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Tom Poston, Virtuoso Comic Actor, Is Dead at 85

By [MARGALIT FOX](#)

Tom Poston, an Emmy-winning comic actor whose television characters ranged from the slow-witted Everyman on "The Steve Allen Show" to a cantankerous closet-dwelling clown on the recent sitcom "Committed," died on Monday at his home in Los Angeles. He was 85.

Mr. Poston died after a short illness, his wife, the actress Suzanne Pleshette, said.

A long-faced, buggy-eyed second banana, Mr. Poston was for a half-century a Paganini of the bewildered, the benighted and the befuddled. His best-known television roles include George Utley, the sublimely incompetent handyman on "Newhart"; Mr. Bickley, the troublesome neighbor on "Mork & Mindy"; and Cliff Murdock, Mr. Newhart's doltish college chum on the original "Bob Newhart Show."

Mr. Poston appeared on Broadway and in films, among them "Christmas With the Kranks" (2004); "The Princess Diaries 2" (2004); and "Cold Turkey" (1971). He was also, variously, a pilot, an amateur boxer, a tumbler with the Flying Zebleys, an aspiring chemist and a panelist on the game show "To Tell the Truth."

It seemed Mr. Poston would do anything for a part. For his first Broadway appearance -- a tiny role in a 1946 production of "Cyrano de Bergerac," the audition consisted of falling off a parapet onto his head, as the character did. Mr. Poston and his head withstood the test admirably.

Six decades later, Mr. Poston tried out for "Committed," broadcast on NBC in 2005. His character, a surly, dying clown known simply as Clown, lives out his days in the closet of one of the show's main characters. (Clown came with the apartment.)

The audition required aspirants to pull down their pants, as called for in the script. Most actors did so only in pantomime. Mr. Poston complied in full, with electrifying results.

"He dropped his trousers and had on these gold lamé boxer shorts," Eileen Heisler, an executive producer of the show, told The Associated Press in 2005.

Whether Mr. Poston had been tipped off about what the audition would entail is unrecorded.

Thomas Gordon Poston was born in Columbus, Ohio. As a boy, he wanted to be a prize fighter, and as a young man he boxed in several hundred amateur fights. He also learned tumbling, performing with the Zebleys as a child. In the late 1930s, he enrolled at Bethany College in West Virginia, where he studied chemistry.

His studies were interrupted by World War II, in which he served as a pilot with the Army Air Corps in Europe. After the war he moved to New York and trained at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Mr. Poston's Broadway appearances include "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter" (1955); "Mary, Mary" (1961); and the 1972 revival of "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." In 1959, starring on Broadway in "Golden Fleece," Mr. Poston met Ms. Pleshette. The two began a romance, though they later married others.

In early television Mr. Poston was the host of "Entertainment" (1955), a 2 1/2-hour, five-day-a-week live variety show on ABC.

"I once timed it and I ad-libbed 35, 36 minutes a day," he told The Associated Press in 2005. "You can imagine how clever that was. It was filled with, 'Wasn't that wonderful!' 'Yes, that was wonderful!' 'Isn't that wonderful!' "

But Mr. Poston's ability to think on his feet earned him a regular role on Mr. Allen's show. There, in the company of Don Knotts and Louis Nye, he played a roster of supporting characters, chief among them Everyman, who is rendered dazed and speechless whenever he is asked a question in the show's "Man on the Street" segments. (A typical question: "What's your name?")

For his work on the Allen show, Mr. Poston won an Emmy in 1959.

Mr. Poston was married four times, to three women. His first marriage, to Jean Sullivan, ended in divorce, as did his second, to Kay Hudson. He and Ms. Hudson later remarried; the marriage lasted until her death in 1998. He married Ms. Pleshette in 2001.

Besides Ms. Pleshette, Mr. Poston is survived by a daughter from his first marriage, Francesca Poston of Nashville; two children from his marriage to Ms. Hudson, a son, Jason Poston of Los Angeles, and a daughter, Hudson Poston of Portland, Ore.; and a sister, Rosalie Cassou, of Fredericksburg, Va.

Before she married Mr. Poston, Ms. Pleshette laid down one ironclad condition: she wanted "a big rock," she said in a telephone interview yesterday.

So Mr. Poston gave her exactly that. A piece of unpolished granite the size of a large marble, it was culled from the gravel in his driveway. He had it put in a platinum setting.

The rock worked like a charm, Ms. Pleshette said. She added: "Of course, he later was taught the pleasures of diamonds."

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