

THE BAKER BUZZ!

By Sheldon Baker

AN INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR *Michael Learned*

Considered by many avid television viewers as America's most respected television mom, Michael Learned for several years starred in the role of Olivia Walton on the CBS-TV show, *The Waltons*. As a four-time Emmy award winner, People's Choice recipient and multiple Golden Globe nominee, Learned's, first regular series audition turned out to be the role of a lifetime. It would ultimately define her career, considering she was told the show would probably not continue beyond the pilot.

In the 70s, audiences could feel for, and still relate to families living in the depression era in the hills of Virginia and the show took hold. Though times were tough, much like today, love and sharing were abundant in the Walton family.

Recently, the TV legend, and cast of the *Waltons* celebrated their 50th anniversary of the hit series that ran for a decade (and can still be seen on the MeTV cable channel), making Learned the quintessential television mom, beating out Shirley Partridge (*The Partridge Family*) by six years, Carol Brady (*The Brady Bunch*) by four, and Caroline Ingles (*Little House on the Prairie*) by one year.

Later, Learned, who is today the effervescent octogenarian, became a fixture in daytime television for her regular roles on *General Hospital*, and *The Young and the Restless*, as well as a cross over character as the Honorable Judge Turner in both *One Life to Live* and *All My Children*.

On stage, she has starred in *Steel Magnolias*, performed in the national tour of *On Golden Pond* and in Lewis Black's *One Slight Hitch*. Other theatre credits include *Elizabeth the Queen* at the Folger Shakespeare Library, *Edward Albee's All Over* at the Gramercy and McCarter Theatres. She starred in the West Coast premieres of *Woman in Mind* and *Hapgood* both for the American Conservatory Theatre Company for whom she was the leading lady for three years. Her Broadway appearances include Gore Vidal's *The Best Man* and Wendy Wasserstein's *The Sisters Rosensweig*, and the Broadway production of *The Outgoing Tide* and a tour with *Driving Miss Daisy*. This lady loves to work.

More recently, Learned continued to use her acting career to raise awareness, just as Olivia Walton did to talk about her life and discover that love conquers all in the film *Second Acts*

(<https://vimeo.com/298223202>). Seen on DirecTV's short film channel, the film also toured an array of global film festivals. And she also found time to appear in the critically acclaimed digital dramedy entitled *Life Interrupted*.

Prior to COVID, honors kept pouring in for Learned as she received a Best Actress Award at the Soho International Film Festival and Best Actress at the Hollywood Women's Film Festival for *Second Acts*. She was also honored at the Las Vegas MEGA Fest International Film Festival with a Lifetime Achievement Award following a screening of that film.

Today, Learned's star continues to shine having portrayed the grandmother of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer in the limited Netflix series *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. The controversial show hit the top of Netflix ratings and the 10-episode limited series shot to the No. 1 show on Netflix across dozens of countries and second most-viewed English television show.

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I had the opportunity to speak with Learned by phone as she revealed some of the behind-the-scenes interaction with the Walton's cast, her fond show memories, the Dahmer role, and love of performing before a live audience.

NaturAlley: When did you first realize acting was in your blood?

I was going to a ballet school in England when I was 12, and I won the ballet-drama competition. That was a big deal in school at that time. I won the drama competition, and the teachers took me aside and said I was not a very good dancer, and I should consider becoming a special drama student. So, I thought I have flat feet and am too tall to be a ballerina so I will pursue drama and that is where I found my niche.

What initial acting opportunities were you presented with?

Because I needed a work permit, I came back to the states, and got married very young, meeting my first husband (actor Peter Donat), and we worked together, I kind of coasted in on my husband's coat tails. We had three kids, and I was a housewife. Acting was secondary to being a wife and a mom at the time. Peter would get a theater acting job and they would give me an understudy role. That meant we had two salaries which really helped at the time because theater does not pay very well. We started traveling all over with the kids. So, his career really got my career going. It was wonderful.

How did the Waltons role come about?

I was unfortunately going through a divorce with Peter, and I realized I had three teenagers who needed to be supported. Peter was away and I had no money. So, I drove to LA in my little VW Bug and stayed with a friend for a while. I had started staying in a very little seedy motel at the time because I could only live with my friend for so long. My agent then called and told me the part of the Walton's mom was still open. I said, I am not at all like Patricia Neal who was initially selected for the role. I did not have dark hair and not in my 40s, I had just turned 32 and had short blonde hair. He said go and see about it anyway. So, I did. I did a screen test with Richard Thomas who played John-Boy and Ralph Waite who was John Walton, Sr., and received a phone call saying I got the part. It was if as I had been handed a gift from God and indeed, I had.

To what do you attribute the success to the popularity of The Waltons, then and today, 50 years later?

I think the charm of the children had a lot to do with it. They were really cute, and adorable, and their parts were well written. They were not perfect little kids. Ralph and I had to struggle a little to get our parts a little less perfect. I think Earl Hamner, the Walton creator, idealized his mother and I can understand why. You do not want to write bad things about your mother. But there were times where I felt the part was making me sick, it's going to give me diabetes. I said you must give the role of Olivia some hump, where she scolds the wrong child, or she is being righteous about something that she should not be

so righteous about. So, God bless them the writers went out of their way to give me some meat to chew on. I appreciated that because it was not easy to write some meat into a part of a woman who was a good woman and good wife. That can be very boring.

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You didn't always agree with the script writers?

No. I was a pain in the neck. Really, I was a pain in the ass. I was difficult at times.

For me as an actor I had just come from doing repertory theater and portraying English playwrights Noel Coward, and Shakespeare. It was very difficult because a lot of the time they wanted me in the scene. They wanted my presence, and they would give me a line like 'pass the sugar, please' or 'more coffee John', or 'time for bed kids'. To spend a 15-hour day doing that was very difficult for me at first. Remember, I had three kids at home who needed me. So, here I was on a set thankfully making enough money to send my kids to private school, but at the same time I was just bored out of my mind.

The last show aired in June 1981. The show can be seen on cable, but if the program originated today, Do you believe it could or would it still be popular?

Yes, I do. I get letters from people who are watching the show today. Mothers who watched the show as children and now watching with



their children, and I think the family still resonates. Earl Hamner Jr., the show's creator was a storyteller. He told good stories I think at least in the first five years. It got a little difficult as the kids got older to keep the same kind of charm going. There was the Depression and we got into World War II, and it was a challenge for the writers, but they held up well. But the real charm of the show those first five years was when Richard was still John-Boy.

The series was set in the Depression, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. Most people probably don't know the Waltons, was based on a real family was created by Hamner who was from rural Virginia.

Hamner always had to walk a fine line not to embarrass any of his real family or the family friends known as the Baldwin sisters. They were all real people. He did a marvelous job.

A lot has been written about your relationship with Ralph Waite, who played John Walton, Sr. He was an ordained Presbyterian minister and a political activist and twice ran for office but lost. Can you set the record straight about your relationship with Waite on and off the set?

We had real chemistry, and the chemistry was real. We adored each other. But we made the wise decision we would never carry our relationship into a bonafide affair. It was a love affair of the heart from our spirit between the two of us. We were the best of friends, we fought, and were like a married couple who didn't sleep together. If we had become real lovers, it might have become real nasty. Eventually, spending all those hours on the set, we were much more mature than we thought we were at the time.

What is your most favorite memory of Olivia?

I loved it whenever they gave me something a little out of character. Something where I wasn't behind an ironing board or taking something out of the oven or pouring coffee. They did, and it was wonderful. They gave me a show where I learned to ride a bike. They had me fly an airplane. Somehow, they managed to make it realistic. I thanked them for it. And as I said earlier, I was a pain in the ass.

I was always saying Olivia wouldn't say that or do that. Or she can't do this. I was always trying to put my two cents worth into the script. Sometimes I was correct. But I was just literally a pain. The writers were wonderful. Heroic. And the producers too. I have nothing but fond memories of them and they of me. We became very close. Claire Whitaker, one of the producer-writers who came on board after the first five years became a very good friend. I have a picture of her next to me. She is pouring coffee in the photo and sent it on purpose.

"I'M AN ACTOR AND NEED TO SINK MY TEETH INTO SOMETHING THAT CHALLENGES ME."

Why did you leave the show?

I really wasn't being given enough to do. I'm an actor and need to sink my teeth into something that challenges me. Spending long hours on the set saying, 'pass the sugar, please,' just wasn't challenging enough for me. CBS (Robert Halmi Jr.) then came to me and offered me a role in a new show called Nurse that looked really interesting. And it was, but unfortunately it was cancelled. But I was challenged by it. It was shooting in New York, where I was living, and it was perfect. (Author's

note: Learned won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series in 1982 for her role on the show.)

Of course, John-Boy played by Richard Thomas, was a fan favorite. What were your interactions with Thomas?

We are still close and dear friends. He is currently touring with the play To Kill a Mockingbird. I have seen him twice. I am friends with all the cast members. We love getting together. We love each other. They are like my second family. The chemistry on the set was real and I couldn't have gone to work if it wasn't. I remember once Ralph and I had a spat and I was crying. I knocked on his dressing room door and said we had to make up because I couldn't do the scene if we were still mad at each other. So, he opened his arms, and we made up.

A Waltons reunion recently took place in Los Angeles to celebrate the 50th year show anniversary. Were you excited to see former cast members?

I am. But many of us recently had previously gotten together, although Richard could only join us by phone. Jon Walmsley who lives in England joined us by phone too. The rest of us met in the studio. I look forward to getting together.



Today you have a major role in the Netflix drama documentary profiling serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. Talk about that and your secret to acting longevity.

I guess I just keep putting one foot in front of the other. And I like to work. I feel alive when I'm working. Less so for television than I did for theater. But television pays the bills, thankfully. Plus, you don't say no to Dahmer creator and executive producer Ryan Murphy. You say yes, please, and I did. Even though the role is the grandmother of a killer, she didn't know he was a killer. Maybe she didn't want to know. But how do you not know someone is chopping up bodies in your basement? Denial? It can be very powerful mechanism for some people. She just loved her grandson. I have a grandson who is living with me temporarily while he is going to school to be a chef. I've wondered, what would I do if I found out he was doing all these horrendous things on the side? What a horrible shock that must have been for Dahmer's family to find out the person they love could do these dreadful acts. Unfortunately, there was little information about the grandmother in doing my show research. Basically, home movies of her walking around outside with her cats. Not speaking. But interesting how much Dahmer liked to be interviewed. He had very handsome, good-looking features. But a deadness to his face. It was chilling to listen to him talk about the killings as if he was talking about items on a grocery list.

After the Dahmer series, what's next for Michael Learned?

Waiting for the phone to ring. It's an actor's life. I don't have anything lined up. I was going to do *On Golden Pond* in Canada with Hal Linden, but I fell and broke my wrist. Sent a script for *Dear Liar*, a George Bernard Shaw play that I am hoping they do. At least I hope they will do it. It's funny and touching. I've done it before. As I've said, theater doesn't pay as much as television, but I love working in front of an audience. Every actor feels that way.

From a health standpoint, how do you stay well, stay in shape?

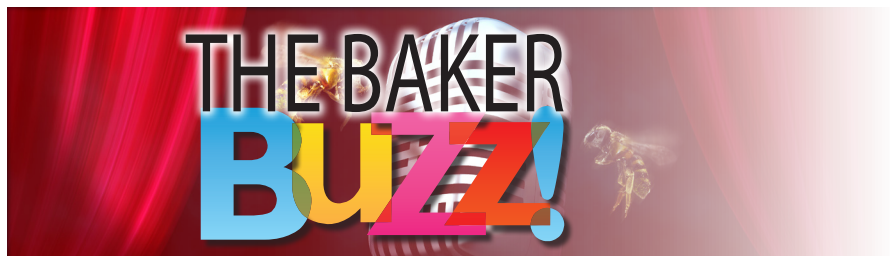
I used to dance, but now there's nothing happening. I feel like I'm turning into lard. Hopefully I don't look like it. I am not self-motivating anything, just grieving for my little dog, a brindle Chihuahua, that just passed. She used to get me going. Take her for walks. I had her for nine years.

When your diet goes out the window, what foods call to you?

I'm a sugar addict. Anything with sugar. Always have been. My allowance as a kid went for candy bars. When young, I'd buy five bars at a time and eat all of them at once. Nothing has changed. I can't handle it, but I love sugar.

And having reached the octogenarian years, you are still in love with acting?

I still love what I do. Sometimes it's difficult and challenging. Most of the time it is still rewarding, especially in front of a live audience and you get that first laugh. It lifts you up higher than a kite. That first belly laugh lets you know you are doing your job and they are with you. Or the silence of a sad scene. It makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It lets me know the audience is in the moment. It's both humbling and wonderful.



About the Author: Sheldon Baker has been interviewing people from all walks of life for more than 15 years. He loves interviewing celebrities, athletes, authors, and other interesting people and is also known for creating iconic health brands and continues to develop brand marketing for natural health and wellness products. He wears many hats.

Sheldon's interviews will now be seen on a regular basis in NaturAlley publications and exclusive interviews on the website. NaturAlley and Sheldon welcome your email comments. The email is editor@naturalalleyhealthmagazine.com

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