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MOVIES

Anne Bancroft

She Won the Biggest Prize

By JACK RYAN



Maybe she'll be awarded an Oscar—maybe not; in any case, she's already victor in a far more important ordeal

IF THINGS GO on schedule a week from Monday, Anne Bancroft will be shucking off a coarse woollen shawl and tossing her peddler's sack in a corner about the time the "Best Actress of the Year" award is made at the annual Academy Awards in Hollywood.

Anne will have just finished her performance in one of Broadway's most challenging parts, the title role in Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children," and in her basement dressing room in the Martin Beck Theater she may hear the news that she is 1963's Oscar winner.

There is a possibility there will be a little sulfur to spice the usual sentimentality if Anne is selected by the Academy for her performance as Annie Sullivan in "The Miracle Worker." It was from Hollywood in 1957 that Anne, after seven years and 16 films in tinsel town, phoned her mother in the Bronx, N. Y., that she was coming home.

Things were sickeningly wrong, professionally and personally. She was getting parts from squaw to ape woman, and each seemed more degrading than the last.

"In the first years in Hollywood," she says, "I thought I was great. I didn't know any better. Then I did a television show for director Robert Penn, and I realized that acting is more than just runaway feeling—it's thinking and discipline. My bubble popped. I knew what I was as an actress—a nothing."

Her personal life popped, too. When she arrived in Hollywood at 19, Anne was fresh from the close-knit, protective immigrant family of Mike and Mildred Italiano. On the Coast, she lived first with the family of her personal agent; then Hollywood took over, and she rapidly progressed from bachelor girl to gossip-column madcap to wife of a young Texas oil heir, Martin A. May. After two years she still hadn't gotten around to furnishing a simple apartment—"too many other things came up." After three years, May was telling a divorce court:

"She worked from 4 a.m. to 6 p.m. She came home and couldn't talk. Once she wouldn't talk to me for three weeks. There was a lack of companionship with millions of people tracking into the house. She tried to combine two loves—one a marriage and the other a career. The career turned out to be the greater of the two."

Anne tried to laugh off the break. "The only men in my life from now on will be my father, my agent, and my psychiatrist," she said. Instead, there were more men and more "B" films. Each picture and each man got worse.

What had gone wrong? Possibly it was the familiar "too easy, too soon." As a teen-ager, Anne Marie Italiano was shy personally yet extroverted in performing; she was boy-crazy yet was refused dating privileges. Her outlets were Sunday matinees and the fluff of fan magazines.

Her ambition was to be a laboratory technician. "Acting was something to dream of, but unattainable," she says. "But just before graduation, a boy I had a crush on held my hand in assembly and told me he was enrolling in the Academy of Dramatic Arts. I rushed home and told my mother I wanted to be an actress. My mother gave me the tuition we'd saved for lab school. Funny, that boy never did enroll."

At acting school she didn't have enough money for lunch and was rehearsing one noon when the wife of a television producer spied her. That encounter led to 80 tv roles. Subsequently, a friend asked her to appear opposite him in a screen test. He missed, but Anne got a contract. Still, acting was a foreign word to her; if anything, she defined it as good money, excitement, and famous people. In 1957 came the nightmarish self-appraisal.

"I had told mother I was quitting," she says, "but I had told myself I'd take one more chance. I'd had a taste of what real acting was and wanted more. I decided to go to an expert. If he said I didn't have it, then I'd quit."

ACTING COACH Herbert Berghof's decision was unqualified: "You must stay in the theater." She did and won Antoinette Perry (Tony) awards for "Two for the Seesaw" and "The Miracle Worker."

The personal reappraisal is more difficult to evaluate. A frugal woman, Anne just bought a \$96,000 brownstone apartment building in Greenwich Village "because I got tired of paying exorbitant New York rents." Her romances have been lengthy, but no marriage is in sight. Does she believe bachelor life best for an actress?

"It's not best for any woman," she replies. "I will marry, but certainly my husband has to understand that sometimes I must work from 4 a.m. to 6 p.m.—but not always."

Are there such men?

"There better be. But I've learned enough to make things work, too. Acting and my personal life are too tied up together not to influence each other. Acting has taught me discipline and how to think. It has taught me that I have a lot to give, too."

It's obvious that she means personally as well as professionally. And it's equally obvious that her new confidence in herself as an actress extends to herself as a woman.