

The Legacy of Katharine Hepburn: Fine Art as a Way of Life

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Katharine Hepburn once said “ If you survive long enough you’re revered—rather like an old building.” The iconic actress certainly did survive—and then some—living to the age of 96 a fiercely independent outspoken dynamo and adored star. Hepburn’s singular personality artistic achievements (including 12 Oscar nominations) and personal dramas have inspired numerous biographies. This author clearly reveres her subject and labors to express the value of the star’s artistic legacy both for herself and for students of theater. Unfortunately her work presents something of a hodgepodge of academic research overlaid with awkward personal expressions of the author’s lifelong devotion to this unique celebrity.

Hepburn traumatized by finding her brother hanging from an attic beam when she was fourteen was a difficult adolescent “ a highly nervous moody girl” who struggled early in her career with stage fright and memorization difficulties. She had an impulsive short-lived marriage and a temporary hiatus from acting but by her early twenties was again on stage and rapidly receiving attention. Citations from earlier biographies help flesh out a portrait of the up and coming actress: “she had a terrific grace ... she came down a ramp of great stairs...and jumped onto the main stage...The audience responded immediately. This was a star!”

The first chapters draw from the author’s Ed D. dissertation but disconcertingly include material on Edith Evans and Vanessa Redgrave in the role of Rosalind in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* before focusing on Hepburn’s 1949 stage version. The production was apparently something of a vanity project for Hepburn and her first stab at Shakespeare. She employed an actress to coach her in a grueling three hour per day six-month effort and she made casting costuming and set design decisions. The author usefully draws on published reviews of the time and previous biographies indicating that the production a commercial success produced mixed reviews of Hepburn’s acting but audiences “were charmed by Miss Hepburn’s magnetism and personal beauty... her legs became the talk of New York and every night there were gasps and applause when she appeared in tights.”

Hepburn’s distinctive no-nonsense personality shines through the text in various places and is captured perfectly in her response to the author’s 1980 request for information: “I am sorry but I really do not have the time to answer sensibly that list of questions and I have no records of anything. Try the Lincoln Center Library.” (!)

The author attempts curiously to provide parallels between the decades of Hepburn’s life and her own artistic and personal endeavors and tries to tie in theater education materials with limited effectiveness.

In Hepburn’s own words: “Who is Katharine Hepburn? It took me a long time to create that creature.” Biographers may long continue to probe that creation process but this effort fails to offer new biographic insight or to coherently illuminate the author’s special feeling for Hepburn’s role in her own life.

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