

In a scene from "What a Way to Go!", oil-spattered Shirley hugs her movie son, Jeff Fithaian.

SHIRLEY MACLAINE SOUNDS OFF

Nonconformist, journeyman critic and one-woman filibuster,

*Shirley MacLaine voices her views on everything from marriage to Mme. Nhu,
TV to travel, with side glances at humor, schools and even matched pearls.*

BY MURIEL DAVIDSON



During a tour of Russia last year Shirley MacLaine decided to make a brief stop at the University of Leningrad. A group of Russian college students quickly cornered her to ask a few questions. Fifty-three hours later the students were haggard and red-eyed from lack of sleep, but Shirley was still joyously discussing such subjects as entomology, horticulture, psychiatry, Hollywood status symbols, the wheat shortages in the Ukraine, John Steinbeck, the romances of Elizabeth Taylor, the advantages of the capitalist system, the shortcomings of the Communist system, Hong Kong tailoring and nudity in art. When the nonstop conversation finally came to a halt, one exhausted Russian student asked an American reporter, "Is that lady what you call in United States a filibuster?"

In the United States—especially in Hollywood—Shirley does indeed rank as a kind of one-woman filibuster. The late Ernie Kovacs once said, "If you've got Shirley MacLaine for a friend, who needs an encyclopedia?" Hedda Hopper has described a session with the young actress as "a kook's tour through her brain." A Hollywood reporter, who has spent a good portion of his adult years trying to wheedle coherent

In gingham swimsuit, Shirley displays her informal side for Dick Van Dyke in scene from their new film.

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monosyllables out of movie stars, points out, “With Shirley, all you have to do is say ‘Hello.’ She’ll gush forth with opinions on *anything*—from fashions to Khrushchev. She’s been given a buildup as a kook—but I’d describe her as an activist, nonconformist, irrepressible, self-educated intellectual.”

As an uninhibited activist Shirley is unparalleled in the film capital. One day last June, for example, she phoned her attorney and asked, “What is the penalty in this state for committing assault and battery?” After a short lesson in law she jumped into her black Mercedes automobile and drove to the office of Hollywood gossip columnist Mike Connolly.

For months Connolly had been chronicling Shirley’s contractual wrangles with producer Hal Wallis. Shirley finally exploded one morning when Connolly announced her capitulation to Wallis. Upon arriving at Connolly’s office, Shirley spotted the columnist stepping from an elevator, and as Shirley recalls, “He said to me, ‘Hello, doll.’ And I said, ‘Are you in this business to print the truth?’ And he said, ‘Of course, doll.’ and I said, ‘Then why don’t you?’ and I slugged him in the face as hard as I could. Then, as I was switching my purse from one arm to the other to slug him again, I noticed he was wearing glasses. That bothered me. So before I hit him again, I took the glasses off his nose. I bashed him two more times, and he kept saying, ‘Why, Shirley! Why, Shirley!’”

That afternoon the incident was splashed all over the front pages of the Los Angeles newspapers. Archie Moore promptly sent Shirley a pair of boxing gloves; California’s governor, Pat Brown, sent her a congratulatory wire; and she received a message from the White House—name of sender undisclosed—which said,

CONGRATULATIONS.
NOW WHY DON'T YOU SLUG WALLACE,
GOVERNOR, NOT HAL?

Shirley MacLaine is constantly embroiled in similar skirmishes, usually in defense of her self-proclaimed nonconformity. Despite the foregoing fashion layout, for example, her concern with her appearance usually is minuscule, and she has had knock-down, drag-out battles with movie executives who have tried to stop her from appearing in studio commissaries in an old shirt and dungarees.

Her attitude toward the usual Hollywood social whirl also is heretic. “I prefer to just go away between every picture,” she says. “I might go to Tasmania, Istanbul or maybe just Fargo, North Dakota. My vista is not bound by a sound stage at Twentieth Century-Fox. Nothing pleases me so much as learning.

“Once I flew to Morocco alone, rented a car and drove through Tangier, Marrakech, Rabat

and all the little places in the desert. I lived with Moroccan families all along the way. In Rabat I spent eight hours just watching a four-year-old child weaving fabric with both his hands and feet. It was fascinating.

“But whenever I get home, I’m constantly amazed by ridiculous questions people ask me—about Tokyo or Hong Kong, for example. No one seems to care about the political situation or any of the internal struggles. They only want to know where they can go to buy jade cheap or get an inexpensive dress made in five hours. So, because I am not trivial-minded and because I go to places where the world’s problems are actually happening, I’m labeled a kook.”

Shirley’s rather unorthodox marriage of nine years to producer Steve Parker helps to perpetuate the legend of her eccentricity. Parker and their seven-year-old daughter, Stephanie (Japanese name: Sachiko), live in Tokyo. Miss MacLaine lives in Encino, Calif. Shirley is a frequent weekend commuter between Los Angeles and Tokyo, and Parker visits her in Hollywood. But often as many as six or eight months go by during which the family does not meet. “I’m not saying my marriage is right for *everyone*, but I don’t care about anybody else’s marital situation,” says Shirley. “I only care about mine. I think too many women regard the marriage license as a license to possess. And I consider that kind of possession dangerous.

“When you marry and have a child, you become a unit. But each individual in that unit should be allowed to express himself, not always perform in concert. *We* give each other freedom. It’s a fact, you know, that the more freedom you have, the less you want. The people who feel compelled to put a label on everything label my marriage ‘an experiment.’ Some of those very same people are finished with marriage number three and are working on number four.”

Discussing her separation from Stephanie, Shirley became agitated. “You think it doesn’t *kill* me to be away from her?” she yelled. “But let me tell you something. We’re separated because I won’t have her educated in America. She’s learning the things all seven-year-olds learn, but she’s learning while sitting next to a child from Pakistan or Indonesia. She speaks fluent English and Japanese, and five other languages fairly well. I won’t subject her to a limited form of education. I could never be that selfish. My daughter’s name, Sachiko, in Japanese means ‘happy child.’ And that’s just what she is. And she’ll be a well-educated child too. The only thing I learned in school was how to type.”

Shirley, 29, a onetime Broadway chorus girl, has become an ardent pupil in the school of self-education. She will sound off on anything from show business to world affairs. Some examples: ● On performing for television: “I don’t want a deodorant manufacturer telling me what I can or can’t do. Besides, I consider most of the tele-

vision shows like doing a rehearsal in front of sixty million people.”

● On capital punishment and her efforts to save kidnap-rapist Cary Chessman: “I’m not saying I’m against capital punishment. For Hitler, yes! For Eichmann, yes! For Chessman, I said, ‘No.’ What we did when we executed Chessman was to drop cyanide pellets on the world’s stage. It was a terrible blight on the American image.”

● On Madame Nhu’s visit to America: “She stuck a bow in the hair of her virginal-looking daughter to improve her *own* image, and she came here to use her feminine wiles to try to convince Americans that she isn’t a Dragon Lady—which she is. You know why I’m glad she came here? They got things straightened out in Vietnam while she was gone.”

● On Hollywood’s so-called clan: “Organizations of any kind bore me. They tie me down and make me feel earthbound. Imagine anyone calling *me* the mascot of the clan, which the newspapers did! I adore Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr. We have a wonderful rapport. I understand their humor and they dig mine. But I go away for months and never see them. They aren’t my blood brothers.”

Highest-paid comedienne

Shirley is flintiest on the subject of humor, which she understands intuitively and which has made her the highest-paid comedienne (approximately \$500,000 per picture) in the world. “I have a tremendous regard for humor because I believe it is an escape valve for all problems,” she said. “I believe there should be more humor in the United Nations—like more people banging their shoes on the tables. Even in tragedy, we all long for a sense of relief.

“When my husband, Steve, broke his leg skiing in Japan, we thought for a while that the leg might have to be amputated. Yet when I went to the airport in Los Angeles to meet his plane, I had myself, my secretary and her three children bandaged from eyeballs to shoelaces. Steve got off the plane on a stretcher, but he got off laughing. To me, humor basically is looking at human frailty and teasing it. The funniest sight gag—and one of the oldest—is a pompous, impeccably dressed, self-important tycoon taking a pratfall. I believe that to laugh at human frailty is to help eliminate it.”

So goes the MacLaine filibuster. But whether Shirley is as serious in her resolve against what she regards as convention is a moot point. Recently, she was talking about Hollywood status symbols, the epitome of which, for a woman, is the possession of a perfectly matched strand of eleven-millimeter pearls. Shirley does own pearls. And they are perfectly matched. “But they are ten-and-one-half millimeter,” says Shirley. “Eleven millimeters, my dear, is too gauche. Just too gauche.” THE END

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