

**ANN STEELY
(CATHY
O'DONNELL)
1923-1970**



**MARRIAGE
DESTROYED
HER FILM
CAREER**

Cathy O'Donnell's screen persona was described as "lovely, shy, wistful and ethereal". She wasn't pretty in the Hollywood sense, but she was enchanting. But Cathy wasn't her real name.

She was born Ann Steely in July 1923, in Siluria, Alabama. When her father died in 1935, the family moved to Oklahoma City, where she graduated from Classen High School in 1942. She worked at an Army induction center as a stenographer but the adventurous Steely left to study acting at Oklahoma City University, after watching the film "Wuthering Heights".

In 1944, with money saved for a two-week trip to Hollywood, where she hoped to begin a movie career, she left Oklahoma City to meet David O. Selznick after sending him a letter and picture. She met with his casting director, who promised to arrange an audition. But while she was waiting, she met agent Ben Medford at the lunch counter in Schwab's Drugstore, who turned out to be Samuel Goldwyn's agent.

Goldwyn arranged a screen test and signed her to a seven-year contract. To get rid of her thick Southern accent, Goldwyn arranged rigorous voice and theatrical training at New York's American Academy of Arts. She changed her name to Cathy O'Donnell, after the protagonist in "Wuthering Heights" and because audiences loved Irish names. In 1945, the 22-year-old Cathy O'Donnell made her film debut in "Wonder Man", starring Danny Kaye.

In 1946, O'Donnell's second film role was the highly-acclaimed "The Best Years of Our Lives", directed by William Wyler and starring Frederic March and Myrna Loy. She played Wilma Cameron, the high-school sweetheart of double amputee Homer Parrish. The film earned seven Academy Awards including Best Picture.

Her next film was RKO's "They Live By Night" in 1948 with Farley Granger. The film is now considered a classic noir film. O'Donnell was dropped from her next project when the 24-year-old actress eloped in April 1948 with Robert Wyler, William's older brother, with whom Goldwyn was feuding.

William Wyler had recently left MGM to join Frank Capra and George Stevens in Liberty Films. He was one of Goldwyn's "cash cows" so Wyler's abandonment was both personal and professional. Goldwyn fired O'Donnell, claiming that Wyler "put his brother up to marrying Cathy to spite him". He insisted Cathy annul the marriage immediately or she would never work again.

O'Donnell finally got that interview with Selznick, who promptly signed her but her career waned after the break with Goldwyn. She appeared with Granger again in "Side Street" (1950) and Jimmy Stewart in "The Man From Laramie" (1955). Her final Wyler film role was in the classic "Ben-Hur" (1959), playing Tirzah, the leprosy-stricken sister to Charlton Heston.

By the end of the 1950s, O'Donnell was a fashion icon, photographed and profiled in publications including Redbook. She appeared on television from 1951 to 1964 but mainly enjoyed a comfortable though childless domestic life with Robert. O'Donnell died of cancer on her 22nd wedding anniversary in April 1970 at age 46. Robert Wyler died the following year.

O'Donnell never considered herself a huge success. Of O'Donnell's seventeen films, all in starring/featured roles, seven are classic film-noir, making her a major contributor to that genre. Ann Steely's journey from Oklahoma City to Hollywood was the stuff of which dreams are made.