

# 'Dinner at Five' a family affair for Kathy Garver

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Kathy Garver, best known as Cissy on *Family Affair*, co-stars in *Dinner at Five* at PACE center in Parker with several other stars of classic television. Courtesy of Fivers Inc.

## *Play starring classic-TV stars to premier in Parker*

**BY PETER JONES**

NEWS EDITOR

Kathy Garver has gotten used to playing characters a little younger than herself.

At 18 years old and 5 foot 1, she played a 12-year-old on *Death Valley Days*. Her portrayal was so convincing, she was soon cast as 15-year-old Cissy Davis on *Family Affair*.

"I usually say I'm 18," she recalled, slyly, of her first conversation with the casting director. "I may have been a little older—or not. I told the producers I was 18 and they bought it, which was good. They wanted somebody at least 18 because of the hours they could work."

Flash forward 50 years: Garver is still playing young, sort of.

In her new play, *Dinner at Five*, the 71-year-old actress portrays a woman in her 60s—though this reporter thinks she could easily play 58.

“Ha, oh, you flatterer,” she said. “I could! That baby face, as you say.”

Theater goers will have a chance to judge for themselves, Nov. 14-19, at the PACE center in Parker when *Dinner at Five* sees its world premiere in south metro Denver.

It is no accident of casting that Garver co-stars in the production. Written by television writer/producer Lloyd Schwartz (*Gilligan's Island*, *The Brady Bunch*), the comic ensemble cast includes Christopher Knight (Peter on *The Brady Bunch*), Fred Grandy (Gofer on *The Love Boat*) and Caryn Richman (*The New Gidget*).

“Unfortunately, we’re kind of typecast,” Garver said with a laugh. “We’re all over 55, and 55 is the new 25. There’s lots of energy in this group.”

At 59, Knight is the youngest cast member.

The play about two aging couples seeking to spice things up was loosely based on 75-year-old Schwartz’s personal experiences. The casting choices came as much from habit as anything else for Garver and Schwartz, who with his father Sherwood helped create the iconic *Brady Bunch* franchise. *Leave it to Beaver*’s Tony Dow and Barry Livingston of *My Three Sons* were both on the original short list of possible touring cast members.

“The play itself is very relatable. We don’t want to be gimmicky,” Garver said. “There are really no allusions in the play at all to any of the television shows we’ve done. Lloyd and I worked together on the casting of classic TV stars. We thought, how much fun would that be? It’s turned out that it’s a great deal of fun.”

Garver has had her fair share of that. At 10, she had her screen debut in the classic thriller *Night of the Hunter*, starring Robert Mitchum and Shelley Winters. The next year, she played a slave girl in Cecil B. DeMille’s epic *The Ten Commandments*, sharing screen time with Charlton Heston’s Moses.



Family Affair: From left, Sebastian Cabot, Kathy Garver, Johnny Whitaker, Brian Keith and Anissa Jones

She would not be etched into the public conscious—or the minds of teenage boys—until 1966 when the near 21-year-old—spoiler alert—was cast as 15-year-old Cissy.

The premise of *Family Affair* was built around a decidedly independent bachelor living in a New York high-rise (Brian Keith), who reluctantly becomes surrogate father to two young twins, Buffy and Jody, and older sister Cissy after the kids' parents—Uncle Bill's brother and sister-in-law—are killed in a car crash.

“Everybody in the cast had a really warm essence. They had a real love lit in them, and I think that warmed the whole series,” Garver said. “The relationships and the caring were quite sincere and very natural.”

The comic foil of the culture clash was Mr. French, Uncle Bill’s erudite gentleman’s gentleman who had never much cared for children—at least not in the beginning.

“What exactly is a Buffy?” French asks with disdain in the pilot episode when the first child is unexpectedly delivered to the Uptown penthouse.

Garver remembers Sebastian Cabot, the actor who played the eyebrow-raising butler, as far less proper than the character he played, but not without his quirks.

“He was professional, warm and egotistical,” the actress recalled with a laugh. “He had trouble learning his lines. He would study and study and study. He would get every word perfect and go over it with the dialogue coach and practice, practice, practice. Brian, on the other hand, would come in and say, ‘What are we doing today?’, look at the script twice, and say, ‘OK, let’s go.’”

The cast was rounded out by Anissa Jones and Johnny Whitaker as Buffy and Jody, respectively.

Tragedy famously struck in 1976, five years after the series ended, when 18-year-old Jones died from combined-drug intoxication. A mix of cocaine, PCP and illegally prescribed barbiturates and sedatives were found in her system.

Garver last saw Jones weeks earlier at the younger actress’s 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

“When I was there, her mother took me aside and said, ‘I wish you would spend more time with Anissa because I think she’s gotten in with the wrong crowd,’” Garver said. “Unfortunately, I left the next day [for work] and was gone for six weeks, and that was during the time she took the overdose. The whole thing was just a tragedy and the opiates today are still a tragedy for so many people.”

Such serious events are part of why Garver enjoys doing comedies, such as the current *Dinner at Five*, which sees four reluctant seniors—at least by AARP’s definition—comically scoping out new ways to escape the monotony of aging.

“It’s a wonderfully nostalgic fun play that people can see and not think about North Korea and terrorists and people getting killed,” the actress said. “These four people want to shake up their lives and they have a couple ideas up their collective sleeves.”

**Dinner at Five**  
debut Nov. 14-19 at PACE  
Center, 20000 Pikes Peak Ave.  
in Parker. For tickets and more  
information, visit [parkerarts.org](http://parkerarts.org)  
or call 303-805-6800.