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## Paula Kelly Dies: 'Night Court' & 'Women Of Brewster Place' Emmy Nominee Was 77

By **Greg Evans**

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**Paula Kelly**

Courtesy Ebony Repertory Theatre

Paula Kelly, an actress who earned Emmy nominations for roles on NBC's 1980s sitcom Night Court and 1989 ABC miniseries The Women of Brewster Place, died February 8 in Whittier, CA, from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. She was 77.

Her death was announced by her family and Los Angeles' Ebony Repertory Theatre.

Kelly, who was also a dancer, choreographer and singer, had her breakthrough role of Helene in Bob Fosse's 1969 film *Sweet Charity*, sharing the screen with star Shirley MacLaine and Chita Rivera in

such musical numbers as “There’s Gotta Be Something Better Than This” and the showstopper “Hey, Big Spender.” She’d already played the role in a West End stage production.

Other film credits include *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *Uptown Saturday Night* (1974) and *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* (1995).

Kelly appeared in numerous TV series from the 1970s through the ’90s, including *Sanford & Son*, *Medical Center*, *The Streets of San Francisco*, *Police Woman* and *The Richard Pryor Show*. In one memorable performance, she played an arrogant doctor called upon to treat the young Janet Jackson’s character in a 1979 episode of CBS’ *Good Times*.

In 1984, she earned an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series for her performance as *Night Court*’s public defender Liz Williams.

Her second supporting actress Emmy nomination came in in 1989, when she played the lesbian Theresa in the two-night miniseries *The Women of Brewster Place*, produced by Oprah Winfrey’s Harpo Productions.

Other television credits include a mid-’80s run on daytime’s *Santa Barbara* and co-choreographing, with Michael Kidd, BBC’s 1976 presentation of *Peter Pan*.

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**From left: Paula Kelly, Shirley Maclaine and Chita Rivera in ‘Sweet Charity’**

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On stage, Kelly appeared in *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope* at the Mark Taper Forum (for which she won a Los

Angeles Drama Critics Circle best supporting actress award), the West Coast premiere of *Sophisticated Ladies* opposite Gregory Hines at the Shubert Theatre and *Stevie Wants to Play the Blues* directed by Simon Callow at L.A.T.C.

Kelly came out of retirement in 2009 to join the cast of Ebony Repertory Theatre’s production of *Crowns* by Regina Taylor at L.A.’s Nate Holden Performing Arts Center; the production later moved to Pasadena Playhouse.

“Her unassuming leadership was marked by compassion, elegance and grace,” said Ebony Repertory Theatre producing artistic director Wren T. Brown. “She was a rare and gifted artist, whom we will cherish forever.”

Kelly's dance credits include solos for Martha Graham, Donald MacKayle and Alvin Ailey. Raised in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, Kelly attended the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art before graduating from Julliard School of Music, where she studied under Graham.

Kelly is survived by her aunt Pearl Mackey of Jacksonville, Florida; longtime companion George Parkington; niece Dina McCarthy and nephew Lehman Brockett.

A celebration of Kelly's life will be held in Los Angeles at the Nate Holden Performing Arts Center. Details will be announced at a later date.

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