

# Gold Circle's Lucille Bliss Passes at 96



By Mike Anton, Los Angeles Times

Gold & Silver Circle member **Lucille Bliss**, who provided the voice of the cartoon character *Crusader Rabbit* in the early days of television and gained recognition a generation later as the voice of Smurfette in the 1980s television hit *The Smurfs*, has died. She was 96.

Bliss died Nov. 8 from natural causes at an assisted living center in Costa Mesa, according to the Orange County coroner.

Bliss parlayed a childhood love of radio theater into a career as an animation voice actress that stretched more than 60 years. She was working as recently as last month.

"Actors from her generation who came up in live radio, you'd do one or two takes with Lucille and she'd just nail it," said **David Scheve**, who owns TDA Animation and worked with Bliss. "She could do three or four characters in one [scene] and you'd never know they were all her. She was terrific."

Bliss found steady work in film and television throughout her career. She gave voice to the step-sister Anastasia in Disney's 1950 film *Cinderella*, and was the original Elroy in the 1960s television hit *The Jetsons*.

Through the decades, Bliss' elastic voice fleshed out characters in a wide range of projects – from *The Flintstones* to animated *Star Wars* spinoffs and video games.

But Bliss' groundbreaking role was in the original *Crusader Rabbit*, the first animated series produced specifically for television. Its first incarnation ran on NBC from 1950 to 1952 and was co-created by **Jay Ward**, who went on to produce such notable franchises as *Rocky and Bullwinkle* and *Dudley Do-Right*.

"She was a pioneer in television animation," said **Charles Solomon**, an author and animation historian. *Crusader Rabbit* "really set a pattern for a lot of future shows – the smart little character and the big dumb sidekick."

Lucille Bliss was born March 31, 1916, in New York City to **Frieda Siemens**, a classically trained pianist, and **James Francis Bliss**. After James died in 1928, Frieda and Lucille moved to San Francisco to be near relatives.

Her mother wanted Bliss to train as an opera singer. But Bliss pursued acting instead, taking lessons and landing parts on radio dramas in the Bay Area.

Bliss realized that to break into the big time she had to move to Los Angeles. She heard that Walt Disney was auditioning for the movie *Cinderella* and borrowed \$50 to make the trip south.

"Six months later I got a phone call" and was offered a role, she recalled years later. "I almost dropped the phone. I was delirious. That is the way it all began."

Throughout her career, Bliss was met with plenty of rejection. She lost her job as Elroy Jetson, she told interviewers, when she wouldn't work under a stage name that would hide the fact that she was a grown woman playing a little boy, which is a common scenario in cartoons.

"Life as a voice actress is tough," she once said. "It's not an easy career."

But she persevered and continued to study her craft late into life, taking acting classes with aspiring artists a fraction of her age.

"I'm an actress specializing in voices," Bliss once told a writer. "I don't like the term 'voice-over.' You have to be an actor first, and then the voice. You have to take acting lessons to learn how to act before you can speak."

She was a member of the *Broadcast Legends*, *Silver Circle* class of 1989 and *Gold Circle* class of 2002.

