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Carole Shelley, a Tony Winner and a Pigeon Sister, Dies at 79

By **Daniel E. Slotnik**

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Carole Shelley, who played one of the bubbly Pigeon sisters in the stage, screen and television versions of Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple" and won a Tony Award in 1979 for portraying a woman who develops an emotional connection to the disfigured title character in "The Elephant Man," died on Friday at her home in Manhattan. She was 79.

The cause was cancer, said a friend, the actor Barrie Kreinik.

Ms. Shelley, who was born in London and began her theater career there, strove to convey complexity, even in characters who might appear shallow.

"I play light comedy with the same intensity I'd give to Lady Macbeth," she told The New York Times in 1979. "The energy is the same, the truth is the same."

Ms. Shelley, who also originated the role of Madame Morrible in the long-running Broadway musical "Wicked," first appeared on Broadway in 1965 in the original production of "The Odd Couple." She played Gwendolyn Pigeon, one of two giggly, single English sisters who live upstairs from the apartment shared by the slovenly Oscar (played by Walter Matthau) and finicky Felix (Art Carney). Monica Evans played her sister, Cecily.

Ms. Shelley and Ms. Evans played the same parts in the 1968 film adaptation of "The Odd Couple," with Jack Lemmon as Felix and Mr. Matthau as Oscar; and early episodes of the television version, which started in 1970 and starred Tony Randall as Felix and Jack Klugman as Oscar.

The Pigeon sisters (who share their given names with characters in the Oscar Wilde play "The Importance of Being Earnest") inject a delightful kookiness into the slob-neatnik dynamic of Oscar and Felix. In the play, when Felix meets the sisters, he describes his occupation: "I write the news for CBS." Gwendolyn asks innocently, "Where do you get your ideas from?"

After "The Odd Couple" ended its Broadway run in 1967, Ms. Shelley appeared on Broadway in comedies like Alan Ayckbourn's "Absurd Person Singular" and the revue "Nöel Coward's Sweet Potato." But by the mid-1970s she wanted to test herself as a dramatic actor.

"I felt I was not being used fully," she told The Times in 1979. "In fact, not only wasn't I plumbing my own depths, I didn't even know if I had any real depths to plumb."

She played Rosalind in “As You Like It” and Regan in “King Lear” at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, an experience she called “months of the most intensive deep-water swimming — more than I’d ever been called upon to do in my life.”

“The clown was finally allowed to play Hamlet, so to speak,” she continued.

“The Elephant Man,” which opened on Broadway in 1979, gave Ms. Shelley her dramatic breakthrough, as Madge Kendal.

The play, by Bernard Pomerance — it was directed by Jack Hofsiss — tells the story of a severely disfigured man who is taken from a freak show to a hospital in Victorian London by a well-meaning doctor. It is based on the life of Joseph Merrick (though the character in the play is named John).



Ms. Shelley with the “Elephant Man” director Jack Hofsiss in Shubert Alley in 1979, the year the play opened on Broadway.

Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Mrs. Kendal, an actor, is hired by the doctor (played by Kevin Conway) to spend time with Merrick (Philip Anglim) after a nurse flees him and orderlies gawk at his appearance. At first she can barely stifle her disgust, but in time she recognizes Merrick’s humanity and develops an affection for him.

In one poignant moment she shakes Merrick’s hand, a movement Ms. Shelley said she ad-libbed; in another she strips to the waist before him, a scene of surprising intimacy.

Ms. Shelley said she adored the role.

“So much of what I’ve been working toward in the past few years — the effort to achieve stillness, sparseness, clarity in my acting — seems to have come together in Mrs. Kendal,” she said.

The critic Richard Eder, writing in *The Times*, said of the performance, “She is strained, moved, tender and funny by turns; beating her way like a golden bird through Merrick’s deformities and into his feelings.”

Ms. Shelley’s performance won her the Tony for best leading actress in a play.

A new generation of theatergoers knew Ms. Shelley for originating a less sympathetic character in the musical “Wicked,” a prequel of sorts to L. Frank Baum’s novel “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.”



Carole Shelley as Madame Morrible in “Wicked” at the Curran theater in San Francisco in 2003. She appeared in the original Broadway production of the musical. Joan Marcus

The show opened in 2003 with Kristin Chenoweth as Glinda, the putatively good witch, and Idina Menzel as Elphaba, who becomes the Wicked Witch of the West. (“Wicked” was still running on Broadway, with a different cast, when Ms. Shelley died.)

Ms. Shelley played Madame Morrible, a college official who pairs Glinda and Elphaba as roommates. She later helps arrange a series of events, including the killing of Elphaba’s sister, that push Elphaba toward wickedness.

Carole Augusta Shelley was born in London on Aug. 16, 1939. Her father, Curtis, was a German Jewish composer who immigrated to England before World War II. Her mother, Deborah (Bloomstein) Shelley, was an English opera singer of Russian Jewish heritage.

Carole acted as a child and dreamed of being a dancer. She studied ballet, but her dancing career ended when she was a teenager after she broke her foot.

She attended Regent Street Polytechnic (now the University of Westminster), where she studied theater design and millinery. At 18 she began working in the London theater, appearing in several productions before being cast in “The Odd Couple.” She moved to New York City in 1964 to appear in that show and never again lived in London.

Carole Shelley as Grandma and David Alvarez, seated, as the title character in the musical “Billy Elliot” at the Imperial Theater in New York in 2008. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

In 1967 she married Albert G. Woods, the maître d'hôtel at Jim Downey's Steakhouse, an old theater-district haunt. They remained married until his death in 1971. She leaves no immediate survivors.

Ms. Shelley's other Broadway credits included "The Norman Conquests" and "Billy Elliot: the Musical." She had a well-reviewed turn opposite Nathan Lane in the touring production of another Neil Simon play, "Broadway Bound," beginning in 1987.

In addition to "The Odd Couple," she was seen on television in shows like "Frasier" and "The Cosby Show," and in films. She voiced characters in the Disney animated movies "The Aristocats" (1970) and "Robin Hood" (1973), both of which also featured her "Odd Couple" compatriot, Ms. Evans.

Sarah Mervosh contributed reporting.

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