
REVIEWS

Milly S. Barranger. *Margaret Webster: A Life in the Theater*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. 400p.

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Scan the shelves of any university library and you will find biographies of many Broadway directors of the 20th century: Elia Kazan, George S. Kaufman, Alfred Lunt, and Peter Brook, among others. Given that Margaret Webster's influence on theater rivaled that of her male colleagues made the lack of biographies about her surprising. Milly Barranger has filled that gap with *Margaret Webster: A Life in the Theater*, a moving portrait of the director's life. Barranger has scoured Webster's comprehensive archive of personal writing and conducted interviews with her contemporaries to reconstruct the life of this pioneer in theater. An accomplished character actress and author of several books about the theater, Webster found greatest fame directing plays and operas. The biography is mapped out like a play, cleverly divided into three acts and an epilogue.

Act One (1905-1936) takes the reader through Webster's childhood into her early adulthood trying to make a name for herself as an actress. Born to actors Ben Webster and Dame May Whitty, Webster's life was populated with productions and stage actors. Despite the whirlwind of contacts forged by her parents, Webster spent many lonely days at boarding school during World War I where she waited for correspondence from her mother and threw herself into her acting pursuits. Webster's early stage career consisted of mastering Shaw and Shakespeare, experiences that would influence her later as a director. Even with hard work and a place at the Old Vic, Webster never attained the starring roles she desired. As she acted, she scrutinized the techniques of her directors and soon tried her hand directing a few productions. When the opportunity arose to direct Shakespeare in New York, she accepted. Thus closed the first act of her life.

In Act Two (1937-1949), Webster embarks on her New York directing career, one marked by many highs and lows. Her first Broadway endeavor, *Richard II*, won praise from Brooks Atkinson and other critics. Along with successes came difficulties. Webster was not savvy in many of her business dealings. Plays, too, could prove problematic. When Webster directed Tennessee Williams' first play, *Battle of Angels*, the production was condemned by Boston authorities and reviled by audiences. It was cancelled before its New York debut. More success was found

in her efforts to give New Yorkers low-cost theater alternatives and her direction of Shakespeare's works. She especially broke new ground, against the odds of actors' egos and society's prejudice, by staging *Othello* with Paul Robeson in the title role. While producers resisted her casting, audiences eventually were enthralled with the production that opened the way for other African-American actors. Once again, idealism and egotism came together in the failed venture of the American Repertory Theatre (ART). Although this attempt to create a repertory theater in the English tradition was marked by financial mismanagement and poor play choices, it revealed the potential of resident professional theaters. Even as ART failed, Webster threw herself into yet another theater venture, a touring company she called Marweb. This venture ended much the same way that ART did.

Act Three (1950-1972) relates another shift in Webster's life: directing opera. Just as her theatrical projects flagged, Rudolf Bing, the new general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, asked her to direct the first opera of the season, Verdi's *Don Carlo*. Her success with this production led to more work with operas, both at the Metropolitan Opera House and at the City Center. Despite the differences between plays and operas, Webster was often successful in communicating with the chorus, mounting productions, and coping with chaos. Shadowing this challenging work was her involvement with Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). After Jose Ferrer mentioned her name during his own testimony, her association with organizations that were thought to have pro-Communist sentiments came under scrutiny. Barranger contrasts Webster's dramatic take in her memoir regarding HUAC's questioning with the actual transcript released after Webster's death. What was indisputable was that her career was stained from these accusations and her relationship with actress Eva Le Gallienne was never the same. As her life wound down and she faced the loss of several companions, Webster had the satisfying experience directing some actors she met as a youngster and recording her life in a memoir. She died of cancer at age sixty-seven, working on projects to the very end of her life.

The biography closes with an Epilogue, reflections by friends, colleagues, and the press about Webster's dedication and contribution to the performing arts. New York and London services celebrated her life. Barranger considers Webster's legacy to the theater, a legacy that is sometimes unrecognized. Champion of the text and the playwright's intention, Webster spent her life in a career that was as challenging as it was rewarding.

Barranger just doesn't relate events; she reconstructs them with details. She describes the teacups and vases, promptbooks and pencils that made up Webster's world. By delving deeply into her personal writing, Barranger provides an eyewit-

ness account of theater in the 20th century. How marvelous it is to get an onstage description of how the great 19th-century actress Ellen Terry shed her seventy-two years and became a believable Portia; how John Barrymore indulged in champagne throughout his performances and was a danger to fellow actors when fencing onstage; how Lawrence Olivier attended her twenty-first birthday party; how John Gielgud rose to stardom; how dramatist Harley Granville Barker directed; how she collaborated with Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, and Uta Hagen; how Chekhov's widow, Olga Knipper-Chekhova, wrote her a letter praising her efforts to bring the Russian dramatist's work to the American stage. The assortment of people who passed through Webster's life, including Marlon Brando, Karl Malden, Noel Coward, Dame Judi Dench, George Bernard Shaw, Eli Wallach, Cecil B. DeMille, and Helen Hayes, marked an existence continually touched by greatness.

Throughout, Barranger takes time to evaluate Webster's choices and experiences. Was it sensible for Webster to skip university life at Cambridge or Oxford and go directly into acting? Was her decision to leave the Old Vic after one season a wise one? Why was Webster asked to be a director in New York with so little experience directing? What were Webster's strengths as a classically trained director and her difficulties with Method acting? Why was she asked to direct the Metropolitan Opera's opening night production? She reflects on professional errors, like why Webster passed on American premiers of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* during her days with the doomed American Repertory Theatre. Whenever Webster changes course, Barranger weighs in on the consequences and the opportunities gained or lost. Barranger's judgment is especially useful when sorting through the press on Webster's production of *Othello*. What critics missed in their evaluation of the play is the great courage it took to cast an African-American performer in the title role of a Broadway play.

Webster's theatrical career is in the forefront of this biography, affected in various degrees by personal relationships and tempestuous world events. To the end, Webster was passionate about preserving the playwright's purpose. Each description of Webster's theater projects highlights her primary aim to serve the text of a play. She saw her job as a director to transmit the playwright's meaning to actors and audiences. The playwright's words and the way they were spoken were central to reaching this goal. Webster's textual approach remained firmly in place, even when Method acting became popular and tinkering with the spirit and text of a play became fashionable. By the end of this engaging biography, the reader is well acquainted with a director consumed with her work, loyal to her friends, and fierce in her convictions. ✱