

# The Maude Squad

A LOOK BACK AT OUR FAVORITE GOLDEN GIRL, **BEA ARTHUR**



Arthur won a Tony in 1966 for her role in *Mame*. The series *The Golden Girls*, below, reunited her with former *Maude* co-star Rue McClanahan.

★ **Much-married Maude Findlay** was an outspoken activist in Tuckahoe, N.Y. Divorcee Dorothy Zbornak was a sarcastic substitute teacher in Miami. And then there was Bea Arthur.

Born Bernice Frankel in New York City in 1922 and raised in eastern Maryland by clothing store-owner parents, the actress, who died of cancer in April at age 86, had chosen a new first name in Beatrice and picked up a stage-worthy surname from her first husband. Returning to New York, she became a star of the theater, gaining notice in the 1954 off-Broadway production of *The Threepenny Opera* and, 10 years later, originating the role of Yente the matchmaker in Broadway's *Fiddler on the Roof*. Then, in 1966, she won a Tony Award for her portrayal of acidic sidekick Vera Charles in the musical *Mame*.

## PROVING FEMINISM CAN BE FUNNY

In 1972, TV producer Norman Lear cast Arthur as Edith Bunker's liberal cousin Maude, who would square off against conservative Archie in an episode of Lear's groundbreaking CBS series *All in the Family*. It was, Lear now admits, a calculated move to showcase the promising performer.

"We put Bea in that one episode, knowing that she would kill," the legendary producer remembers. "And indeed, before the East Coast feed of the show was off the air, I got a call from [then CBS' programming chief] Fred Silverman saying, 'That woman should have her own show!'"

In the resulting 1972-78 spinoff sitcom *Maude*, Arthur's feisty feminist title character, although often just as buffoonish as Archie Bunker in her own well-meaning way, became a role model for a generation of women. The show's



Bea Arthur's first starring role on network television was as feminist Maude Findlay in the series *Maude*.

best-known episode, "Maude's Dilemma," in the show's premiere season, tackled a subject taboo even today, as the married grandmother Maude, finding herself surprisingly pregnant at 49, discusses and undergoes an abortion.

In 1985—seven years after Arthur hung up Maude's trademark maxi-vests—the silver-haired actress reunited with former co-star Rue McClanahan to play two of a foursome of older ladies on NBC's *The Golden Girls*. With the role of Dorothy Zbornak came, for Arthur, an opportunity rare for any actress, to create yet a second iconic TV character.

And like Maude—and as the actress was wont to explain about herself—Dorothy didn't suffer fools gladly. "We're both 5 feet, 9½ inches, and both of us have very deep voices," Arthur explained in a



Arthur's work with the gay community—vociferous fans of her two big TV roles—won her their adoration. And there were other ardent groups of admirers as well. *Maude*, she explained, “was one of the first shows to tackle the race question. And so in a lot of towns where there is a significant black population, I am still Maude Findlay. [Many African-Americans] just love me, and it is so sweet and so nice.”

And as *The Golden Girls* has continued to live on forever in repeats, so has Arthur's warm relationship with her generations of fans. “I'll be on a plane,” the actress noted in 2006, “looking like I look now. And the flight attendants will come up and say, ‘Are you ... ? You *are*, aren't you?!’ and proceed to give the most wonderful compliments. And after all these years, I am still delighted.”

— *Jim Colucci*

## Big Box of Brilliance

In 1971, Norman Lear forever changed the style of network comedy with his bold and often controversial version of a popular British series, retooled for the U.S. as *All in the Family*. The next fall, the prolific producer supplemented CBS' schedule with a second hit sitcom, *Maude*. Two years after that, Lear and his creative team spun *Maude's* maid, Florida Evans, into her own successful series, *Good Times*.

During the first months of *All in the Family's* success, Lear began planning a U.S. adaptation of a second Britcom that would star comedian Redd Foxx. In the fall of 1972, *Sanford and Son* ended up becoming a smash—on another network. CBS, recognizing Lear as a hitmaker, subsequently snapped up his later long-running shows *The Jeffersons* and *One Day at a Time*.

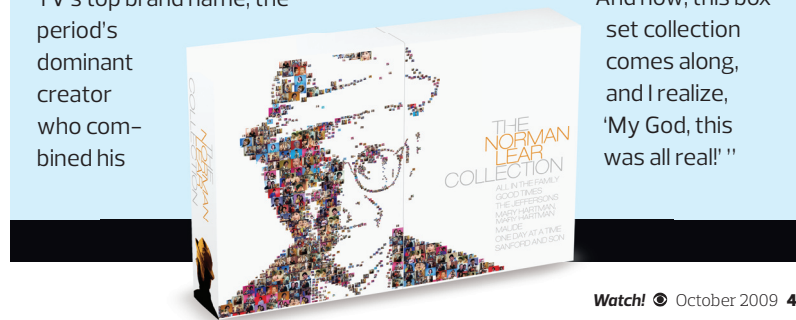
All six series turned Lear into TV's top brand name, the period's dominant creator who combined his

humor with realism and provocative social issues. Now Sony Pictures Home Entertainment has packaged the first season of each show, along with his 1970s syndicated soap spoof *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, into a 19-disc DVD set.

The Norman Lear Collection (\$159.95) also includes bonus material such as two never-before-seen pilot episodes for *All in the Family* and featurettes on the creation and production of each era-defining hit, complete with interviews from Lear's legion of stars.

Looking back at the 1970s and early '80s from 2009, when hit sitcoms are in shorter supply, even Lear has to marvel. “It's amazing how such a huge part of my life can come back at me, almost as a surprise,” he admits. “I'm so far removed now from those years, they're like a dream.

And now, this box set collection comes along, and I realize, ‘My God, this was all real!’”



previously unpublished 2006 interview. “And we're both what I like to call ‘bubble prickers.’”

### MAKING A TRUE CONNECTION WITH FANS

On TV, Arthur's gruff exterior was part of her brilliant comic timing, enabling her to famously wring laughter out of the slightest of cocked eyebrows and pursed lips. But behind the scenes, the actress became equally beloved for her generous heart.

In recent years, as the two-time Emmy winner popped up in guest roles on the small screen, she also capitalized on her fame to campaign for causes such as animal rights. In 2005, she performed a sold-out, one-night-only version of her earlier one-woman-show, *Bea Arthur on Broadway: Just Between Friends*, as a benefit for the homeless gay teens served by New York's Ali Forney Center.