

Cultural Daily

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Remembering Julie Harris: Belle of the American Stage

Sylvie · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2013

I knew Julie Harris. Well, not in the ordinary way one knows someone. But I knew her. Really knew her, even if I'll never be sure exactly who she was.

We first “met” when I had just arrived from Egypt, a fresh-faced immigrant in love with theatre, passion in my heart, excitement at my bewildering new surroundings. I wandered around Manhattan like a kid among Christmas toys, going to a different theatre every night, buying standing-room only tickets and seeing shows. Lots of amazing shows. I was 18. How was I to know that everything that was playing on Broadway that summer and the next would become iconic? Including Julie Harris.

There was Lee J. Cobb in *Death of a Salesman*, Utah Hagen in *Streetcar Named Desire*, Patricia Morison and Alfred Drake in *Kiss Me Kate*, Carol Channing in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and then, of course, there was the astonishing Julie more than holding her own with Ethel Waters and young Brandon De Wilde in *The Member of the Wedding*.

Julie, 24 years old, was just becoming known and hitting her peak—yes, both at once. She was getting raves and harvesting awards—the first of so many to come. But this is not about her Tonys (five, plus a sixth for Lifetime Achievement) or her reviews or her acclaim. You'll find those in the obits and appreciations that flowed onto the pages of newspapers and magazines at the announcement of her death at 87 on August 24. It is about the enigma of the woman herself. Who was she? Who was this walking miracle of the stage?

If I felt I'd met her when I saw her play Frankie Addams in *Member of the Wedding* it is because I was responding, like everyone else, to that sting of recognition—the extreme anguish of adolescent loneliness that reached out from that performance as a *cri de coeur*.

It was not all just talent, that performance. It was authentic—and lucky for us, it was later preserved on film. And it was brave, because it sprang from what Julie herself had experienced as a conflicted adolescent growing up in Grosse Pointe, MI. She had not cared for the triviality of affluence reflected in her personal surroundings. Nor was she what you might call a physical beauty—an important if superficial measure in that debutante environment. So she never entirely fit in—not in that society, not at home with a mother who had other plans for her daughter that the daughter had no interest in, and consequently not even in her own skin (by her own account, she was a committed but never confident artist, always perceiving her relationship with acting as a struggle to “get it right”).

It was that singular, persistent, continual effort that made every undertaking, every characterization so remarkable. Well, if not every, certainly most. In the last several years before the devastating stroke she suffered in 2001, a measure of fatigue began to creep in. One of her most memorable later-life performances was as Emily Dickinson in the one-woman *The Belle of Amherst* written by William Luce. It was a role seemingly tailor-made for her and it won her extensive plaudits. Yet as

she took the show extensively on the road, cracks developed. She would occasionally lapse into sing-song. Fatigue, yes. Not so much with the work; doubtful that it would be with the work. Perhaps with life itself.

It had, after all, not been a particularly happy life. She was married and divorced three times, but she rarely spoke of her marriages or her loves. Intense privacy was another one of her attributes. Once in the early 1970s, when I was working for the *Los Angeles Times*, I recall interviewing her (not for the first time) at a house she was renting in the Valley. I found her there at the appointed time in the company of a young man with whom she was clearly involved. He did not stay for the interview, but what was instantly obvious was how unsuited he appeared to be for a woman of her grace and dignity—and how much, suitable or not, that woman needed and wanted whatever he offered.

That neediness was surely an offshoot of her difficult relationship with a mother who did not appreciate the unusual daughter she had. It's the sort of thing that makes you grow up needing to prove you are lovable, over and over. Inhabiting other characters on stage and making them lovable to the audience is one way to make up for that original, insatiable deficiency. I have no way of knowing how much personal happiness Julie ever found because she made sure that subject was never on the table.

We met on several other brief occasions over the course of her life. Some encounters were professionally motivated, some not. Julie very much enjoyed the company of my late husband, which helped foster a more personal friendship among the three of us. While it was born of her and my initial professional connection, it migrated over time to a more relaxed kind of reciprocity, fostered by a now-and-then correspondence. And she answered every card, letter or note, without fail.

Once in the 1980s when we were dining with friends at a favorite Greek restaurant in Greenwich Village, I noticed a woman sitting alone at a far table, reading a book. Fleeting, I thought of how lonely that seemed, but my attention was quickly drawn back to my table and present company. Some 20 minutes later, that woman rose and came toward us. It was Julie. I had not recognized her at that distance, in part because offstage she was so self-effacing, always in some fashion hiding from the world. We tried vainly to have her join us for dessert. But there were too many "others" at the table; she declined sweetly, never sat down and, after a few minutes of failed entreaty, slipped away.

We did have dinner with her once later in Williamstown, MA, after a performance. There were "others" there too, but they were her "others"—friends who had driven in to see her. Yet on every occasion, every encounter, the warmth that she projected went just so far. It was as if she simply could not allow closer access for fear of somehow being burned if she did.

This contrast between the civilian Julie and the actor Julie is not news to anyone who knew her. Her incandescence lay elsewhere. It sprang from the tumult within, a fearless passion that made itself evident primarily, fiercely and utterly on stage. Any stage. She was artistically uncompromising, yet surprisingly democratic in the roles she took on. She moved with ease among the theatre (her favorite medium), film and television. Needing to make a living had something to do with it no doubt, but film and television did not always treat her as well as she deserved. She, on the other hand, treated both with innate respect, always. That is the mark of a great artist as well as a great human being.

My life as a theatre critic was elevated by so many of the artists it was my privilege to meet and write about over the years. Julie had the distinction of being the one with whom I was the least intimate and yet always felt I knew profoundly. Perhaps because I too had had a difficult relationship with my mother and recognized the symptoms. But mostly because her vulnerability, kindness and tightly-held interior life tacitly demanded that we give her, in return for her public

brilliance, anything that she was willing or able to accept. It was a very small price to pay for a lifetime of shared exhilaration.

We loved you Julie, a lot more than perhaps you ever knew.

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