TV Close-Up: Judith Chapman

by Eirik_Knutzen

Tired of banging her head against Hollywood's thick brick walls due to subtle forms of ("non-existent") discrimination facing all film and television actresses over 40, Judith Chapman packed up her makeup and most of her belongings and moved 125 miles east to the spectacular desert setting of Palm Springs, Calif., in 1991.

JUDITH CHAPMAN - Judith Chapman stars as Gloria Bardwell in the daytime drama 'The Young and the Restless.' CNS Photo courtesy of Robert Voets. She never regretted the stunning change of venue and the adoption of a new lifestyle, which included teaching drama at College of the Desert for several semesters, plus starring in, directing and producing plays at the local Palm Canyon Theater. But 13 years later, she discovered that she was "getting a little weary" of the desert. Simply, her small corner of the vast Mojave Desert was not enough.

"Something was calling me away and I told my partner, James (St. James), that if got a job in Vancouver, I would probably take it," said Chapman, 62, over a light lunch at the Vineyard Tuscan Grill, the downtown Palm Springs bistro she helps operate with restaurateur St. James when time permits.

Striking, she is slim and trim in a loose pink sweater, tight blue jeans and a wide-brimmed straw hat pulled down almost to her blue eyes.

"Then I received a call out of the blue from my agent, saying an actress on the soap 'The Young and the Restless' wanted out and a replacement was needed," she recalled.

Six weeks later, after three knockout auditions, Chapman replaced Joan Van Ark as Gloria - the scheming mother of Kevin Fisher and Michael Baldwin - on "Y & R." She has been married at least five times, including to the well-heeled late John Abbott (Jerry Douglas) and the caring late William Bardwell (Ted Shackelford); her current husband is William's evil twin, Jeffrey Bardwell (also Ted Shackelford).

Complicating matters, Shackelford once portrayed Gary Ewing, the husband of Van Ark 's Valene Ewing on "Knots Landing" from 1979 to 1992. In a plot to get back his father's splendid Abbott Mansion, her ex-stepson Jack (Peter Bergman) hired a look-alike actor, Alistair (also played by Jerry Douglas), to impersonate his father's ghost and scare the hell out of Gloria.

Unfortunately, Alistair is falling in love with her during the whole messy process. OK, it's a daytime soap opera.

"I love it," laughed Chapman, raising a glass of pure water. "Gloria and her sons are grifters from the wrong side of the tracks and she has gone through a series of ugly, abusive husbands before landing the richest man in town. Unfortunately, every husband seems to drop dead six months later."

The word among "Y & R" fans on the Internet is that the sexy Gloria induces her men to scarf down Viagra, then finish them off with a few slick moves of her own.

Born in Greenville, S.C., to a "Southern belle" and a military officer, she was raised along with older sisters Patricia and Harriet on Air Force bases stretching from Texas, to Spain, England and back again. With cool parents deeply into the art, Chapman's childhood was a fairy tale in many respects as she was educated in small private schools in the English and Spanish countryside. She relished family vacation time when the whole gang piled into a VW van to explore various European nations up close and personal.

She stumbled into acting in Madrid, Spain, at the age of 13, through Patricia, the first professional actress in the brood.

"Patty had gone to modeling and finishing schools in London, then returned to Spain," Chapman explained. "One day her agent called and asked if I could take an extra part in a TV commercial. I skipped school the next day, made a couple of bucks and the rest is history."

The budding actress had several commercials under her skinny belt by the time she co-starred in her first feature film, a "god-awful spaghetti western with a 'Seven Brides for Seven Brothers' story line," she recalled, squelching a giggle.

"Playing the youngest sister, my opposite was a pimply-faced 14-year-old Italian boy who spoke no English. I have no idea how they dubbed the picture later."

Chapman was living at Randolph Air Force Base near San Antonio in time to finish high school, and find out how nice it was to have a father named Leland C., Shepard Jr., then recently promoted to a U.S. Air Force brigadier general. On base, she felt perfectly safe and never received a speeding ticket. Already obsessed by

acting, she earned a bachelor's in theater at Stephens College in Columbia, Mo., found a roommate and spent the obligatory two years of waiting tables in New York City.

A major professional break came when cast as Natalie Hughes in "As the World Turns" - her first of seven daytime soap operas, including "General Hospital" and "Days of Our Lives." Between gigs, Chapman has traveled the world, several times, usually with soul mate partner St. James.

"It's easy because we don't have children," she said. "And I divide my time between our home (in Palm Springs-adjacent) Desert Hot Springs and L.A., where I kept my little house in the hills ... and with my hybrid Prius, I get into a carpool lane all by myself. It's an easy two-hour commute."

Â© Copley News Service

TV Close-Up: Judith Chapman by Eirik_Knutzen