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TV

13 golden roles Betty White played in TV shows and movies

The beloved actor and comedian would have been 100 in January.



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By Randee Dawn

When they say Betty White was a national treasure, they aren't wrong. The comedian and actor, who died on Dec. 31, 2021 just a few weeks shy of her 100th birthday, entertained generations with her sassy, saucy wit, good heart and pure versatility.

"She was wholesome, and a little naughty underneath," Ray Richmond, author of "Betty White: 100 Remarkable Moments in an Extraordinary Life," which was published last December, told TODAY. "She was the grandma everyone wished they had."

And no matter how much we love our grandmothers, Betty White truly was one of a kind, who really could do anything (she was offered an anchor slot on TODAY in the 1960s, but turned it down). Here's a look back at just some of the roles that kept her golden in our hearts over the years:

— Betty White in "Life With Elizabeth". Alamy

"Life With Elizabeth" (Elizabeth)

In one of TV's earliest sitcoms, White played a kind of Lucy Ricardo clone from 1952-55 who was always coming up with schemes and pulling the wool over her husband's eyes. Then a disembodied voice would scold her, and she broke the fourth wall by saying, "I don't know."

"The sketches were quasi-improvisational, and that takes real acting talent," says Richmond. "Originally it was done as a live show in a music hall theater in Beverly Hills and it wasn't recorded, just went out live on television. One time (the actor who played) her husband forgot his lines and left for a minute and a half, and she had to play with things on a table until he came back."

Betty White in Advise and Consent - 1962



"Advise & Consent" (Senator Bessie Adams)

White was ahead of her time in playing a senator in this 1962 political drama film starring Henry Fonda and Charles Laughton, among others. According to Richmond, "Bessie has some great back-and-forth with the sexist senators on the Senate floor. It was the first time she showed she had some dramatic chops."

— "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" (clockwise from top l.): Ed Asner, Ted Knight, Gavin Macleod, Mary Tyler Moore, Georgia Engel, and Betty White. Alamy

"The Mary Tyler Moore Show" (Sue Ann Nivens)

As the host of "The Happy Homemaker" on WJM from 1973 to 1977, White's Nivens was like a wholesome, cheerful proto-Martha Stewart. Behind the scenes she was totally different: competitive and very interested in men. But she wasn't an original cast member; White didn't join Moore and the gang until season four – but ended up earning two Emmy Awards.

"It was supposed to be a one-shot guest spot, and she got such great laughs they had to keep writing her in," says Richmond. "She was at a point in her career where she'd become a regular celebrity contestant and people were forgetting she was an actor."

Betty White and Rue McClanahan on Mama's Family



"Mama's Family" (Ellen Harper)

The sitcom, spun off from a sketch on "The Carol Burnett Show" had White playing one of Mama's daughters Ellen, a divorcee who was always irritating members of the family, from 1983 to 1986.

"This is another example of Betty not wanting to be the wholesome, sweet fun loving gal," says Richmond. "Given the opportunity, she'd gravitate toward the edge, stretching her acting muscles. (Stars) Burnett and Vicki Lawrence basically told her, 'What do you want to do? We'll give you any role,' and she said she wanted to play this character."

"The Golden Girls" (clockwise from lower l.): Rue McClanahan, Bea Arthur, Estelle Getty, White in 1985. Alamy

"The Golden Girls"/"The Golden Palace" (Rose Nylund)

Rose was the anti-Sue Ann. Famously, White auditioned to play Blanche on the series, a character who could have been seen as Sue Ann Part 2. But the casting director suggested they change things up and have her try out for Rose.

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"Betty didn't think she could do Rose; she didn't think she could do kind and naïve," says Richmond. "She ended up nailing it. Arguably Rose's role is the toughest because she didn't have natural punchlines. She had to act, it was all in the nuance."

The role, which she played from 1985-92, then reprised on "The Golden Palace" from 1992-93, and won her third Emmy for the part.

Chance of a Lifetime 1991



"Chance of a Lifetime" (Evelyn Eglin)

This 1991 made-for-TV film was shot while White was still making "Golden Girls," and happened in part because she wanted to do a romantic comedy with Leslie Nielsen. She played a woman who learns she has a terminal illness after taking over her late husband's business, so she goes on a vacation to Mexico where she meets a dashing widower, played by Nielsen. And then it turns out she's not dying after all!

"That '70s Show" with White, Debra Jo Rupp and Tom Poston. Everett Collection

"That '70s Show" (Bea Sigurdson)

As Kitty's mom, White seemed quite sweet on the surface, but turned out to be a very loud, annoying person. She was only on the show for a handful of episodes between 2002-03. After she was widowed, she came to live with her daughter's family for a time, then more or less disappeared from the show.

Closing Argument - Client Expectations (Betty White)



"The Practice"/"Boston Legal" (Catherine Piper)

"Practice" and "Legal" creator David E. Kelley had already discovered the joys of making "horrible, rank things come out of Betty White's mouth" with his 1999 film "Lake Placid," says Richmond, which made her a terrific addition to his legal show. As Piper, who she played from 2004-08, she was a neighbor, a secretary ... and a killer who used a skillet as a weapon.

"(Kelley) got her to say and do anything, and that was the beauty of (those shows)," Richmond explains. "But it was more than a sight or sound gag, because she had such great comedy and acting chops."

— "The Bold and the Beautiful" (from l.): Susan Flannery, Ally Mills, Betty White, and John McCook
Getty Images

"The Bold and the Beautiful" (Ann Douglas)

Playing Stephanie Forrester's mother, who overlooked the abuse of her daughters at the hands of their father, White's foray into soaps lasted for 23 episodes from 2006 to 2009.

"It's hard to come into a show like a soap opera, and one of her co-stars basically said she walked on and had 40 pages of dialogue to deliver in the first episode, and she'd memorized it," says Richmond. "She was in her early '80s then. She got a death scene where her daughters took her from the hospital and let her die on the beach. People think of her as a sitcom queen, but she did everything."

— "Ugly Betty" with White and Vanessa Williams. Getty Images

"Ugly Betty" (Betty White)

After Wilhelmina (Vanessa Williams) shoves Betty White aside to get a cab, a video version of the incident goes viral in this 2007 episode. In order to salvage her image, Wilhelmina visits Betty in the hospital to smooth things over, but this "Ugly Betty" White is not the one we're used to seeing, and during the hospital visit White stabs her in the back (but not literally). During the visit, White tells Wilhelmina that this dust-up was the best thing that had happened to her in years, and she was going to ride it because "that 'Golden Girls' money went right into the nickel slot," recalls Richmond.

— "Hot in Cleveland" (from l.): Valerie Bertinelli, Wendie Malick, White and Jane Leeves in 2014.
Jesse Grant / Getty Images

"Hot in Cleveland" (Elka Ostrovsky)

White entered "tough ol' broad" territory with Elka, playing a caretaker with every sort of amazing story and close call in her past, ranging from dealing with Nazis to gangsters. As with "Moore," she was only supposed to be a guest actor, but proved so popular she was on the show from 2010 to 2015.

"Betty had already showed she could go against type and be a crazy, eccentric, weed-smoking widow, and that's what she had on 'Hot in Cleveland,'" says Richmond. "The amazing part is she had the energy and mind to pull it off in her '80s and '90s."

— White (c.) with (from l.) Amy Poehler, Maya Rudolph, Ana Gasteyer and Will Forte on "Saturday Night Live" in 2010. Dana Edelson / NBCUniversal via Getty Images

"Saturday Night Live" (Host)

As challenging as the classic NBC sketch show can be, it's got to be exponentially harder when you're 88. White became the oldest host of the show in May, 2010, and her very presence brought back alumnae like Tina Fey, Maya Rudolph, Molly Shannon, Amy Poehler and Rachel Dratch. (All of whom were ready to step in just in case hosting was a bit much for White.) The hosting gig came about after her [Super Bowl ad for Snickers went viral](#), and a grassroots campaign convinced executive producer Lorne Michaels to have her on.

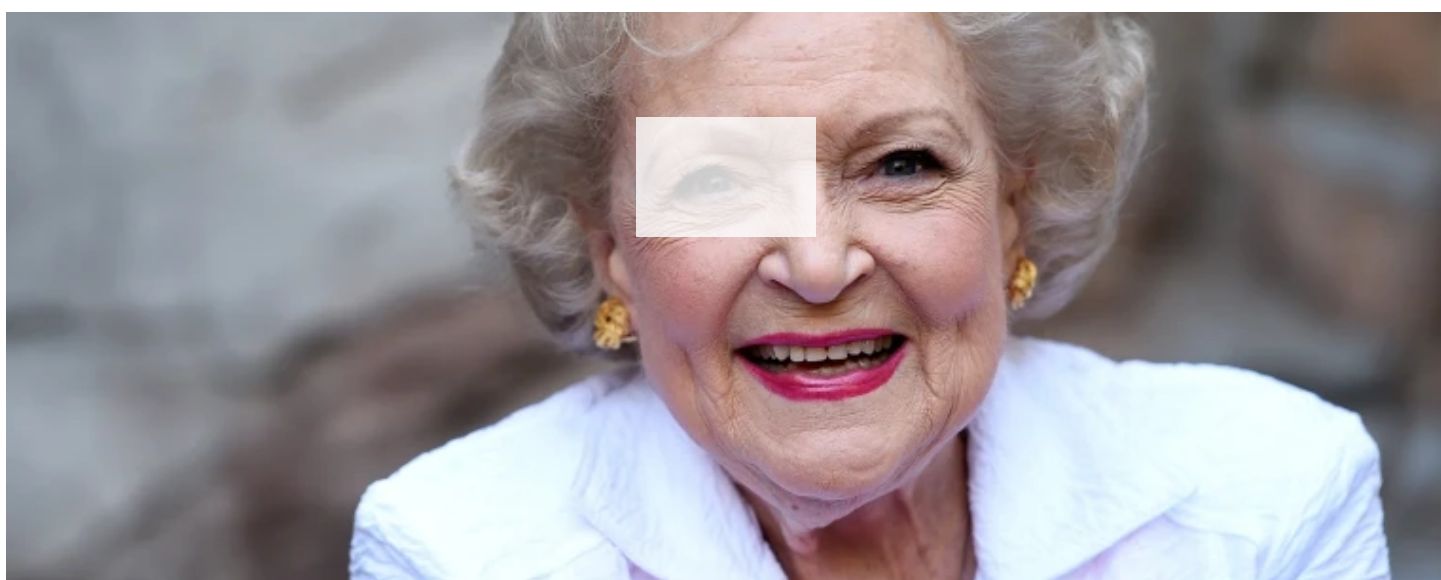
"She riffed on the whole idea of being there, and getting her lines right, but of course she completely nailed it," says Richmond. "Her agent will tell you it was incredibly tough for her, though."

— "The Lost Valentine" with Jennifer Love Hewitt and White. Alamy

"The Lost Valentine" (Caroline Thomas)

White plays a widow whose husband's remains (lost during World War II) have been located, and he's being shipped back for burial. White appears in the 2011 Hallmark Hall of Fame made-for-TV movie opposite Jennifer Love Hewitt, and has, what Richmond calls "The best Betty dramatic moment ever. I don't know if she summoned the memory of her late husband Alan. but her tears and grief feel so real in the moment."

Betty White's legacy lives on as fans remember her legendary career



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Rande Dawn (she/her) is a veteran entertainment journalist and author based in Brooklyn. In addition to writing for outlets including TODAY.com, Variety and The Los Angeles Times, she's the co-author of "The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion" and co-editor of "Across the Universe: Tales of Alternative Beatles." When not interviewing the stars or dabbling in speculative fiction, she nurses her sourdough starter and dreams of the day she can travel again.

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