

ACTING OUT

A new biography reminds a public in danger of forgetting of a lesbian theater pioneer

by Dale Reynolds

Eva Le Gallienne was one of this century's greatest theatrical figures. A more-or-less out lesbian when she became a star in 1921—extremely rare then, as it was dangerous to both career and body, and only marginally less rare now—she was the first in the country to attempt a European ideal of repertory theater. Her Manhattan company, the Civic Repertory Theatre, lasted only six years, from 1926 to 1932, but it

unpaid interns at the CRT is a compendium of the following generation's great actors—Burgess Meredith foremost among them.

Le Gallienne did more than any other single person to bring Ibsen and Chekhov to U.S. stages (often by creating new translations, which are still in print), as well as other European writers mostly unknown to all-too-uncaring audiences, who then as now preferred mindless spectacle to more thoughtful examination. She was heavily and personally influenced by acting legends Eleonora Duse, writing a definitive biography in 1966 on the Italian actress, *The Mystic in the Theater*, and the great French media-whore Sarah Bernhardt.

The eldest offspring of a Danish mother and a French father, Le Gallienne had the good fortune to bring her layered pedigree to a U.S. theater which, until the late teens and early '20s, gasped under the weight of too many feathery plays. Personality and sentimentality ruled the stage until she and others like her began to see that social realism and spirituality could bring more rewarding experiences to lovers of the theater,

became the blueprint for all subsequent U.S. regional theaters (none of which can now, due to extreme cost, afford a true repertory where several different plays are performed each week).

Le Gallienne started acting at 15, and became a major Broadway name early on in her career (she originated the role of Julie opposite Austrian star Joseph Schildkraut in the U.S. version of Molnar's *Liliom*, the play on which the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel* is based). She worked more or less steadily for the next 60 years. In addition to her work in the classics, she was a Broadway star as late as 1976, when she received rave notices as Fanny Cavendish in Ellis Rabb's Tony-nominated production of Kaufman and Ferber's comedy about the Barrymore-Drew acting dynasty, *The Royal Family*. (Ethel Barrymore, that Grand Dame of theater at the time of the play's debut in 1927—who was a great friend and mentor to Le Gallienne—disavowed the satire during its successful run.) Le Gallienne was nominated for an Academy Award in the supporting actress category in 1981 (for *Resurrection*) but appeared in very few movies, believing she was not attractive enough on film, in part due to a partially disfiguring accident she suffered during a natural-gas explosion at her Connecticut home in the early '30s. She continued performing sporadically on stage until her mid-80s, gradually retiring, and she died less than a decade ago at age 92 having lived a life and a career which spanned most of the 20th century.

Unfortunately, the great actress is already fading in the collective artistic memory, so a newly published biography is all the more valuable. Helen Sheehy stints nothing in imparting relevant facts about the at-times imperious actress who seldom hid her live-in lovers from the prying eyes of the theatrical community. Of course, while it was dangerous at that time to let the press in on one's private sexual life, it was also true that during Le Gallienne's heyday it would have been unthinkable for any legitimate magazine to actually out an actor unless she or he was caught up in some sort of public scandal. Among her lovers was the great Shakespearean director Margaret Webster, whose two eminently readable autobiographies—published in the less-open 1970s—unhappily ignored her sexuality.

Sheehy also spares us none of the actress' irascible, demanding, ego-ridden and insecure personality. But the author also demonstrates the great star's generosity, especially toward novice actors. Many of the people Le Gallienne helped are interviewed, as are many of the surviving veteran actors in her companies. Even the list of

Eva Le Gallienne

producing and promoting greats such as Eugene O'Neill (*The Hairy Ape* and *Desire Under the Elms*) Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur (*The Front Page*), and the first play to deal with the disillusioning horrors of World War I, Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings' 1924 drama *What Price Glory?*.

Eva Le Gallienne is a name we should not, and must not, forget—to remind ourselves of her courage to live her personal life as fully as she was able, and that art is one of the cornerstones of an integrated and well-lived life, a reality the right wing of any age is all too eager to ignore and suppress. Sheehy has done an admirable job with her exhaustive biography and deserves our thanks.

Eva Le Gallienne by Helen Sheehy. Knopf, 1996; \$37.50 cloth.

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