

Mary Steenburgen

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Miss Firecracker, where I played a vain bitch. So that part of it—playing someone who's not likeable—was not a problem for me. I'm actually eager to do that more and more in my career. While I have mainly eluded being typecast in my career, if I have been at all, it would be that I've played more likeable people than people like the *Miss Firecracker* character. I adored her, but, you know, one does not aspire to be like her.

That wasn't a problem. The problem was just literally that it was AIDS. That was the hard part for me—trying to go up against somebody who had it.

BRENT: It seems like one of the things the film has going for it is that it has very likable actors, such as yourself, and Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, that can draw in an audience and make AIDS accessible to people who don't understand.

MARY: Thank God Tom Hanks is the person who played that part. He's stunning. He's incredible. In fact, he was so incredible that I sometimes got so mesmerized by what he was doing, I forgot I was working, I'm ashamed to say...

There are some people that are literally going to protest the fact that a straight actor played a gay part, but the fact is I don't know who you would have found who would have been any more respectful of this material than Tom Hanks, and who would have done a better job. Tom is familiar and likable and easy and accessible, and since that is the experience of so many of us with our gay friends, it was wonderful to use him, instead of someone who was more aloof or harder to relate to.

BRENT: A lot of your films haven't been big box office hits. Does that discourage you?

MARY: No.

BRENT: That's not something you consider when—?

MARY: Well, sure, I consider it, but I can't make people go to the movie. All I can do is do my best work, which I always try to do. I've never phoned in a day or an hour of my work, ever. I really care about it. That's not to say that I don't help to promote movies, because I do, but ultimately, it's almost serendipitous in the end. You do as much as you can do, and then you have to leave it to

someone else. If I got eaten up by that, I think it would probably restrict the work that follows it. I'm very protective of my working self. I just don't let things like that bother me.

It's been really nice that some of my less successful films have been loved in video. *Cross Creek* is really a film that eventually people really saw. *Miss Firecracker* has its own funny little cult. Certainly I would love for a million—millions of—people to go see these films, but when a film comes out it's either *Parenthood* or *Back to the Future III*, and everyone goes and it's fantastic and great, or it's *Miss Firecracker*, which I loved and had an amazing experience doing, and you mourn it and you go on. You just have to do that.

BRENT: Recently, Susan Sarandon said, "In Hollywood, they nominate an actress for playing an activist, but ban her for being one." You have a reputation for being an activist. Do you agree with Susan?

MARY: I'm a funny activist in that I do a lot of my work quietly. I worked for two hours this morning on political activism issues, but no one knows it. I don't do it to get my picture in the paper—I'm not saying most people do it for that, although some do. The work that I do is mainly work I started before I ever became an actress, and it's a continuation of that work. [She laughs.] I'm probably more involved than you could ever guess, but for me part of the pleasure of it is not making a big deal out of it.

BRENT: So you find that it hasn't really negatively affected your career?

MARY: I don't think so. I've been criticized, and I've taken very unpopular stands. I mean, I went on television last February to support Bill and Hillary Clinton when nobody would go near them with a barge pole.

That wasn't a fun time to be their friend, but I am their friend, and she's one of my closest friends, and they needed me. When I did that, there were a lot of people who thought I was nuts, and a lot of people had a lot of negative things to say about them to me. Of course, some of those same people were inviting me to cocktail parties honoring them within a few months. If you care about that stuff, you only have to wait a couple of months and it swings a different way. You have to—it's a terrible cliché—but to thine own self be true.



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