

Then & Now

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Limerick actress' rags to riches tale

CONSTANCE SMITH was a Limerick born actress who died on June 30, 2003 aged 75 years. She began in rags, briefly tasted riches, and then returned to rags, during her lifetime. She was a very attractive woman who could have taken Hollywood by storm but was often spoken about as one of the "might-have-beens" of the cinema industry. Perhaps with proper training and a calmer temperament she could have become a lot more famous. A recent programme on TG4 recalled her amazing up and down career.

Constance was born at 46 Wolfe Tone Street, Limerick on February 7 1929. She was the eldest of 11 children many of whom passed away in their infancy. Her father Sylvester Smith, a native of Dublin, was a foot soldier in the Irish Army and her mother Mary Biggane was a Limerick native. Within a year of her birth the family moved to 37 Mount Pleasant Buildings, Ranelagh, Dublin. A now demolished slum immortalized by Lee Dunne in his novel *Goodbye to the Hill*. Constance attended a convent school until her father, aged only 36, died in 1944 from tuberculosis, and Constance had to leave school to help support her siblings.

Constance's working life included spells in chip shops, one of them in Charleston Road, Ranelagh. Then the family in Rathmines for whom she worked as a maid, encouraged her to enter a look-alike competition being run in 1945 by a Dublin film magazine, *The Screen*. She won the section for women, dressed up as Hedy Lamarr. Her mother sent her photograph to a film studio in England and she was called for a screen test. Constance was reluctant to take it but continued under her mother's insistence. As a result, Constance went to England, to be groomed in the Rank Organisation's charm school for budding starlets.

She made few films for Rank, though she had a seven-year contract with the company, but she did show up in several films made by

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independent producers in the late 1940s. If you look closely at the 1947 film *Brighton Rock*, based on the Graham Greene novel, you'll see her as a singer on the pier. In 1950, she was fired by Ranks because she was always objecting to their complaints about her Irish accent it was said.

She was first noticed by the big movie studios in 1950 after playing an Irish maid in *The Mudlark*. She was talent-spotted by Darryl Zanuck, the Hollywood producer and director, a long-time power in Hollywood and a co-founder of 20th Century Fox. He took her off to Hollywood where he took a special interest in her, and she signed a seven year contract. On February 1 1951, Constance married Bryan Forbes, an English film director, actor and writer, whom she had known for three years. They married in Caxton Hall, London, when Forbes was 24 years old.

The newlyweds were never able to go on honeymoon as Forbes had to report immediately to his play, *The Holly and the Ivy*, and she to Tyrone Power for her film, *The House in the Square*. The marriage to Forbes was brief, lasting just two years. Darryl Zanuck cast her opposite Tyrone Power in *I'll Never Forget You* (1951). However, Power soon decided she was not experienced enough and replaced her with Ann Blyth. In 1952, she had been sufficiently well-known to host the annual Academy Awards ceremony in Hollywood.

But once in Hollywood, with her talent largely undeveloped, and a temperamental and difficult actress to boot, she failed to make the progress predicted for her. At the time, many in the film business thought Constance would emulate



Constance Smith was well on her way to becoming a Hollywood starlet in the 1950s

Maureen O'Sullivan. She did make about six films in Hollywood, none of them memorable, but with such leading stars as Anne Bancroft, Charles Boyer and Jack Palance. She appeared in Hollywood features such as *Man in the Attic* (1953) and *Impulse* in 1954.

Whether too emotionally frail to overcome the pressures of stardom, or simply not talented enough to be thought of as star material, Constance never made it beyond leading lady status. By the time her contract expired in 1953, Smith had undergone an abortion forced upon her by the studio, and the first of her three marriages was on the ropes. As the years went on and Smith failed to get the parts she felt were matching with her abilities, she began an embittered descent into a life of drugs and alcohol. In June 1955 Constance divorced Forbes upon charges of desertion. Forbes went on to marry fellow British actress, Nanette Newman, the same year.

She also got married for a second time, in 1956, to an Italian photographer called Araldo di Crollanza, whose father had been a Fascist senator in Mussolini's time. He referred to Constance as "the barefoot Irish peasant". Constance last acted in a string of minor films made in Italy between 1955 and 1959, including a role as Lucretia Borgia in *La congiuradei Borgia* (1959). None

of these did anything to rescue her failing career, and subsequently made her last film appearance in 1959.

Interestingly, the Italian film publicity machine described Constance Smith as being descended from Irish aristocrats. As her career faltered in Italy, she took the first of several overdoses and her husband, unable to cope, left her. During her time in Rome in 1958, she first attempted suicide by overdosing on barbiturates. While in Italy she met the veteran producer Paul Rotha who was in the country planning a movie about the life of Mussolini.

In 1960 Constance had moved to London with Paul Rotha, who was over twenty years, her senior. Even though she had left the silver screen behind her, she was still making the headlines. In 1961, she returned to Ireland with Rotha, who planned to write a book about her life and then film it, but it never happened. But Constance did pose for pictures outside the house in Wolfe Tone Street, Limerick, where she was said to have been born. She was met with great fanfare and her visit is still remembered by some today.

In 1962 Constance was sentenced to three months in prison for stabbing Rotha. On 4 February 1968, she stabbed Rotha for the second time and was charged with attempted murder. Paul Rotha

dropped her to the prison and picked her up on her release. Strangely enough, Constance and Rotha later married in 1974. On numerous occasions, she stabbed Rotha during the frequent and huge rows they had; they were both heavy drinkers. In 1975, she ended up in Pentonville Prison in London but they managed to reunite, and in the end, it was she who left a heartbroken Rotha. Paul Rotha died in March 7 1984, in Wallingford, Oxfordshire.

At the close of her life, Constance Smith was cleaning hospital wards and doing childcare jobs. She was in and out of hospital and by the time she died at Islington in north London, in June 2003, she had been reduced to a down-and-out wreck, moving between hospitals and hostels, as her chaotic life continued in a downward spiral.

She tried several more times to kill herself and her last decades were spent rakish and in and out of hospitals. When able to get herself together for brief periods, she worked as a cleaner. Constance died June 30 2003 aged 75, of natural causes but in obscurity in Islington, London. A sadder end is hard to imagine. Constance was cremated and her ashes were scattered in Rose Garden of the crematorium in London. We will remember her with pride, as this Saturday marks the 15th anniversary of her passing.