

Sally Flew & Faltered, Now Flowers

BY STEPHEN RANDALL

It left some of the more serious-minded Hollywood artists scratching their heads. Why would Sally Field, who had worked so hard and so successfully to erase the image pinned on her by three of the most insipid television series ever produced, take a giant step backwards and sign up to do *Smokey and the Bandit*, the same type of frothy and mindless comedy that nearly ruined her career in the first place? Hadn't she learned?

They pondered the Sally Field saga. Discovered virtually days after graduating from a Los Angeles high school, Sally was cast as the lead in *Gidget*, a 1965 surf-bunny TV series that established her as cute — certifiably, button-nosed, girl-next-door cute. When *Gidget* wiped out, Sally traded her bikini for a habit in *The Flying Nun*, a cute little nun who, because of her tiny size and large, wing-like habit, was often carried aloft by gusts of wind. "Only people who hate daisies and ice cream could find Sally Field less than adorable," gushed *Look* magazine in 1967. "I hate being called cute," countered the Flying Nun. "When someone says I'm cute, I want to throw right up."

After three years of being adorably airborne, Sally was given another set of clothes to package the same old character. This time the girl next door was married (to equally cute John Davidson) and had ESP, making her *The Girl With Something Extra*. It was all a little too darling. Any one of these shows could have slowed down the career of even a gifted actress. But doing all three of them — in succession, with no other roles to balance them out — would have ruined Laurence Olivier. Sally Field did not need ESP to realize this and, at the age of 25, she retired to rethink her career.

For three years, she thought. And studied — not only acting at the Actor's Studio, but voice and dance lessons as well. To her friends in the workshop, she was an unknown talent with a well-known name. It was one of those friends, actress Zhora Lampert, who arranged Sally's modest re-entry into show business — a supporting role as a Southern teen in *Stay Hungry*, an offbeat movie set against a backdrop of bodybuilders. All three of Sally's previous efforts — especially the *Flying Nun* — had been devastated by the critics. And she knew her background was not likely to warm a reviewer's heart.

"I knew that some people might want to use my past as an opportunity to make a joke; after all, something called *The Flying Nun* is a built-in punchline. I knew my work in *Stay Hungry* had to be strong; it had to be beyond laughter. I couldn't be timid as an actress because if there was one inkling of the girl I once was, I'd be dead. They'd grab on to that and strangle me with it."



Sally knew that this was her comeback; people would be watching to see if she failed. "I suppose I was afraid somewhere, but you can't allow yourself to feel that — it's not productive. I was like Scarlett O'Hara, I just said 'I won't feel that now, I'll feel that tomorrow.' By the time that day comes and you allow yourself to feel it, it just overwhelms you and floods you with insecurities. You want to go jump off a cliff. But I had already faced the possibility that I would never reach my potential publicly, that I'd end up doing it in little theaters or by teaching. But I knew I had done good work in *Stay Hungry*."

It was not the splashy comeback that, say, Frank Sinatra made in *From Here to Eternity*. But it was a comeback nonetheless — solid, subtle and professional . . . and not at all girl-next-door cute. Plus, it was a stepping stone to an even bigger breakthrough, the lead role of the multi-personality schizophrenic in the TV-movie *Sybil*.

It would have been a *tour de force* for any actor, but for

Sally it was even more. It won her an Emmy and erased once and for all that image of a cute little nun soaring with the breeze. Industry wags could only marvel at how effectively Sally Field had carved out a brand new career for herself as a serious actress.

Then, as if she had lost interest in her "respectable" career, she signed up to play the female lead opposite Burt Reynolds in *Smokey and the Bandit*, which was certainly not the proper vehicle for an *artiste*, any more than Sally's three TV sitcoms had been. It was as if Norman Mailer had said, "Yeah, this is nice, but I'd rather be writing the type of books Harold Robbins and Irving Stone do."

"I was scared to do it because it was commercial and lightweight and that was the background I was trying to get away from. But I think that actors make a grievous error when they think that they should go for serious heavy-duty meaningful drama and they don't ever think of the audience