

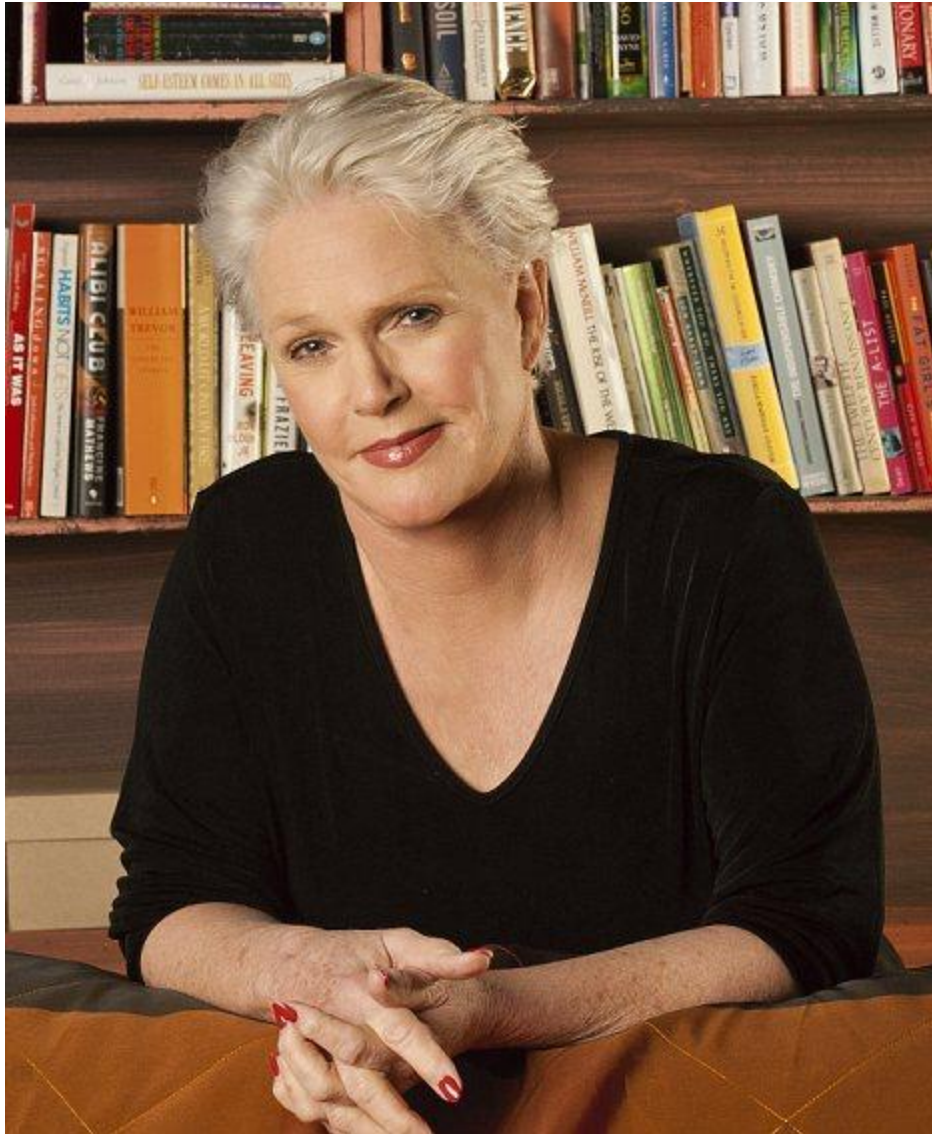
Cagney gets racy: Sharon Gless is back... stripping off on stage as a 60-something sexpot

By [Nicole Lampert](#)

Sharon Gless can still remember the day she first felt invisible.

Struggling with the menopause, out of work and several stone heavier than normal, the actress who found fame in Cagney & Lacey picked up a self-help book.

It was the worst thing she could have done.



Comeback: Sharon Gless is appearing in a new play, *A Round-Heeled Woman*

‘ I opened the book and someone had written: “ No one notices me any more,” and I remember being so depressed after that,’ she recalls.

‘ Until then I wasn’ t aware whether people noticed me or not, but I did notice after that. Nobody ever saw me.’

It is hard to imagine. At 68 Sharon is still stunning; her white-blond hair tied back from her face serves only to accentuate the cheekbones which made her an Eighties pin-up.

Her agent teases that the taxi driver was checking her out. ‘ Get out of here!’ giggles Sharon. ‘ I was just trying to get him to smile —he was so miserable.’

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But while Sgt Christine Cagney —the character Sharon is still best known for — may have been tough-talking and ultra-confident, the actress who played her is anything but.

‘ I’ ve always been shy,’ she says, ‘ and a big part of acting is getting to dress up and pretend that you are somebody else.

‘ As an actress I’ ll do anything —go naked if I have to. But I have never felt confident in myself. My weight has always been an issue for me. But I don’ t think it’ s about age, it’ s about attitude.

‘ Helen Mirren has it. It’ s not cockiness —she’ s just so sexy. So are Judi Dench and Julie Walters. They have a confidence; they have lived.

‘ I’ d like to have that attitude. I fantasise that if I really lost weight, cleaned myself up and got an attitude, then people would look at me again.’



Heyday: Sharon starred with Tyne Daly in 80s smash *Cagney & Lacey*

For someone so shy, her latest venture could not be more of a challenge.

A stage play of the book *A Round-Heeled Woman*, it is based on the real-life tale of divorced English teacher Jane Juska who, at 66, posted an advert in the *New York Review of Books* which said: ‘ Before I turn 67 —next March —I would like to have a lot of sex with a man I like. If you want to talk first, Trollope works for me.’

What ensued was plenty of sex as well as the revival of ghosts from Jane’s past. For the role, Sharon has to strip to her underwear. That is very scary,’ she admits. ‘ As it is, I get stage fright.

‘ The first three minutes are petrifying and then I know I can get through it. I’ m 68 years old and I have the body to prove it. I hate my arms, my fat is hanging out.

‘ The first time I did the scene I was crying. The director told me: “ You’ ve got to give other women out there courage; this is what it looks like.” As I fought back tears I sobbed: □ OK.□ □

So why do it? ‘ I love this woman,’ says Sharon. ‘ She had this passion. She was so brave. There are so many women out there who are ignored. Jane’ s story has already given so many of them hope.’

Putting the play together has been a labour of love for Sharon who bought the rights to the story soon after a furious row with her husband, former Cagney & Lacey producer Barney Rosenzweig.



Tough: But Sharon's on-screen persona masked a shy demeanour

‘ I’ ve been married for 20 years now, but ten years ago it was a little rocky,’ she recalls. ‘ He and I had this huge fight and he stormed off to his office.

‘ About an hour later he came back into the kitchen with this New York Times article about Jane Juska, threw it on my desk and snarled: “ If you had any balls you’ d go after that.”

‘ I was so angry that the next day I phoned my lawyer and said: “ Get me that!” I hadn’ t even read it, but when I did, it was so fascinating.

‘ When she posted the advert she thought it was just about sex, but then ghosts came up; she reconciled with her son after 15 years of not talking, and other male figures came back into her life. I’ m not sure I would have had the nerve to do what she did —but then, I don’ t think I have the libido either. That’ s not who I am.

‘ It’ s been a while, but my husband has just started to call me sexy again. I’ m over the menopause, but it was difficult —no fun in our house at all.’

Born into a Hollywood family (her grandfather was lawyer for Howard Hughes and his retinue of actors), Sharon was one of the last to be signed up to the studio contract system at Universal.

She had a string of small roles but television was to be the place where she found real success. With Tyne Daly as her co-star, Cagney & Lacey soon attracted an audience of more than 50 million. In the six years it was on television no other actress got a look-in at the Emmys.

But then Sharon began an affair with the show’ s married producer Barney.

The fallout from that, and the stress of being on the biggest show on television soon took its toll as she turned increasingly to alcohol.

Her own dependence on drink was mirrored in a storyline which saw her character hit the bottle following the death of her father. As soon as Cagney & Lacey finished, Sharon went to rehab and has been clean ever since.

She remains extremely close to Tyne; tears spring to her eyes when she talks about her pride in her friend. ‘ She’ s starring on Broadway to rave reviews,’ says Sharon. ‘ She’ s a wonderful actress. We talk often.’

There’ s still a huge affection for the show —there have been three television movies and Barney is planning a fourth with the two older cops helping Cagney’ s niece.

Sharon admits she went through a five-year drought of not working. ‘ That is when I went through the menopause, gave up smoking and weighed 14st,’ she says. ‘ I still did a bit of theatre, but that’ s when I moved from leading lady to character roles.

‘ Ageism is a huge problem in America, so believe me when I say I am filled with gratitude every day that I work.’

She doesn’ t have children —never wanted them —and could easily be at home now, retired and living in her Miami beach house. But she says her main joy still derives from working.

With that, she gives me a big hug and whispers in my ear: ‘ Please don’ t make me sound stupid.’

You’ re not, Sharon. Not at all.

A Round-Heeled Woman is at the Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, from October 18 to November 20. Box office: 020 8237 1111, www.aroundheeledwoman.com

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