the blacklist was the thing that informed making documentaries. It changed my life completely. I stopped being interested in working and acting. It was exciting, it was thrilling to me. It was my first political involvement. You know, my husband thought that I was intellectually stupid. I didn't understand communism. I don't understand those things. I'm not interested in those things. What I saw was an affront to everything that I believed in, and it gave me the energy to fight through anything.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Thread

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Lee Grant

Actress

Beating the Blacklist

00:01:24:00

INTERVIEWER:

I'm gonna start by asking you to tell us who you are and how you see yourself.

00:01:31:00

LEE GRANT:

Oh, who I am and how I see myself. Well, who am I? I'm little Lyova Haskell Rosenthal who was raised by a Polish-American father intellectual, and a Ukrainian mother, who was sitting on the stairs because the Cossacks had come to Ukraine and were killing all the Jews. And so little Lyova Haskell Rosenthal, who is me, was born and spent most of her young life on 148th Street and Riverside Drive and had such an ambitious mother that she was put into the Met for Dancing when she was four and stayed there till she was 11 and then sent to the neighborhood playhouse to be an actress.

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Speaker 3:

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00:02:37:00

INTERVIEWER:

Now, when you entered the world as Lyova Haskell Rosenthal, when did Lee Grant emerge?

00:02:45:00

LEE GRANT:

Oh, at 15, at fifteen. Yes, I did some professional singing in a nightclub and I had to choose a name and of course, Lee I was called anyway. And then the other thing I could think of was Lee and Grant, that it was encompassing.

00:03:07:00

INTERVIEWER:

One of the things that I'm so struck by is that the list of your teachers and mentors, Meisner, Uta Hagen, it's a list that is the pantheon. How did that

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happen for you? Is it the same thing your mother said to some of these people, you should meet my daughter?

00:03:30:00

LEE GRANT:

No, The neighborhood playhouse had teachers who were Stanislavski teachers who came from the Moscow Art Theater and went into the group theater who adopted that whole system of acting which was not affected, it was real. And so the school, the neighborhood play house was Sanford Meisner, who had been part of the group theater and who was one of the great teachers of our time. And he was very, very stern with me and had no problem telling me how spoiled I was and how unattentive and that I really didn't go down and explore. And at that time, you know, I had my mother's and Fremont's voice too. And Mary Carver was the voice teacher at the time. And so I had no idea that I was talking falsetto all that time. She placed my voice. So going to the neighborhood playhouse gave me a life and a focus that

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I never would have found in my whole life. I probably would have married some suburban guy or done something and had affairs all over the place because I was so frustrated and angry.

00:04:55:00

INTERVIEWER:

Well, the first thing actually that I see for you professionally on stage, you understudied in *Oklahoma*. Is that right? Well, not a lot of rage there, but a lot of...

00:05:11:00

LEE GRANT:

Fear. Yes, it was huge. It was a huge part. It was Ado Annie, who was the comedy lead in it. And I had just graduated from the neighborhood playhouse, so I was 18. Richard Rogers had seen me in something and was thinking of putting me in another play of his on Broadway. And when it came

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time, I was not experienced enough. He chose Nancy Walker for the part. But he sent me on the road to kind of keep me, you know, under his wing while I understudied. But yeah, it was my first time away from home.

00:05:59:00

INTERVIEWER:

This is a theme that's recurrent in so many of these conversations. People have been mentored and taught by extraordinary people, whether they're well known like Richard Rogers or Meisner or just someone's fourth grade teacher who inspired them. Have you found that that mentoring has been something that you now practice yourself in your own life?

00:06:25:00

LEE GRANT:

Well, I was a teacher at The Actors Studio. At The Actors Studio, where I was accepted. So as an actor, I had the privilege of being invited into The Actors

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Studio so that we were like the cream of the crop of young actors at the time. Marlon Brando and all kinds of exquisite actors were there. And it was out of that that I had my first play, *Detective Story*, which went into the film *Detective Story*.

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INTERVIEWER:

And here you are, you're a young actress. Your first film role, you're nominated for an Academy Award, Best Supporting Actress. Transforming back in time, do you remember the moment of learning this and where you were?

00:07:21:00

LEE GRANT:

I do! I had met Arnold Manoff in the meantime, and I was living with him in a walk up on Third Avenue. And he had two little boys, like four and five. And I

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heard about the Oscar, which being a New Yorker, the only time I went to California was to film *Detective Story* and came right back. I had no idea what it was or what it meant. None at all. And I also got the Cannes Film Festival Award for Best Actress of 1952, I think it was. And they sent me, you know, it looked like a menu, which said that I would have been best actress. And so what I did was to auction it off for Communist causes, for people who were in trouble, lost their jobs and by the time those things came, I was immersed – I was blacklisted. And so for the next 12 years, I couldn't work in film or television. I kept on being called by the Un-American Activities Committee to name my husband, Arnie Manoff, who was a communist. And that's all they wanted. They wanted me to name my husband.

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INTERVIEWER:

What happened to Arnold after he was named? What was that experience?

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LEE GRANT:

Well, they all worked under the table for... you know, there were great people at the TV stations. Arnie used Joel Carpenter as his name to write under. And they were rogues in a way, you know. They were charming and funny and interesting and undercover. And there was something about that and about beating the system and writing all these things that had a kind of... I don't know, but it had a kind of fun to it along with the danger.

00:09:46:00

INTERVIEWER:

It's something that affected people as it did Bromberg. It cost people not only their livelihood, it cost them their lives.

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I was an actor. I couldn't write under the table and I could work on Broadway because Actors' Equity and the producers on Broadway had a pact that there would be no blacklist in the theater. And there was never any blacklist in the theater. And like once a year at least, I was doing theater on Broadway.

00:10:23:00

INTERVIEWER:

Lee, did this politicize you? Did you get active in the political world or did this cause you to pull back from?

00:10:30:00

LEE GRANT:

Absolutely, politics really...beating the blacklisters became my life. And I had an adorable teacher, Madeline Lee, who was a voiceover artist and she was married to Jack Guilford, who was, you know, was a brilliant comic. And she

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was fun. She was the mother of two children, but she taught me everything that I knew about fighting.

00:11:01:00

INTERVIEWER:

Ronald Reagan was president of the Screen Actors Guild and cooperating at that point with the committee.

00:11:07:00

LEE GRANT:

Yes. Well, of course, but he wasn't a communist. You know, he was a committee former. He was a right-wing, a right wing blacklister, as was all of the board of the American Television Union. And so what Madeline and I did was to gather people who weren't Reds and who weren't Rights and have them run to be the head of AFTRA. And we got a group of actors who were not political, but who were decent and they won. And that whole liberal input

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into getting rid of the blacklisters and getting in good, decent actors who could be the head of AFTRA was the thing that turned it around.

00:12:12:00

INTERVIEWER:

You had a daughter at this point. And I saw a quote that I think is so telling. Your daughter, Dinah, became your grail. She became so significant. So you were not just fighting at this point for the world, you were fighting for...

00:12:32:00

LEE GRANT:

Oh, I was never fighting for the world. I was only fighting for actors.

00:12:37:00

INTERVIEWER:

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But at a certain point, you also had a young child whose future you had to envision.

00:12:49:00

LEE GRANT:

I could not have gone on without that child. When I separated from Arnie, I would have been all alone if I didn't have my daughter to take care of and to fight for. She was three. She was funny and she was little and she was dear and she was who I had to work for and to keep alive and to keep us as mother and child – alone in the world, alive. So she was my *raison d'être*. And she was so delicious and so funny that that it made this new world that I was a part of because I was separated from my husband, thank God. It gave me the reason to fight, gave me the reason to go up to Washington and to ask them to take me off the blacklist, which they didn't for 12 years, but eventually they did.

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00:14:22:00

INTERVIEWER:

Just a side note, I didn't know you went to Washington. Where did you go and what happened when you did?

00:14:27:00

LEE GRANT:

Well, there was a lawyer who actually, as I learned later, was working for the Un-American Activities Committee, but who offered. And the last time that I went up to see him, he said, what would be so bad? What would be so bad if you go in front of the committee and, you know, you're separated from him. Just, you know, give him Arnold Manoff. I couldn't even, I couldn't even, that this man who I trusted was really a spy for the Un-American Activities Committee all along, and that what he was doing was trying to get me. And I said, you know, if I went in front of the committee, you'd have to put me in an asylum because I couldn't live with myself if I gave anybody's name.

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INTERVIEWER:

You've been – you've been fighting your entire life for yourself, for your daughter, and for justice when you saw something unjust. And that brings us to you later, choosing to become a documentarian. But first, *Peyton Place* gave you an Emmy nomination. It put you back in front of the American public as an actress. So...

00:16:01:00

LEE GRANT:

Stella Chernak, I became Stella Chernak on the wrong side of the wharf on *Peyton Place*, and it saved our lives. Joey, my husband and Dinah and me to be transported from West End Avenue to Malibu. Malibu and the beach and the colony. How amazing. I met Joey in stock. He was a dancer in the show. He was 12 years younger than me. And I thought, you know, what a cute boy, and

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nothing serious can happen here. And so, you know, 60 years later, he's, you know, he's my boy and nothing serious can happen.

00:16:56:00

INTERVIEWER:

You were the first woman to win a DGA award, the Directors Guild of America Award for Nobody's Child. And as a woman, you have had a lot of firsts. And and I think that that's one of the reasons that we're having this conversation. So you're making this little film called *Shampoo* in 1975. And you said that was the moment that you started thinking about directing.

00:17:26:00

LEE GRANT:

No, not not at all. I passed Warren. And he said, you're 49 years old. It was his way of saying this may be your last big film, you know, babe. And, you know, I was –

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00:18:51:00

INTERVIEWER:

It took you down the path. You made a lot of documentaries, one of which would go on to win an Academy Award. And I believe it still is true that you're the only actor who has won an Academy award for acting and for directing a documentary.

00:19:14:00

LEE GRANT:

You know, when I was about eight or nine, I was living on 148th Street and I went up to Broadway and there was a man stalking a woman and there was a whole bunch of people watching, you know, like people on the street watching. And he was going after her and she was running away. And then a bus came up and the doors opened and she tried to get in the bus away from him and the bus driver saw it was a situation and he closed his doors. And people were watching. And so I ran to get a policeman. And I ran two blocks

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and I brought the policeman back and by the time I brought the policeman back, everybody was gone, including the man and the woman. And I was trying to tell him, you know, that he was going to hurt her, that he that he was after her and he said, "Oh, darling, you know, they're probably in a pub somewhere, you know, having a drink together. Don't worry about it." And so, you know, I can't say why documentaries mean so much to me, but I know that that was a core for me of people doing things to people that weren't right and that I had a compulsion. In the same way as I had a compulsion to act, I had a compulsion to open the doors and the windows to what people were suffering.

00:21:15:00

INTERVIEWER:

One of the things that you had mentioned earlier was that you were inspired by another woman documentarian, Barbara Kopple.

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LEE GRANT:

Yes, a short film that I made at the American Film Institute was given an award. And it was very charming and very light. It was Strindberg and my friends, Dolores Dorn and Susie Strasberg were the two leads in it. It was absolutely charming and I was very proud of it. And – and then they showed this Barbara Kopple piece, *Harlan County, USA*, and I had never seen a documentary like that. Documentaries to me were like in between the movies: when you went to the movies, they had news things and those were like short... This was an exploration of a strike. And there she was sitting right behind me, and she had leaned forward after she saw my little piece, *The Stronger*, that was really good. This little girl behind me has made *Harlan County, USA* and that's – it was life changing for me. And so when the chance to make the Wilmer Eight came up [unclear] Mary Beth Yarrow, who came from that town and knew those women, opened a door for me to go in there with this great camera woman from San Francisco, Judy Irola. It was like

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kicking a door open in myself. I'd been through the blacklist, you know, that was, uh, it was like the cover of the snakes, you know, the cover of the snakes that are inside you that need to burst out and come out where you need to show what was underneath the pretty top that was covering all the things you needed to see what was really going.

00:23:33:00

INTERVIEWER:

Your inner cobra.

00:23:36:00

LEE GRANT:

Not my inner cobra, the cobra that was in the country, the, the things that were eating people alive and that the pretty – you saw the pretty gardens on top of it and never saw the pain underneath: the people who were losing

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their jobs, the people had dual sexual impulses, the women who were in prison. All of these, all of these subjects could be cracked open and shown.

00:24:17:00

INTERVIEWER:

What strikes me about this period though, is you were tackling subjects that no one else was doing. You did transgender, uh, stories with *What Sex Am I?*. These are the eighties. Ronald Reagan is president and he can't even say the word AIDS and you're making films about these subjects.

00:24:40:00

LEE GRANT:

Well, my darling, so how do you think I feel with the way that transgender children and young people are being treated now? You know, I was, I, was the friend who put their story on camera just to hold a mirror up to them and say, this is what these young people were going through. This is not something

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they want. It's something that is happening within them that they're going through.

00:25:20:00

INTERVIEWER:

Music seems to touch everyone in a very real and personal way. What, what music do you turn to for joy? Is there any one or is there a lot?

00:25:35:00

LEE GRANT:

I tell you, my favorite is Gershwin, da da da da da – the New York, “Rhapsody in Blue.” “Rhapsody in Blue” kind of encompasses my life as a young woman in New York. It always inspires me and it has a New York kind of bounce to it, but it's lyrical and it's painful and it's jazzy and it is life and I never tire of responding to – something in me always responds to it. Yeah. Yeah.

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00:26:33:00

INTERVIEWER:

What gives you hope?

00:26:38:00

LEE GRANT:

Surprise. I mean, 12 years of the blacklist followed by 12 years of all the acting parts I could ever ask for, followed by directing. Everything was a surprise, and it went from something so frightening to something so amazing. So, what I'm hoping for is for the hope. For the hope again, to come through this bad period and transform into safety.

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Speaker 3:

And the winner is Lee Grant in *Shampoo*.

00:18:01:00

LEE GRANT:

And as I was going up for the Oscar, I wasn't 49, I was 50. And I knew that my career as an actor, as a really wanted woman with a very, very thrilling and exciting career was over; that anything that I would be given after 50 would