

The artful life of Billy Dee Williams

Actor returns to first love, painting

By Joan McKenna
Scottsdale Life Editor

“Would breakfast with Billy Dee be all right?” the publicist asked.

Billy Dee Williams was flying into town early for the opening of his first Scottsdale art exhibition and could talk in the morning.

The expectation was for a swashbuckling Lando Calrissian, the character he played in the second and third *Star Wars* movies, to sweep into the dining room and order something flashy.

Instead, a figure closer to Obi Wan Kenobi arrived — a quiet, introspective, thought-provoking 54-year-old, who worked his way through a plate of eggs benedict as he talked of his new focus on painting.

“For me, painting is like coming full circle,” he said. “I

PAINTINGS

by Billy Dee Williams

When: Through Dec. 22

Where: The Masterpiece Collection Ltd., Scottsdale Galleria, 4343 N. Scottsdale Road.

Information: 949-3388

started this way and I think I'll spend my remaining years painting.

“I procrastinated doing it for a long time. Then something happened 2½ years ago. I was at a crossroads, as they say. I had to make a decision to move on. I needed something else in my life, to express myself without a committee. I needed to find out if I could create an impact without the help of a director and writers.”

Indeed, his turn for the artistic is more of a return. He's been drawing for as long as he can remember and spent many an hour in elementary school doing comic strips.

“I was always one of those kids that was very observant, always somehow standing outside the situation observing,” he said.

He grew up in Harlem with parents who actively encouraged their children's artistic sides. His twin sister, Loretta, also is an accomplished painter.

His painting skills were developed while attending the High School of Music and Art in New York City. He received numerous honors for his work,

including two coveted art scholarships in 1955 — the Guggenheim and the Hallgarten Award to New York's National Academy of Fine Arts and Design, where he studied for the next two years.

Acting was always a bit of coincidence for Billy Dee. His mother was an aspiring opera singer who perhaps would have made a big name for herself if not for her devotion to her children, he said.

By association, Billy Dee spent his early years meeting such legends as Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. He made his own Broadway debut at age 6½ in *The Firebrand of Florence*.

His first attempt to get TV work came from a need for money to buy paint and canvas.

“I find myself in these places,” he said. “I'm not necessarily looking for them.”

He went on to rack up such film credits as *Lady Sings the Blues* and *Brian's Song* before landing the Calrissian role in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Then it was back to Broadway for August Wilson's hit *Fences* in 1988.

Despite all the success, the fans, the head-swelling effect of women fainting at his touch, he said he's always been searching for something real, some reason for being.

“When one dies, I think the idea is to release yourself from this phase and move on to a different level. I believe there's got to be more to this to life, cause if this is it, it's a very bad joke. I think of this as a living experience. Your mind moves on.”

And consequently, one leaves things behind. For Billy Dee, that's his work — “something enduring, a legacy.”

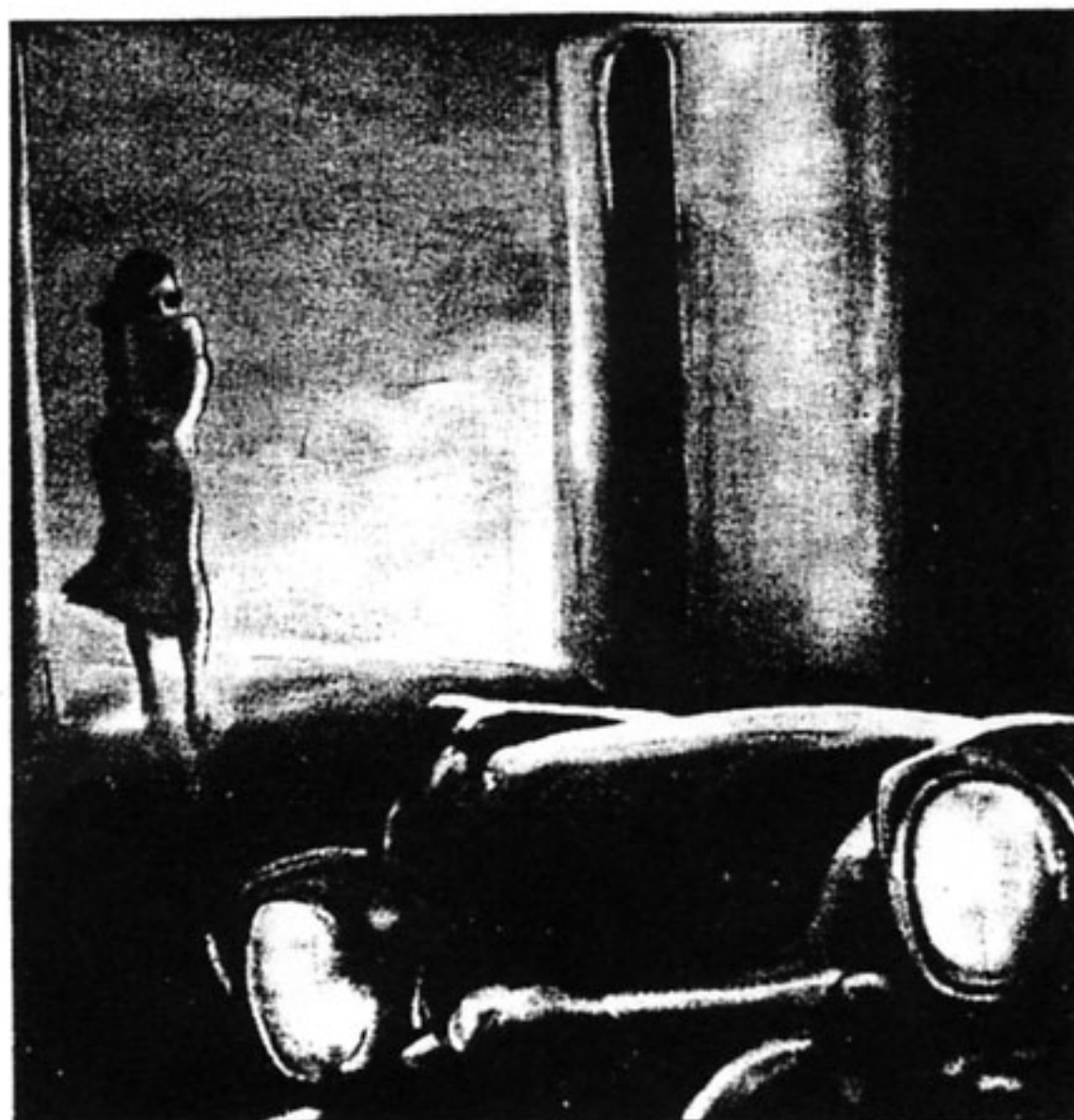
“We each have a finite tenure on this earth and what we choose to do with it affects the next generation. Inasmuch as painting fulfills my need to make strong statements about what I've experienced, I hope the ideas expressed can serve as a springboard for the development of (that next generation's) ideas.”

Each night, Billy Dee withdraws into his own world to paint. He begins at 8 p.m. and often goes 'til 6 the next morning. That schedule holds even while he's on acting assignments, such as his most recent film in Toronto. He sleeps four or five hours during the day.

“I can't seem to go to bed without picking up a brush,” he said.



Isolated Moment, acrylic on canvas.



Girl Waiting for Her Lover in a '58 Buick.

At the suggestion that it sounded more compulsive than fun, he said: “I have to keep busy. I can't stand not to be busy.”

The only difficulty seems to be in getting people to take him seriously.

“As an actor, when I say to people that I paint, they say, ‘Oh yeah, a lot of you paint.’ But when they come to see my work, they're totally amazed.”

“I do this very seriously. I am a painter. I understand about painting. I understand drama. I know how to interpret drama. It's interesting stuff.”

One of the biggest skeptics at first was his Scottsdale gallery representative, Mindi Shapiro Gutman, who recently opened The Masterpiece Collection Ltd. at the Scottsdale Galleria. She



Billy Dee Williams, artist

said she only went to see his work after being talked into it.

“I thought: ‘Oh wow, another

actor,’ she said. “I wound up spending about 4½ hours looking at his work and walked away kind of in awe.”

Mindi moved to Los Angeles a year ago from New York and then to Scottsdale in October to start the gallery with her brother, Mark Shapiro.

Billy Dee's show, which runs through Dec. 22, was part of their private grand opening Saturday. It includes 35 of the artist's large-format pieces, which range in price from \$5,000 to \$35,000.

Billy Dee describes his paintings as abstractions of reality, images that bridge the world of the here and now with the invisible one of feelings and imagination.

His current preference is for acrylics, which he applies with both airbrush and paintbrush. but he's also worked in oils. His palette is cool, misty, moody, but he wonders if that's not just a result of his night-time painting hours.

In the future, he'd like to do murals, paint in brighter colors and branch out from the United States, putting his art in Europe and Japan. He also would like to get back to his comic strips, working large on canvas. Humor is a large part of his work.

“I'm real big on dealing with absurdity, just things that go on in living experiences.”

So how does he want to be remembered when he's gone: as the artist or the actor?

“As a good father,” he said.

He has a 31-year-old son and 18-year-old daughter. He always kept his son in private school in New York despite the cost and when he moved to California, settled in Beverly Hills — something he wouldn't admit for years — so his daughter could have the best in California schools.

“I wanted them surrounded by people that could stimulate their minds. I had a very special childhood,” he said, attributing it to his parents and grandparents. His family comes from a relatively prominent background in the British West Indies and his grandfather was a shoemaker by trade when he came to America. Because of that status, “he escaped the experience of the American blacks and was left alone to be productive,” Billy Dee said.

His own father worked three jobs most of his life to support the family. His mother not only sang, but was a writer and is doing a book about the family.

“My family is very prideful. Everyone always supported each other. That's why family is so important to me. When you have that kind of support, a child feels as if he belongs to something. It gives him strength.”

“These are things I try to talk about in my paintings — for example, I remember as a child walking down the street holding my father's big hand — situations you recognize.” □