Passing Performances
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Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History.

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Margaret Webster (1905–72), the only child of British actors Benjamin N. Webster III and Dame May Whitty, was the fifth generation of a distinguished theatrical family, including actors, managers, and dancing masters, to carve out an international career. She established herself in the United States as a notable actress and stage director whose career reached its zenith in the 1940s on Broadway. Her journey to distinction in theater, opera, and letters was marked by triumph and failure as she wrestled with the skepticism, prejudice, and vagaries of the theater industry on two continents.

“Peggy,” as family and friends called her, was born on March 15, 1905, in New York City at an address on West Fifty-eighth Street while her father, accompanied by her mother, was on tour with the William Brady–Grace George Company. As the only child of highly successful professional actors, she grew up in the glamorous world of London’s West End. Her childhood companions were her parents’ professional friends. These “aunts and uncles,” as she called them, included Hilda Trevelyan, who played the perennial Wendy in the seasonal Peter Pan, Constance Collier, who played Ophelia in the John Barrymore Hamlet, and Jean Forbes-Robertson, who starred with her husband Johnston Forbes-Robertson in The Passing of the Third Floor Back.

During Peggy’s early years, three strong-willed, accomplished women emerged as role models for the young girl: May Whitty, Edith Craig, and Sybil Thorndike. Described as a “petite doe-eyed beauty,” May Whitty had little personal time for her daughter. Her mothering was sandwiched between professional engagements and her many committees for the war effort during World War I. Edith Craig played an enormous role in the young girl’s development, since she and her bohemian companions, both male and female, lived in the redbrick Victorian multidwelling at 31 Bedford Place near Covent Garden where the Websters resided on the top
floor. Twenty-six years older than Peggy, Edith Craig was the daughter of the renowned actress Ellen Terry and architect Edward Godwin and sister to the famous designer Edward Gordon Craig. Her life was characterized by exceptional devotion to her mother and by a career as a stage director that was circumscribed by her fiery temperament and aggressive personality and by the male-dominated theatrical establishment of the day. She was relegated to staging secondary events, such as benefits, pageants, and
Webster without Tears

charity matinees. Edith Craig was an early example for Peggy of the social and professional marginalization of women who did not aspire to stage prominence as actresses or to backstage positions as dressers and seamstresses. Edith Craig’s bisexuality also represented an alternative lifestyle that would play a large role in Peggy’s developing sexuality, for it became an accepted fact for the various families at 31 Bedford Place.¹

Sybil Thorndike and May Whitty, on the other hand, were accomplished actresses whose husbands provided an emotional and professional support system both at home and on stage. Married to actor-manager Lewis T. Casson, Sybil Thorndike, a distinguished actress in classical roles and in plays by George Bernard Shaw, was the leading actress of the Casson-Thorndike company that was to provide Peggy with her professional stage debut in 1924.

Peggy’s first separation from her parents’ glamorous world came at the start of the zeppelin raids over London in 1916. May Whitty sent her daughter to a Christian Science boarding school, Bradley Wood House, in Devonshire. Peggy endured her “exile” with feelings of homesickness and anxiety over her mother’s inability to attend her school theatricals. At war’s end, Peggy transferred to the prestigious Queen Anne’s School, a small public school dedicated to the education of young women of professional parents, located in Reading.

The year Peggy was to graduate the school authorities encouraged her to try for a scholarship to Oxford or Cambridge. She had excelled with an “A” certificate in literature, history, and languages, and her teachers envisioned that she would become one of the few women of the day to achieve admission to a university. They had not counted upon May Whitty’s determination that her daughter should not, and would not, depart from the Webster family tradition. Arguing that Peggy could not change her mind about a stage career at age twenty-one should she decide that she was unsuited to a scholarly career, May Whitty offered Peggy a three-month sojourn in Paris followed by professional actor-training at the Etlinger Dramatic School. The Herbert Beerbohm Tree School, established in 1904, was the premier training ground for young actors in the 1920s (it would become the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art), but it so happened that both Ben and May were teachers at the Etlinger School, and Peggy’s formal journey to the stage began in 1923 under their tutelage. Forever sanguine about her career choice, Peggy said in later years that May and Ben objected “to my stage career with the usual insincerity of theatrical parents.”³

What May Whitty could not envision (and it must be remembered

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that May had almost no formal education because of the Whitty family's financial difficulties that sent her to the stage to earn a living at age sixteen) was that her daughter would eventually achieve distinction as a stage director and author rather than as a preeminent actress. Peggy's "American" experience was beyond both parents' knowledge of the industry. As actors, Ben and May found career fulfillment and social distinction in the commercial theater, and at age seventy May Whitty became a film star as well. Ben's grandfather, Benjamin Nottingham Webster I, known to the theater world as "Old Ben," had been one of the most famous West End actor-managers of his day, managing both the Haymarket and Adelphi Theatres in the mid-1800s. It was not until Peggy met Lilian Baylis, the formidable manager of the Old Vic Theatre on Waterloo Road, that she would observe a woman in the powerful position of theater manager. First, however, Peggy's apprenticeship as a professional actor would occur in the crucible of the regional repertory companies.

Peggy Webster's adolescent weight problems—she was five feet, four inches tall, and weighed 140 pounds—relegated her to the secondary roles of aunts, spinsters, and chorus members. She made her professional debut in 1924 with the Casson-Thorndike company as a chorus member in *The Trojan Women*, with Sybil Thorndike playing Hecuba. The following year she toured with the company in *Saint Joan* as Sybil Thorndike's understudy. As was the custom of the time, understudies filled in as court ladies and swelled crowd scenes.

Following her twenty-first birthday and fearing a professional lifetime of crowd scenes with the Cassons, she joined the Macdona Players and toured as dowagers, servants, and an occasional ingenue in a repertory of George Bernard Shaw's plays. The following year she joined J. B. Fagan's Oxford Players and toured in plays by Shaw, Anton Chekhov, James M. Barrie, and August Strindberg. The role of Sonya, the emotionally deprived young woman doomed to spinsterhood in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, was the high point of this tour. Peggy cheerfully admitted that for the privilege of playing Sonya for one week she would agree to "carry a spear for six months."4

The rhythm of Peggy's life was seemingly established. A period of intense rehearsing and performing was followed by a period of inactivity relieved only by weekly auditions and Sunday-night showcases when the theaters were otherwise dark. She also experienced the double-edged sword of many children of famous theatrical parents. While doors were opened to her that might otherwise have remained closed, the interviews and auditions were often perfunctory and ended with, "Give my love to
your mother and father." Peggy also learned that some employers were reluctant to hire young talent of well-known parents because of the risk of creating professional and personal difficulties with the parents should the child not be successful.

No parental influence was exerted when in 1928 Peggy joined the slightly disheveled and unfashionable Sir Philip Ben Greet Shakespeare Company, a troupe famous for its "pastoral" tours of Shakespeare’s plays. "B. G.,” as Ben Greet was known to his actors, had pioneered Shakespeare at the Old Vic Theatre during World War I and had managed some early summer festivals at Stratford. Many young British actors as well as audiences owed their first experience of Shakespeare to his efforts. By the time Peggy joined his company, he was an elderly man of benevolent appearance, with a shock of white hair, bright blue eyes, and a cantankerous disposition. His company, however, was a training ground for playing Shakespeare in all kinds of weather, topography, and costumes. The general idea was that the company would play out of doors (hence, “pastoral”), adapting to such existing conditions as rose gardens, soccer fields, and rain-drenched pastures. Ben Greet avoided fancy theories, modern analogies, and stage gimmicks; he trusted the lines and the actors to reach the audience and hold them enthralled. Peggy was to carry this lesson throughout her career and even into her own Mar Web Shakespeare Company that she formed in the late forties and toured into the American heartland.

Women had made great social strides during World War I, when necessity required that they undertake the jobs that three million men had left behind in England when they crossed the channel to fight in the trenches of Europe. May Whitty excelled at committee work for the many good causes and in 1917 was named a Dame Commander of the British Empire for her exceptional efforts. Nevertheless, the commercial West End theater that had been home to the Webster family for four generations had changed very little. A patriarchal system remained in place with men empowered as producers, managers, and directors. The mercurial Lilian Baylis (1874–1937) challenged the system from her domain in the Royal Victoria Theatre, whose management she inherited from her aunt, Emma Cons. The Old Vic, which had risen from a temperance hall, was by 1929, when Peggy first appeared there, a nonprofit theater whose repertoire was largely devoted to Shakespeare.

Peggy’s entree to the Old Vic came through a small maid’s role in an eighteenth-century comedy called The Confederacy. In his first season as artistic director at the Old Vic under Baylis’s management, Harcourt
Williams had difficulty casting Molière’s scheming maid in The Imaginary Invalid. He saw Peggy’s performance in The Confederacy and offered her a seasonal contract. At age twenty-four Peggy emerged from the chaotic obscurity of pastoral touring and makeshift showcases onto the stage of the prestigious Old Vic.

In the 1929–30 season Peggy played secondary roles opposite London’s newest young stars, John Gielgud and Martita Hunt, a slim, high-spirited young woman known for playing “modern” Ibsen heroines. Overshadowed by these two stars, Peggy played Lady Capulet in Romeo and Juliet, Nerissa in The Merchant of Venice, the duchess of York in Richard II, and Lady Macduff in Macbeth. Always her own severest critic, Peggy’s greatest success that season, in her own estimation, was as Audrey with a putty nose and flaxen wig in As You Like It.

Realizing that performing with this company of rising stars—which was shortly to include Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, Jessica Tandy, Edith Evans, and Charles Laughton—she would never progress beyond the minor queen in tragedy or the country maid in comedy, Peggy declined to renew her contract for a second season. “Never mind, dear, you’ll be back,” Lilian Baylis predicted. In fact, Peggy returned to the Old Vic as Lady Macbeth in 1932 and again twenty-five years later to direct Measure for Measure in the 1957–58 season.

With a sense of determination but with growing disappointment that after six years of hard, devoted work her career had yet to take off, she turned to the West End for employment. In one very real sense she was returning to her parents’ world—the familiar world of her childhood that she had never left, since she continued to reside at 31 Bedford Place—but it was also a world of many hard object lessons learned by women who aspired to work there. Peggy was determined to climb the mountain equipped with her repertory experience of playing Shakespeare and Shaw. She was also equipped with a remarkable voice, which was her distinguishing quality as an actress along with her sensitive readings of the texts.

As unexpected as her departure from the Old Vic was the offer of a major role in a West End production. The actor-manager Sir John Martin Harvey had announced a revival of The Devil’s Disciple with himself as Richard Dudgeon. He cast an inexperienced ingenue, Peggy, in the role, expecting that critics and audiences would demand the return of Lady Harvey, who was then sixty-one and forcibly in retirement, to replace the less experienced actress. Contrary to the Harveys’ expectations, Peggy received such critical praise that she remained in the part for the length of
the play’s run. However, her West End success was followed by eighteen months of work in less prominent roles, although she appeared in some twenty-two plays.

John Gielgud, from whose brightness she had fled the Old Vic, rescued her from obscurity. He was involved in a Sunday matinee performance of *Musical Chairs* along with Frank Vosper, Jessica Tandy, and director Theodore Komissarjevsky. He invited Peggy to play a role, and the production then moved to the Criterion Theatre for a run of nine months. Gielgud followed *Musical Chairs* with a production of *Richard of Bordeaux* in 1933 with himself as Richard II, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies as Anne of Bohemia, Ben Webster as the duke of Lancaster, and Peggy as the countess of Derby. Now a popular star, Gielgud’s production ran for fourteen months and was his first West End success as a director. But Peggy also made her directing debut that season with Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* for the British National Federation of Women’s Institutes in Kent. This was a “pastoral” production with eight hundred women to move around in crowd scenes. The year was 1934, and Peggy had at last found her true artistic place in the theater, but it would be several more years and an ocean voyage before she would be recognized as an important director.

The contrast with Gielgud’s career is a measure of the traditions and prejudices that existed in the commercial theater both in England and the United States. While he was invited by producers to direct a West End production at age twenty-eight, Peggy would not receive a similar invitation until 1937 at age thirty-two and only after a resounding success on Broadway.

Peggy’s American adventure began with a transatlantic telephone call. She was playing a dour Irish cousin in *Parnell* in the West End when the stage doorman announced, “Personal call. Mr. Maurice Evans from New York.”

Her parents were already in New York City, where May was playing in the London transfer to Broadway of *Night Must Fall*. Peggy’s friend Maurice Evans had been brought to New York to play opposite Katharine Cornell in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Saint Joan*. The Websters learned that he was interested in doing a series of classical revivals on Broadway and had an American backer by the name of Joseph Verner Reed. There are no records of May Whitty’s manipulations in this matter, but Evans is reported as saying to her, “We’ll do some Shakespeare and get old Peg out here too.”

In that fateful telephone call, Evans invited Peggy to come to the
United States and direct him in a repertory season of four plays, beginning with *Richard II*, a play not seen on Broadway since 1878. Evans’s choice of Peggy Webster is highly provocative since she had no comparable directing experience in the West End, and, before telephoning Peggy at the New Theatre, he had contracted British designer David Ffolkes to design scenery and costumes.

Admittedly, Evans was faced with the very realistic dilemma that there were no directors with a Shakespearean background in New York City, and his friend Peggy had experience playing with Ben Greer’s company, with Harcourt Williams at the Old Vic, and with Donald Wolfit’s provincial touring company. She had also played with Gielgud in *Richard of Bordeaux* and again in his West End production of *Queen of Scots*. Evans was also aware that Peggy’s career as an actress was mired in minor roles in undistinguished plays and that her personal life was unencumbered. He went so far in his memoir to say, “This was partly, I think because her mother . . . wouldn’t let her plough her own furrow.” (Since the school crisis of 1923, May Whitty continued to control and influence her daughter’s career choices.) Evans also knew that if he were to engage one of the rising young male directors, such as Tyrone Guthrie or Michael Redgrave, he risked losing control of the production and possibly even the leading roles. Most persistent was Evans’s conviction that he could influence Peggy’s artistic choices and control the production from center stage. Into the bargain he would gain an actress to play the duchess of York, as he also proposed.

With thirty seconds left on the call, Peggy said yes to the New York venture and changed the direction of her career. The Cunard shipping line that had taken her as a child from the city of her birth to England would now return her to the United States to begin a career that would place her at the center of American stage history for the next thirty years.

The year 1937 was an eventful one in world history. In the United States Franklin Delano Roosevelt had been re-elected president the previous year; in England, the Wally Simpson–King Edward VIII affair reached the national press; Hitler and Mussolini were marching to power; Franco’s fascistic forces in Spain were winning the civil war; the Japanese warlords were preparing the largest naval armada in history; and in Russia, Stalin was consolidating his power with summary executions and exiles to Siberian camps. The Evans-Webster *Richard II*, a play about abuse of power and vacillating rulers who love unwisely, opened at the St. James Theatre on Forty-fourth Street to unprecedented critical notices on February 5, 1937. Brooks Atkinson, dean of Broadway critics,
admirer the “infinite subtlety and burning emotion” of Evans’s king and praised Peggy’s “versatile and powerful staging.” John Anderson of the Evening Journal described the event as “a brilliant spectacle, handsomely turned, deeply moving, richly imagined, superbly executed.”

Evans quickly abandoned his plans to produce four plays in repertory when the success of Richard II, which played for 171 performances, made plain the financial wisdom of playing a single production at a time. The Evans-Webster team did, indeed, stage four more Shakespeare plays on Broadway in the next decade, including Hamlet, Macbeth, Henry IV, Part I, and Twelfth Night. In effect, the three Websters settled in America with Peggy’s parents relocating to Hollywood, where May Whitty embarked upon a major film career that included The Lady Vanishes, Night Must Fall, Mrs. Miniver, The White Cliffs of Dover, Lassie Come Home, Suspicion, and Gaslight.

Peggy’s war years on Broadway vacillated between wildly triumphant Shakespeare productions, eccentric and even sentimental choices of undistinguished scripts to provide work for her parents and close friends, and absorption into a lesbian subculture of theater artists that would generate its own frissons in her career and personal life.

The year 1938 was significant. Peggy firmly established that her work on Richard II was not a onetime affair; she directed Evans as the prince in an uncut Hamlet, as Falstaff in Henry IV, Part I, and as Malvolio in Twelfth Night with newcomer Helen Hayes as Viola. Peggy’s connection with the Theatre Guild was made, first, at the intervention of May Whitty, who encouraged her friends Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne to cast her daughter as Masha in their production of The Sea Gull on Broadway. This was the first of three critically admired performances that Peggy gave on Broadway, including Emilia in Othello and the nun-detective in The High Ground. Then there were the unwise but understandable choices of plays to direct for her parents, friends, and companions: Young Mr. Disraeli for Ben Webster, Viceroy Sarah for May Whitty and Mady Christians, and The Trojan Women for May Whitty and Walter Slezak. Mady Christians, whom Peggy saw in the Orson Welles production of Heartbreak House and described as “blonde, distinguished, opulent . . . [with] a slight German accent” and cast as Queen Gertrude in Hamlet, became the first of several women whom Peggy loved and lost to other relationships or to untimely deaths by natural causes.

It would be easy to argue that Peggy’s marginalization to secondary roles as an actress and to undistinguished scripts as a director was directly related to her sexual orientation, which segregated her from the
Broadway power brokers. The facts, however, do not support these conclusions. Peggy Webster had never been a willowy ingenue nor a woman of fashion. She wore sensible shoes, unfashionably bobbed hair, and smoked cigarettes prodigiously. She was Audrey and Nerissa, not Rosalind and Portia. She was a supporting character actor, and these roles as written by Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Shaw were for court ladies, loyal confidantes, comedic servants, poor relatives, and emotionally starved wives. Peggy’s London experience also instilled the habit of directing any and every possible script for the experience and without serious consequence at times when the West End theaters were dark. No such tradition existed in the New York theater. In the 1940s there was one way to produce a play and that was with all the expense of a commercial production. Peggy was not an independent producer-director, as Alfred Lunt and Maurice Evans had become. She was dependent upon others to throw opportunities her way. Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn of the Theatre Guild would bring important projects her way in the forties, and the wisdom of hindsight tells us that she should have waited for these opportunities rather than staging *Young Mr. Disraeli, The Trojan Women,* and *Therese* in New York. However, she was compelled financially and emotionally to keep working during the intervals, and she proceeded in the only way she knew how. Peggy was also idealistic and involved herself, like her mother before her, in the “good causes.” In the 1940s, she joined fundraising groups in support of the Soviets in their efforts against Hitler’s armies and directed a play on Broadway that was clearly sympathetic to the Soviet cause. These associations would bring her before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the fifties along with other notable theater people.

Despite difficulties, the 1940s were halcyon days for Peggy. Following the success of the uncut *Hamlet,* she directed, again with the Theatre Guild producing, *Twelfth Night* (with Maurice Evans and Helen Hayes), *Battle of Angels* (with Miriam Hopkins), and *Macbeth* (with Evans and Judith Anderson). What then followed was the remarkable production of *Othello* that made stage history.

The fierce defiance of stage and social conventions that was the fabric of the 1943 production of *Othello* proclaimed Peggy’s independence from Maurice Evans (he declined to play Iago, saying that “stars” would not play either Iago or Desdemona) and the theatrical status quo. She was advised against casting an African-American as Othello. It took fifteen months to negotiate financing, cast, rehearse and try out the Webster-Robeson production, but on October 19, 1943, Paul Robeson became the
first African-American actor to play Othello on Broadway, in a produc-
tion directed by Peggy Webster. When he walked onto the stage of the
Shubert Theatre with José Ferrer as Iago, Uta Hagen as Desdemona, and
Peggy as Emilia, theatrical history was made. In the face of hostile predic-
tions of doom for Peggy’s decision to use an interracial cast, all fears and
grievances melted away as Robeson with Othello’s first words endowed
the play with larger-than-life stature and perspective on human and social
issues. Critics used phrases such as “unbelievably magnificent,” “nothing
to equal it,” “consummate genius,” and “one of the great events of
theatre history,” and the lines at the Shubert box office the next day
confirmed Peggy’s courage and craft. With 296 performances, the pro-
duction broke all box office records for a Shakespeare play.

Throughout it all, Peggy was not without her self-doubts, as her
nightly letters to her mother revealed. She had been careful to defend her
selection of Robeson, arguing the paramount importance of a black actor
to the play’s “credibility and to the validity of every character in it.” The
fact that she had not grown up with an understanding of American
society and its ingrained racial prejudices helps, in part, to explain her
daring and conviction. Also, her emotional disconnection to family (noth-
ing that she did could affect May Whitty’s film career) and the lack of
other emotional dependencies, which would develop soon enough, freed
her independent spirit and hardened her resolve. Nevertheless, there were
other pitfalls. She stumbled upon the fact that Robeson’s stage presence
as a performer far outweighed his technical skills as an actor. Convinced
of the “unambiguous racial identity” of Shakespeare’s Moor, Peggy con-
vinced herself that Robeson’s problems with speaking verse and his lack
of technical skills could be overcome. Some critics expressed reservations
about Robeson’s “deep organ tones becoming a trifle monotonous.”

But, the overriding importance of Robeson’s Othello as a racial event of
great importance overwhelmed the critical measurements and reduced them
to insignificance.

In retrospect, Othello was to be the high-water mark of Peggy’s career.
It was also the time in her life when she was emotionally independent of her
mother’s control (May Whitty was otherwise engaged in Hollywood), of
her lovers’ needs, and of Maurice Evans’s agendas. This independence was
short-lived. Eva Le Gallienne, her childhood friend from summer vaca-
tions at Chiddingfold, England, who was six years her senior, reentered her
life as an established actress and director at a time Peggy was being ostra-
cized by the Robeson-Hagen-Ferrer trio from decisions regarding cast
albums, costumes, and the national tour. Peggy grasped at another project
and withdrew from the national tour of *Othello* and, at the urging of Le Gallienne, entered into her old friend’s household and dream of establishing a national repertory theater to be called the American Repertory Theatre (ART).

This giant step away from the commercial theater thrust Peggy into a world of women producers, directors, designers, and stage managers that included her lifetime friend and now lover Eva Le Gallienne, as well as Carly Wharton, Cheryl Crawford, Rita Hassan, the Motleys, Thelma Chandler, and others. For eighteen months they struggled to create a repertory theater on Columbus Circle in New York City. Though Le Gallienne’s Civic Repertory Theatre (1926–33) had failed under crushing financial constraints, she had not abandoned her dream of a national repertory theater. Le Gallienne enlisted coworkers, like Cheryl Crawford, who were successful producers and managers and shared an alternative life-style as well.

By the beginning of the 1945–46 season, the three women had launched the idea of ART with plans to open two plays in September and to add four more during the season. They believed the theater would become a self-supporting business within three years. By the time the first production opened in November 1946, prospects were good. They had sold about three hundred thousand dollars in stock, Joseph Verner Reed had contributed one hundred thousand dollars, and other well-known theater people had signed on as sponsors with over five thousand subscribers. But ART would survive less than two years. The reasons for the theater’s failure have been attributed to many forces: the New York theater critics, unreasonable union demands, and play selection. Many found the choice of plays (*John Gabriel Borkman*, *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Yellow Jack*) self-serving and ill advised for the New York scene. Peggy and Le Gallienne traded roles and directing responsibilities. Peggy directed *Henry VIII* with Le Gallienne as Katharine of Aragon and also *Ghosts* with her friend as Mrs. Alving. Le Gallienne directed *John Gabriel Borkman* with herself as Ella Rentheim and Peggy as Mrs. Borkman. The most popular choice was *Alice in Wonderland* with Le Gallienne as the White Queen and Peggy as the Red Queen. The trio did everything that they could to salvage ART except abandoning, as did the Lunts a decade earlier, the idealistically classical repertoire.

The times were against them in more ways than Broadway tastes and union demands. The critics took the position that ART’s management team revived plays the actors wanted to act rather than plays the public wanted to see.15 Broadway audiences declined following the war as audi-
ences moved to the suburbs; movies and the new invention, called television, absorbed the entertainment dollars.

Then there was an assault from the radical Right of the day. Peggy and Cheryl Crawford were the objects of invidious charges that they were Communist sympathizers. Crawford had been a cofounder of the “leftist” Group Theatre and had traveled in the Soviet Union; Peggy had directed a Soviet play on Broadway and had worked as a fundraiser for two organizations sympathetic to the Soviet war effort in the 1940s. Peggy’s involvement with these “Red” organizations was rising up to haunt her and would eventually bring her before HUAC in 1953.

Finally, America’s attitude toward women in the late forties was a harsh societal fact. Although eight million women had entered the workplace by 1945, at war’s end this work force would be diminished, if not outright fired. With the return of the male population from Europe and the Far East, American women would again be relegated to the “domestic.” The commercial theater establishment in which men were managers and producers had remained unchanged during the war years. By opening ART in New York City, the three unmarried, middle-aged women had openly challenged the establishment with a new theater devoted to classics and repertory. The fact that they were lesbians was the final count against them. Postwar America had become a land of conformity to ensure national security, justice, and common decency. Sexual conformity became a cornerstone of national security, and same-sex desire was condemned as a menace to morals and a threat to national policy.¹⁶

The late forties were years of immeasurable loss for Peggy. Her parents died in Hollywood. Ben Webster passed away in 1947, and May’s death less than fourteen months later coincided with the demise of ART. Peggy was bereft of family (one cousin remained in London), and with May’s steady advice for over forty years halted, Peggy was more alone, than she had ever been in her life.

In 1950, Peggy was named a Communist sympathizer and her career was further marginalized by the insidious charges. Besides being an elected member of the “Red” Actors’ Equity Council, she was guilty of employing a known Communist, Paul Robeson, of directing a Broadway play sympathetic to the Soviet cause, and of raising funds for two international organizations that gave money to the Soviets. (Nothing was said about these activities taking place at a time when the Russians were our allies in a global war.) Peggy’s name appeared in Red Channels, a booklet compiled by the FBI listing Communist sympathizers on Broadway and in the entertainment industry, and she was summoned to appear before

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HUAC in 1953, almost eighteen months after the death of her former companion Mady Christians, who had been branded as a German émigré-turned-Communist by the House subcommittee. With her career and health destroyed by the ordeal, Mady Christians died at age fifty-one.

Having been named by fellow actor José Ferrer, Peggy, guided by attorney Louis Nizer, appeared before the McCarthy committee for over an hour and was pronounced an “Ok American” by Roy Cohn. However, her anxiety and fear over this public humiliation took its toll emotionally and financially. Grief-stricken by Mady Christians’s premature death, Peggy was afraid of imprisonment for the “good causes,” but her fear of exposure of her lesbian preferences, which were against the law in some states, possibly far outweighed her fright over future unemployment. Because the witch-hunts of the 1950s conflated alleged forms of degeneracy, such as Communism and homosexuality, Peggy risked standing before the Senate subcommittee not only as a traitor but also as a sexual pervert. The fear, grief, and anger that she felt that day over the injustice of the hearings was in no way alleviated by Roy Cohn’s flip dismissal.

Some years later Peggy wrote in her autobiography that “no one touched the blacklist, witch-hunt pitch, without being lessened and to some degree defiled.” She considered her career “undermined, if not ostensibly broken.” Her friend and admirer, Brooks Atkinson, summed up her situation by saying that “her Broadway career was permanently tarnished. She never again could work with the scope and exuberance of her early years on Broadway.”

There is, nevertheless, more to Peggy Webster’s latter-day story than Red-baiting, sexual orientation, and professional isolation. The kind of theater that Peggy knew and loved was not possible in New York City in the late forties. Zelda Fichandler and others were to open Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., in 1950 and fellow-Briton Tyrone Guthrie established his successful repertory theater in Minneapolis in 1963, far from the New York critics and the theatrical unions. Other nonprofit theaters were to spread in the sixties from Baltimore to Seattle.

Moreover, Peggy was experiencing artistic difficulties as a director. She conceived of acting as the process of shaping outer form. Typically, she would tell an actor where to stand and how to speak—the hows, not the whys. This external process that she encouraged often resulted in actors skilled in outer effect and vocalization rather than inner exploration of emotion. Such practices sometimes lead Peggy to ignore the psy-
choles of both Shakespeare’s texts and contemporary works that she directed. She remarked to an interviewer that she had no interest in psychoanalytical interpretation and said, “It’s walking all around the block, that sort of fiddle-faddle.” At midcentury, the work of directors Elia Kazan and Harold Clurman was preferred for its psychological insights and social emphasis. Peggy sought refuge from a changing Broadway and the blacklist at the New York City Theatre Company, where she directed Shakespeare and Shaw: Richard II, The Taming of the Shrew, Richard III, The Devil’s Disciple, and Saint Joan.

Rudolph Bing also became an unlikely savior from artistic obscurity and financial hardship. As the new general manager of the Metropolitan Opera Company in 1950, Bing decided to revive the fading “dinosaur” by hiring accomplished directors and designers to revitalize the staging at the Met. In that first season, he contracted Alfred Lunt, Garson Kanin, Tyrone Guthrie, and Peggy Webster—the first woman director to be hired by the opera company. Bing invited Peggy to stage Don Carlos, the first opera in his opening season, with Jussi Bjoerling, Jerome Hines, and Robert Merrill. Peggy was reluctant to try a medium in which she had no prior experience, but Bing argued that the effects he wanted were essentially Shakespearean and, of course, the woman who had directed eight hundred women in Kent could stage an opera with ninety-five chorus members and twelve principals.

Peggy staged seven operas for the Metropolitan Opera Company and the New York City Opera over a period of ten years. The grand operatic style with historical costumes, elaborate scenery, mannered acting, and glorious vocalizations could have afforded Peggy a distinguished second career and a comfortable income. She pronounced herself, nevertheless, frustrated with the limited rehearsal hours, which she called one of the “greatest evils of operatic staging,” and turned her back on opera, declaring that she had devoted her life and skills to the legitimate theater and that was where she belonged.

Despite the twelve years left in Peggy’s life and career, which she filled with solo performances, lecture tours, term professorships, the writing of two memoirs, and acting and directing jobs in England and the United States, she was not to reestablish herself as a major artist. She remained marginalized by the changing theatrical establishment, by her women companions, and by ill health that was probably a result of a lifetime of cigarette smoking. Maurice Evans sought her out for a final collaboration in 1962 on The Aspern Papers with Evans and Wendy.
Hiller that ran for ninety-three performances and became Peggy’s last successful Broadway production.

Although Le Gallienne remained a lifelong friend, their partnership ended with theHUAC investigation into Peggy’s political activities. (Le Gallienne, a political conservative, declined to become involved in the public display or risk undue exposure to herself.) The two partners of Peggy’s final years were, first, British novelist Pamela Frankau and, lastly, Bostonian Jane Brundred. Peggy met Pamela Frankau sometime in 1955, and they maintained a London residence at 55 Christchurch Hill for ten years before Frankau’s death in 1967. Despite her own illness from colon cancer, Peggy maintained her lifelong habit of existing between two continents. During her last four years, she received medical attention in Boston and frequently stayed with Le Gallienne in Weston, Connecticut, and on Martha’s Vineyard, where she met Jane Brundred, who died in 1969. Brundred bequeathed a small fortune to Peggy that subsequently became devalued in the decline of the stock market in the early seventies. However, Peggy used the money to pay her medical expenses and bequeathed the remainder to Pamela Frankau’s first cousin, Diana Raymond, to Eva Le Gallienne, and to St. Christopher’s Hospice in Sydenham, England, where she spent her final days.

Despite the disappointments, Peggy Webster sustained an active professional career for forty-five years. For thirty-two of those years she exchanged letters over two continents with Ben and May detailing her self-doubts, enthusiasms, struggles, and accomplishments, always described tentatively. One by one she saw her companions and loved ones die and Le Gallienne reject her only to extend her friendship again in the last decade of her life. Upon her friend’s death, Le Gallienne said in the New York Times: “It is rare for a woman to succeed in this difficult field. She must be quite exceptionally talented to overcome the ingrained prejudices, the skepticism, and distrust that stand in her way.”

It is true that Peggy’s career was supported and enhanced by the Cassons, Lilian Baylis, the Lunts, Maurice Evans, Joseph Verner Reed, Lawrence Langer, Sol Hurok, and Rudolph Bing. She was awarded honorary degrees by seven American colleges and universities, elected one of Ten Outstanding Women of the Year in 1946 by the Women’s National Press Club and named to the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1979. As long as she remained connected to the commercial theater as a director or actor, the work was forthcoming and satisfactory, although theHUAC investigation severely reduced her chances for employment. Inspired by Peggy’s last performance as an actress on Broadway in The High Ground, her
friend and admirer Brooks Atkinson praised her as “the ablest woman in our theatre.” She also directed many great actors, including Maurice Evans, Helen Hayes, Paul Robeson, Uta Hagen, José Ferrer, Flora Robinson, Wendy Hiller, Eva Le Gallienne, Arnold Moss, Maureen Stapleton, Tyrone Power, Faye Emerson, Judi Dench, John Neville, Emlyn Williams, and Sybil Thorndike.

Whereas her own worth diminished in her mind when measured against the beauty, grace, and accomplishments of May Whitty, Sybil Thorndike, or Eva Le Gallienne, one of Peggy’s eulogists finally got it right when she wrote that Peggy’s career was more “distinguished than that of any member of the four previous generations of the Webster family that had contributed to English theatrical history.”

Despite the social and artistic marginalization that she experienced in her lifetime, Peggy Webster endured and succeeded as one of the few women to establish herself as a stage director both in England and the United States, as the first woman to direct Shakespeare’s plays on Broadway and Verdi’s operas at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. May Whitty’s daughter, who could have been an Oxford don, followed in the family’s theatrical footsteps and made an imprint on the English-speaking stage far larger than those generations of Websters that preceded her before the footlights. The fact that she did so in the thirties and forties without “proper” social connections, personal fortune, glamour, husband, or family influence speaks to her extraordinary intelligence, wit, drive, and devotion to a profession that, as she was fond of saying, required “the courage of a lion, the strength of an elephant and the hide of a rhinoceros.” Her strength, courage, and tenacity carried her successfully through an industry that militated against women directors and producers. May Whitty’s daughter journeyed through the professional theater of her day with few competitors—a fact that remains true even fifty years later. And, she did so in a way that ran counter to established tradition, fashion, and sexual mores on two continents.

NOTES


4. Webster, The Same Only Different, 316.
5. Ibid., 321.
6. Ibid., 345.
7. Ibid., 374.
8. Ibid., 372.
9. Maurice Evans, All This... and Evans Too! A Memoir (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 110.
17. Webster, Don’t Put Your Daughter, 273.
21. The letters of Margaret Webster are found in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
25. Webster, The Same Only Different, 153.