

Acclaimed actresses Karen Allen and Blanche Baker take a detour into directing



Mark Burger

Contributing columnist

Karen Allen and Blanche Baker are award-winning actresses who have enjoyed long and varied careers. Allen, who made her screen debut in *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978), enjoyed a string of big-screen successes including *Shoot the Moon* (1982), *Starman* (1984), and will

forever be remembered as the plucky, irrepressible heroine Marion Ravenwood in Steven Spielberg's 1981 blockbuster *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, a role she reprised 26 years later in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.

Baker, the daughter of director Jack Garfein and actress Carroll Baker, earned an Emmy Award (Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Mini-Series or Movie) for the 1979 NBC mini-series *Holocaust* and has appeared in such feature films as *French Postcards* (1979), *Sixteen Candles* (1984), Volker Schlöndorff's 1990 screen version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the psychological shocker *The Girl Next Door* (2007).

Now, both actresses have made the transition to directing, Allen with the short film *A Tree a Rock a Cloud*, based on a Carson McCullers' story, and Baker with *Streetwrite*, which examines the issue of free speech through street art. Both films will be screened Saturday at the Babcock Theatre on the main campus of the UNCSA School of Filmmaking as part of the 19th annual RiverRun International Film Festival with both actresses in attendance, after which they will participate in the panel discussion *From In Front of the Camera to Behind the Camera*, moderated by faculty member and former School of Filmmaking dean Dale Pollock.

Both actresses have had experience directing in the theater, which informed their decision to take the next step into film.

"I've had a lot of on-the-job directing experience at the New York Film Academy because we shoot scenes with the students in almost every class," says Baker. "I wasn't interested in directing a film but the subject matter of free speech through street art was compel-



Karen Allen



Blanche Baker

ling, and I knew the only way to realize it was if I wrote and directed it."

"It just opens up such an interesting world when you start directing," observes Allen. "There doesn't have to be a role for you to play when you direct. There are so many plays and playwrights' work that I love, and this was a way to connect to that – and I really enjoy that a lot."

Admits Allen: "I was a little daunted by it, even though I've lived in it for most of my life. To be the captain of the ship seemed like a lot to bite off, but having said that ... I thought 'Let me do it with something I know really well and that I love.' Even with a short, there was a steep learning curve. It's a commitment, but, you know, I loved it."

Pollock, the only emeritus member of RiverRun's board of directors, produced 13 features during his career, several of which featured actors who went on to direct, including Denzel Washington (*The Mighty Quinn*), Shirley MacLaine (*Mrs. Winterbourne*), Tommy Lee Jones (*House of Cards*), and several cast members from his 1992 screen version of *A Midnight Clear*: Peter Berg, Ethan Hawke, Frank Whaley and Gary Sinise.

"Every actor I have met either openly or secretly wants to direct," he says. Berg, he thought, was the least likely actor to make the move to the director's chair, but he's made such high-profile, fact-based dramas as *Lone Survivor* (2013), *Deepwater Horizon* (2016) and *Patriots Day* (also 2016). "He may be the most successful of all the actors I worked with who went on to direct."

Although Allen and Baker still enjoy acting, both actresses say they'd like to continue working behind the camera in the future. "As far as writing and directing, I'm mainly interested in issues of social justice and civil society," says Baker, "(so) that's where I'm putting my energy."

"I can't imagine doing it on a larger scale," Allen says, "(but) I think I would like to do a feature. There's a script I've written, based on a novel that I love. For me, I'd like to approach projects as simple as possible."

So, we won't see Karen Allen directing *Suicide Squad 2* or the next *Transformers* extravaganza?

"No-o-o-o," she laughs. "The whole CGI thing, I'm bored by it. I'm bored by it as an audience member, and I can't imagine it's too much fun for the artists who do it, either." 🍷

WANNA go?

The panel discussion *From in Front of the Camera to Behind the Camera* will take place 11 am Saturday in the Babcock Theatre, located on the UNCSA School of Filmmaking's main campus, 1533 S. Main St., Winston-Salem. Admission is free. For more information about this event and other screenings and events presented by RiverRun, call 336.724.1502 or visit the official website: riverrunfilm.com.

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