The Den of Geek interview: Margaret Nolan

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From glamour model to Bond girl, *Carry On* siren and political activist, Margaret Nolan worked with the very best in British show business to beone of the most ubiquitous and iconic faces of TV and film in the 1960s and 70s.

It is her gold-painted body in the famous title sequence to *Goldfinger* – in which she also appears as 'Dink' – , but she is perhaps more popularly remembered in the UK as the most glamorous addition to six of the *Carry On* comedy films.

Not having done an interview for nearly thirty years – twenty of which she has spent in seclusion in the Spanish countryside bringing up her family and developing photomontages which are now on sale at her new official website (see below)- Margaret was kind enough to have a chat with Den Of Geek this week…

You haven't done an interview for a very long time…

I've been out of the business for years – absolutely years. I went and lived in the mountains in Spain. In 1990 I bought my house, and that's it –I've been up there. I only came back this year, actually.

Did you enjoy the ex-pat life?

It's nothing to do with ex-pat, really – I know what you're saying, but it's nothing to do with that. I lived in a self-sufficient farmhouse in the middle ofnowhere. It was nothing to do with the Costa Del Sol. It was to do with my passion, which is Permaculture. What's that?

Look it up.

(I did).

Your apparent disappearance caused increased interest in you and your icon-status…

Yeah. It's amazing!

Were you asked to do commentaries and interviews, what with the resurgent interest in Carry On?

Not at all. I didn't even have a computer, so I haven't known until recently what's been going on at all. I maintained getting fan letters, right up untiltoday, and I'm afraid I really haven't done anything with them,

but the plan is to put them all on a database, and let them all know via my website,but they might find out anyway, you know?

Where did they write to that the letters actually reached you?

To the BBC. Either there or Equity.

When you were living what – on the face of it – sounds like quite a solitary existence, is that when you developed the interest in creatingphotomontages?

Well that's been only in the last five years, but yes, exactly.

There's a very clear recognition of your own iconic status in your montages. Are you relatively comfortable with that very sexy imagethat you're best known for?

Absolutely, because I do sort of take the piss out of it as well. It's deeper than that, though – the [John Berger] quote that I use on the website isreally what I feel about them too. I really think it says it all. When I actually had my exhibition in Spain, I was looking to find something to put in thecatalogue. I was trying to come up with something myself, and then I came across the quote, and that says very distinctly what I wanted to say.

When I went to the mountains I took everything with me – because I left London completely – including all my photos. As an actress, you send outportraits. I know it's all different now, but in those days my husband used to come in and say 'How many letters have you written today, then?'. Itwas much easier in a way to get work; I'd send off a photo, perhaps three or four –wonderful eight by ten portraits – with a letter, and I'd get work!And from that work came more work and more work, and I just didn't stop at all.

So when I arrived in Spain and eventually got round to going through all my photo stuff, wanting to throw everything away really, I just looked atthem and thought that they're too good to throw away. Some of them were by very famous photographers. Because I had lots of copies of some ofthem, about half a dozen or so, I started cutting them up. I only used the photos that were relevant in the photomontages. I didn't go to any othersource at all, so they were all made up of just these half a dozen or so photographs, so that if I didn't have enough 'hair', that would be the end ofthe hair – but as it happens, because of the fashion at the time, there was hair everywhere! And it's gone back to that now.

My favourite is actually the one with just the hair, called 'Fallen Dreams'.

There is a wonderful sense of space but consequently also a sense of isolation in your montages.

They're very lonely. And there's this kind of passive 'look', which is part of what it was like in the sixties. If you look back on all the photos, even themodel ones of people like Jean Shrimpton, there's this passive…we weren't allowed to have an expression on our face. The idea was really to justlook beautiful…and passive, the way men liked you to look.

And I hope that comes out in the montages; that's why I made some of them quite grotesque, really…the idea that I was there as this passivewoman, being looked at, but behind it all, behind my eyes, of course I knew what was going on. Hopefully that comes out in the material, that I'mlooking at you looking at me – that I'm acting coy but I know what it's all about! So a lot of them are very sexually explicit as well.

So thanks for appreciating them – I'm really happy about them. I've just shown them to somebody and they just adored them, and I've got anexhibition coming up, at this gorgeous posh little café quite near me. The thing is, I didn't want to show the originals because they're a bit full-on,and some of them are quite big, and they're quite precious too, so I've been very busy trying to get decent prints made of them. Hopefully next week they'll be hanging. I love being an artist – I feel much more in control of my life.

Perhaps you were custodian of the same 'unreal' image in the montages even when you were in your twenties and nearest to it…?

Yes!

Did you feel that 'disconnect' back then?

Yes, part of me was living behind this screen of men's expectations and the idea that if you're a pretty girl, this is the sort of category they put youin. And it was also to do with me not being very secure in myself in those days, and it's only now that I feel much more assertive and secure that Ican look back and say how awful some of it was, in a way, this passive stuff that went on.

Was Spain a refuge from all that attention?

I think it probably was. I had wind of the internet and it worried me, and I thought 'Oh God', it'll have all my pictures up', and of course as soon as ithappened, people told me they were up there – nothing about my acting career but all these bloody pictures! I only modelled for about a year. Andthat's it, that's what mainly comes up but I understand. Now it's much easier to say it's all okay and it's all in the past.

People do it a lot more now. I suppose I felt at the time that it was a bit risqué, but I never thought that anything would ever happen to any of them[*LAUGHS*].

The theatrical work you're most proud of is very hard to record in the same way.

Exactly.

So inevitably you're going to be recalled for your work in the Carry Ons and Bond, and all the wonderful appearances in programmeslike Steptoe & Son…

The ones that come up on telly, yeah. Not very many of those either – apparently the BBC has lost or deleted loads and loads of the stuff. All theMilligan stuff has gone.

That's terrible!

I know, I know, all gone. It was such good fun. Most of the comedy has gone, I think, and lots of the plays, the thirty minute theatre…I was a reallyserious actress, because I was married to a very serious actor, and I just managed to get lots of really good parts, but [*LAUGHS*] all I can do is tellyou about them! Actually, I have got some photos.

Though you wanted to move on from the lighter film roles to weightier stuff, the photographer Roger Davis once said that your attractivephysique held you back from better roles very often…?

Yes, I'm sure that's true, but it did change. With a film I made in France, for instance, a role that wasn't even described as being attractiveparticularly in the script, which was how the continental people approached attractive women – they were just women. Whereas in England theywould always be described either as a dumb blonde or a nice bit of fluff. Not always though. Some of the plays that I did like Armchair Theatre,those kind of thing, the roles were just women, girls, you know. Also I ended up doing things like Fox, I don't know if you remember that series…?Iremember it being on.

I played the wife of one of the sons, and that was a lovely part. In Knife Edge I just played a mum whose child was being threatened…

You did Armchair Theatre live, didn't you?

That was *Thirty Minute Theatre*, if I remember rightly. And the series *The Newcomers* also went out live.

Live TV seems unimaginably intimidating..?

I know, it was strange. I didn't mind it, because I liked doing theatre anyway. It's scary but if you really focus, you're away. And It's a very nicefeeling that it's going out live, actually. I've done interviews on television and everything, and it never bothered me.

The Carry On films seem to be rising in cult status every year. Is it a millstone or a boon for you?

It doesn't bother me at all, except that I want nothing to do with them. Absolutely nothing. I don't even acknowledge…you know, there are peoplethat have been writing to me over the years to put this in their book and that…they were such bastards, the *Carry On* people. They became multi-millionaires, both of them, Gerald Thomas the director and Peter Rogers the producer. The last time I saw them was the very last thing I did atPinewood, where they acknowledged me; they were dripping with gold, and I thought 'You bastards'…I've got stories about the*Carry On* films thatyou just would not believe…

The most anybody ever earned on a *Carry On* film was Sid James. Do you know how much that was?

No…?

Five grand. They were low budget films and we worked really hard in them. Most of the comedy was improvisation, the way we did it, and theyhave become multi-millionaires on compiling videos out of them, by selling them as videos and selling them to every single television channel inthe world.

We could never get any royalties, because the deal was done in the days before films were shown on television, before videos even wereinvented. Equity and so many of the actors – most of whom have died now, the people who were keen on getting something done, like BernardBresslaw and Sidney James – we just couldn't get anywhere, they were not interested in even just listening. Equity went to see them and they told them to fuck off.

And I've got another story for you. Charles Hawtrey, the very skinny one with the glasses – oh! Such an amazing character, he was dying ofpoverty, and Equity went on his behalf to ask for some money in lieu of royalties so that they could pay for nursing, and he was told to fuck off out of the studios. The guy told me that in the Equity office, he said there's no point even trying.

If I had the energy I could pursue it, because somebody just recently has won a court case; it's always to do with precedent, and on having thecontract revoked because it was signed in a day when these showings didn't happen. But you just need the energy, and I don't know if I have it.

But it's appalling to consider how popular they became and that no deal was made with the actors at all – so I don't want anything to do with the*Carry On* stuff. They were good fun though, and I loved doing them.Was it 'light relief' to be involved with them?

Yes! In a way…I had done quite heavy theatre up till then, and then I suddenly got into comedy. I'm not quite sure how it started, it could havebeen at the BBC – yes, I think it probably was, and then I did all these Brian Rix farces and in a way it was like a breath of fresh air.

Comedy is quite different to anything else – the most important thing is getting a laugh, and it's a technical skill. You can easily kill a laugh bycoming in too soon or with a different expression, so in a way it's much harder work than drama, because with drama you just get into the script and that's it! And the more you're into the script, the more convincing you'll be.

Can you tell us something about the trouble over your political activity, in the 1970s?Just after the Paris uprising my husband was veryinvolved in working with Peter Brook, a revolutionary theatre director, and they were all in Paris at the time. I remember getting a phone call frommy husband, from the Odeón, which is the theatre all the actors had occupied at the time, and he was saying that they were picking up thecobblestones and throwing them….oh, it was an incredible time!

Anyway they were all sent back, and after ‘68 a lot of people who were concerned, you know, left-wing people got together at various directors’ andproducers’ houses and we eventually formed an organisation that put on plays and theatre, to do with people’s histories, for the Young Socialists,and I got very involved in that. That was very unpopular at the time, I remember some of the vibes I got. I was really concerned with that, more onthe production than acting side of putting on concerts and so on. I think it did piss a lot of people off; I don’t care now, but it did at the time, and Ithink it had a negative effect on my career, definitely. I would have been on a ‘list’ for sure.In the sixties and entering the seventies, there wassuch a radical air in art and theatre, and there was the sense that art could really make a difference to culture….

Definitely there was.

Do you think that’s rather missing now?

Yes. I think it’s there, but it’s got to be eked out. It’s still there definitely in some of the satire you see and some of the stand-up stuff, but in a way itwas more mainstream with us; we were doing much more plays and much more political stuff on television too. It’s still there, but it’s in a differentform now; it’s not so ‘in your face’; there’s been a clamp.

Are you interested in returning to acting?

Funny enough I have been offered a part. It would be extraordinary if it all happened at the same time – me coming back, the website, the art, andnow I’ve been offered a bloody part in a film! And it’s based on me as a character [*LAUGHS*].

Wow!

It’s extraordinary. I was a bit shocked when I read it but I think I will do it just for the fun of it really, because I like the woman director. I’ll let youknow at a later stage. So there’s me as a character who disappeared into the mountains in Spain, but the character in the film doesn’t disappear,

she stays on, so by the time the script was written, she’s a Dame [*LAUGHS*]! So she’s referred to as ‘Dame Margaret Nolan’.

It’s a film within a film; they’re trying to get her to do this low budget film about feisty women, and she comes back and does it [*LAUGHS*]. It’s ascream! I’ll let you know more about it later.

Did it really take four months to film the Goldfinger title sequence?

The photography? Oh no! No, it took a while though. I earned so much money – I’d never earned so much money in my life. It probably took two orthree weeks. I was going to be the *Goldfinger* girl, so I did everything – the record cover, the book cover…then, when I pulled out of that, there wasa lot of confusion as well.

Was that the two-year promotion deal that you turned down?

Yeah. So they were quite pissed off because they’d already spent loads of money on me. It was because of what was going on politically at thetime, and I wanted to do more serious stuff and be taken as a serious actress. Also my husband didn’t want me to go away for two years as well; itmeant touring the world.

So I turned it down, and it was so funny because [*LAUGHS*] as I say, I’ve never been able to live it down anyway! In a way, I might as well justhave done it. But I’d probably have ended up marrying some awful big American movie guy and have been pissed off. I’ve had a more interestinglife, probably!

Did you enjoy working with Sean Connery?

Yes I did, though I didn't spend a lot of time with him.

Is he the sexiest Bond?

He's lovely. I loved Sean Connery. He was actually more interested in my sister, who's very much his type. I have a non-identical twin sister, butshe's quite petite with red hair, and she looks a bit like Diane Cilento, so he obviously likes these quite petite, high-cheekboned women. Iremember he was very keen to dance with her! But no, he was nice – he used to give me a lift home in his Rolls Royce.

Could I ask you about the '□' series? Particularly as it's – appallingly – been wiped. What was it like working with Spike Milligan forseven series?Oh I loved Spike Milligan, he was Godfather to one of my sons. He was adorable, as nutty as a fruitcake. We used to have a greattime. He used to take me to all these wonderful jazz clubs, and we became quite good friends, actually, despite the fact that I had boyfriends. Itwasn't that kind of thing with Spike, but it was a really close friendship, and he was very very fond of me.

But then it kind of ended on a rather sour note because he asked me back to do a series, and wanted me to do more pin-uppey sort of stuff in it,and I just didn't know where he was coming from and I think – this is what other people have said as well – that he did lapse back into a kind ofmore conservative thing as he got older. And then he had this woman with him with enormous tits, like I used to have, I suppose, but even bigger. Isaid to him 'What's going on here?', and he said 'Well, that's just the way it is', so I kind of lost touch with him then over that.Did working withsome of the great actors such as Anthony Hopkins help you develop as an actress?

Yes, he was another actor who came up to me after we'd worked together and said 'I think you're a very very good actress'. It was so wonderful. I'llnever forget that. Him and the old guy, Andrew Cruikshank, remember him…?I know the name…

He used to be Doctor Finlay. I did a *Crown Court* with him. I did a couple of those, in fact; they were wonderful parts, really completely different toanything else I've done. I did quite a few of these women that were either harassed or working-class women…I loved all that. And I remember himwalking up to me, the whole length of the station where we filming, to say 'I just want to let you know…' – because I didn't really have an awful lotof confidence, I hadn't been to drama school or anything; I was learning as I went along, but I had a feel for it definitely.

There's surely a market for your autobiography. Can we expect that in the near future?

I've thought about it. I will when I get round to it, one day!

Very many thanks to Margaret for being so generous with her time. Her photomontage work can be bought at her official website atwww.margaretnolan.co.uk