

NOTABLE WOMEN
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PAGE, Geraldine (October 22, 1924–June 13th, 1987): actress and famous member of the Actors Studio, was born in Kirksville, Missouri, to Pearl (Maize) Page and Leon Page, a doctor. After graduating from the Englewood High School in Chicago, she attended the Goodman Theatre Dramatic School (1942–1945), thus permanently shifting from her teen-age devotion to music and the piano to a career in acting for theatre, film, and television. Her first public appearance on stage had been in 1940, in a performance of *Excuse My Dust* at the Englewood Methodist Church in Chicago—an experience that convinced her that acting was more rewarding than playing the piano and required less work. Upon finishing at the Goodman School she went to New York City, making her first stage appearance there on October 25, 1945, at the Blackfriars Guild in their production of *Seven Mirrors*. She also undertook further study with Uta Hagen at the Berghof Studios and at the Theatre Wing School, and she studied voice with Alice Hermes. She returned to Illinois for summer stock seasons at Lake Zurich and at Marengo, where Vincent Canby remembers seeing her for the first time in *Rain* (*New York Times*, April 6, 1946). She spent two seasons at the Woodstock (Illinois) Winter Playhouse (1947–1949).

Page was married twice: first to Alexander Schneider, and then for the last twenty-five years to Rip (Elmore) Torn. They had three children, now grown: their daughter Angelica and twin sons Anthony and Jonathan.

It was her performance as Alma in Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke* that catapulted Page into public prominence. In her first appearance with the new Circle in the Square company in New York, in the fall of 1951, she played the Pagan Crone in Garcia Lorca's *Yerma* to no critical notice whatsoever. But in April 1952, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* journeyed down to Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village and was struck by her performance in

Summer and Smoke. Thus was Geraldine Page "discovered," and the next year her name was in lights on Broadway. She played Lily Barton in Vina Delmar's *Midsummer*, opening at the Vanderbilt Theatre on January 21, 1953, winning for her the Theatre World Award, the Donaldson Award, and the New York Drama Critics Award for that season. From that date she was seldom out of public view. She created a memorable series of characterizations on the stage, acted in a long list of films, and appeared on television. She had a long and illustrious career.

On the strength of her discovery and her personal triumph in *Midsummer*, she did a series of "Best Plays" on radio in 1953—*Summer and Smoke*, *Ethan Frome*, and *The Glass Menagerie*—and was invited by Hollywood to play opposite John Wayne in *Hondo*, a Warner Brothers 3-D epic that earned her an Academy of Motion Picture Arts (Oscar) nomination as best supporting actress for 1954. She would not appear again in Hollywood for seven years. She returned to Broadway to open in *The Immoralist* on February 8, 1954, at the Royale Theatre; then played Lizzie Curry in *The Rainmaker*, opening at the Cort Theatre on October 28, 1954, with a performance described as "fresher than the play and equally funny" (*New York Times*, October 29, 1954). At the close of the Broadway run, the show toured through the spring of 1955 and played in London in May 1956, after Page's short run in *The Innkeepers* at the John Golden Theatre in New York in February 1956. The last three months of 1956 she spent at the Studebaker Theatre in Chicago, playing in repertory in *Desire Under the Elms*, *A Month in the Country*, and *The Immoralist*. In July of 1958 Page replaced Margaret Leighton in *Separate Tables*, which was playing at the Music Box Theatre in New York, and she went on tour with the show.

Then came another triumph with a cluster of awards. The play was Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth* (Martin Beck Theatre, March 10, 1959), for which she won both the Donaldson and the New York Drama Critics awards and a nomination for the Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award, as well as Chicago's Sarah Siddons Award. Playing the flamboyant Alexandra del Lago opposite Paul Newman, she was called "fabulous" by Brooks Atkinson (*New York Times*, March 10, 1959). The show ran for 375 performances; then Page and Newman went to Hollywood for the MGM film version, which was released in 1962, and for which Page won her third Oscar nomination. (Her second was for Alma in *Summer and Smoke*, with Laurence Harvey, released by Paramount in 1961.)

During her long career, Page appeared in dozens of stage plays and a long list of films, rather consistently alternating work in the theatre and in Hollywood. She was nominated for the Oscar seven times, finally winning the best actress award in 1985 for her sensitive performance in *The Trip to Bountiful*. It was in 1982 that she won the Tony for her performance in *Agnes of God* on Broadway. She had earlier twice won television's Emmy Award for her performance in ABC's *A Christmas Memory* (1966–1967) and *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (1968–1969). But awards are a mere by-product to this actress. She said: "I would like to live to be about 132 and to work all the time. . . . My total ambition is

to follow one project with another project and another project—an endless succession in which I can use different facets of the human state and communicate it and learn as I'm going" (Amitin interview, February 28, 1983). From her earliest triumphs to her latest she succeeded in an amazing variety of roles, bringing to each an unusual intensity and commitment. One of her most interesting projects was her involvement with the Actors Studio in the 1960s, when its director, Lee Strasberg, mounted Studio productions on Broadway. Page played Nina Leeds in Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* under the direction of José Quintero (Hudson Theatre, March 11, 1963) for 94 performances; and Olga, then Masha, in Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, directed by Strasberg himself (Morosco Theatre, June 22, 1964) for 119 performances. She particularly enjoyed the latter because, as she said some years later, "People like Chekhov and Shakespeare are really expressing more densely and more complicatedly, getting more information across per second on stage than most about humanness: who we are and what we do" (Amitin interview, February 28, 1983).

Additional leading roles on Broadway were in *P. S. I Love You* (1964), *The Great Indoors* (1966), *Black Comedy* (1967), *Angela* (1969), *Absurd Person Singular* (1974), *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980), *Mixed Couples* (1981), and *Blithe Spirit* (1987). She also performed in other venues. She appeared at the Locust Theatre in Philadelphia in *The Umbrella* (1962); at Philadelphia's Playhouse in the Park in Chekhov's *The Marriage Proposal* and *The Boor* (1971); at the Academy Festival in Lake Forest, Illinois, as Regina Giddens in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1974) and Blanche DuBois in Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1976); at the Hudson Guild Theatre in New York as Tekla in August Strindberg's *Creditors* (1977); and at the Promenade Theatre in New York as Lorraine in Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* (1985). She was a member of The Mirror Repertory Company, an acclaimed Off-Broadway group, and the Sanctuary Theatre, an acting ensemble founded by Page and her husband Rip Torn. Page based her acceptance of film roles on whether or not the character she was being invited to play was an interesting one that she would enjoy doing. She expressed her attitude toward film acting while working on Woody Allen's *Interiors* (United Artists, 1978), for which she won an Oscar nomination as best actress. She says, "As I explained to Mary Beth Hurt, in film you have no responsibility. Say to yourself all day, 'it's not my fault.' You must constantly remind yourself, 'I had nothing to do with this, and it's up to them to paste it together in a way that makes sense.' Just go ahead and enjoy whatever task he [Woody Allen] sets up. Let him figure it out" (Amitin interview, February 28, 1983). In such a fashion she obviously enjoyed her small role in *Pete 'n Tillie* (Universal, 1972), for which she was again nominated for a best supporting actress Award, as she had been for the role of the mother in Frank Coppola's *You're a Big Boy Now* (Warner, 1967). At last, in 1985, Geraldine Page was awarded an Oscar for her role as Carrie Watts in the film *The Trip to Bountiful*.

Geraldine Page died of a heart attack on June 13, 1987. She was appearing on Broadway as Madame Arcate in *Blithe Spirit* at the time of her death.

Page's long and active career was marked by her constant curiosity about human characteristics as embodied in a variety of roles. A devoted student of Stanislavsky and "The Method" as practiced at the Actors Studio, she once said, "Stan the Man. I'm so fond of him. He wrote all the stuff down . . . so you can keep working at it. After I graduated from Goodman I assumed . . . that I knew all about it. And then to find out that if I studied for the next ninety years I'd just be scratching the surface was divine. It's like suddenly being handed a bottomless cup" (*Tulane Drama Review*, Winter 1964, p. 130). This attitude, which Page maintained throughout her career, gave zest to her performances. Perhaps the final word on Page belongs to Tennessee Williams, in whose plays she performed so brilliantly: "She is the most disciplined and dedicated of actresses, possibly the one that fate will select as the American Duse" (*Where I Live*, 1978, p. 129).

A long interview with Page, "The Bottomless Cup" by Richard Schechner, in the *Tulane Drama Review* for Winter 1964, is very revealing of Page's methods of work. It is reprinted in Helen Krich Chinoy's *Actors on Acting* (1970). The unpublished interview (February 28, 1983) with Mark Hall Amitin shows that Page's work methods and points of view remained fairly constant throughout her career. Vincent Canby's feature article "Out of Marengo, Illinois, and Bound for Glory" (*New York Times*, April 6, 1986) is an interesting assessment of her career. Reviews of her numerous stage appearances can be found in the various chronological volumes of the *New York Times Theatre Reviews* and of the *New York Drama Critics Reviews*. An announcement of Page's death appeared on the first page of the *New York Times* on June 14, 1987. The next day the *New York Times* published her obituary and an appreciation of Page written by the drama critic Mel Gussow. Geraldine Page is included in *Current Biography*, 1953 (1954); *The Biographical Encyclopaedia and Who's Who of the American Theatre* (1966); William C. Young, *Famous Actors and Actresses on the American Stage*, Vol. II (1975); *Notable Names in the American Theatre* (1976); *Who's Who in the Theatre* (1981); *Who's Who in America, 1984–1985*, Vol. II (1984); *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre* (1984); and *Contemporary Theatre, Film, and Television*, Vol. I (1984).

Vera Mowry Roberts and
Mark Hall Amitin