

# PROFILES

## Julie Harris

What we know about Julie Harris the actress goes back just shy of fifty years to her 1945 Broadway debut in *It's a Gift*. Ten years later she co-starred with James Dean in Elia Kazan's *East of Eden*. What she accomplished in the ten years between and the thirty eight years hence is indeed the true stuff of legend. She has racked up more Tony Awards (five) for her starring roles on Broadway than any other actor or actress ever, and two Emmy awards for her television work as well. For those who don't know much about the early Julie Harris they might well recognize her from her running role as Lilimae Clements on CBS's series *Knots Landing*.

One of the most astounding aspects of her career is the phenomenal range of roles she has tackled. Many have been based on the lives of real people such as Emily Dickinson, Joan of Arc, Mary Todd Lincoln, Queen Victoria and Anastasia but she also essayed the original Sally Bowles in *I am a Camera* both on Broadway and the film as she did with her breakthrough role of Frankie in Carson McCullers' *A Member of the Wedding*. She has played in an astonishing array of major films since the 1950's including: *The Bell Jar*, *Gorillas in the Mist*, *Harper*, *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, *Voyage of the Damned*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and *The Haunting*. On stage the range is equally vast from Ophelia in *Hamlet* to the 1965 musical *Skyscraper*.

She returns in the Circle Repertory production of a new play *Fiery Furnace* by Timothy Mason and directed by Norman Rene (*Longtime Companion*, *Prelude to a Kiss*) opening at the Guild Hall Theatre August 13th through the 28th. (Information and reservations: 324-4050). September 22nd the play moves to the Lucille Lortell Theatre in New York City for an open ended run. Miss Harris discussed her work during an 8:00 am interview before dashing off to rehearsal:

**Hamptons Magazine:** Is *Fiery Furnace* a serious play?

**Julie Harris:** *Serious is a strange word. It's a drama. To me the play has a lot of power. Serious to me reminds me of my father saying, "I want to talk seriously," and I think, that's not what I want to hear. Serious to me is a little dull and undramatic. This is really a play about a family and things that are said and not said and the consequences of that. It also has a lot of humor and heartache in it.*

**HM:** Does it take place in the present?

**JH:** *It takes place over a period of thirteen years from 1950 to 1963.*

**HM:** What does the play have to say to you?

**JH:** *That families or people you love should all try to get through that veil of uncertainty and say what we mean; speak to each other really.*

**HM:** Through the years you have played such a series of roles including many historical figures as well as many sprung from the imagination. As an actress what is the difference in approaching the characters who really lived from the others?

**JH:** *In a person who has actually lived you can read about them. I also did Charlotte Bronte. Isaak Dinesen and that holy terror Florence Nightengale, They've left letters and diaries and you can hear their own words and the way they sounded and that's thrilling and quite different from doing something from someone's imagination. I've said to Timothy [Mason, author of *Fiery Furnace*] why did you have her say that? And it's not as easy to get to the heart of it in a fictional character because you're not sure, so jump in and swim and try to find the answers. We dig in and do research on the 1950's and farm life, this is a family living on a farm in Wisconsin, so we get a feeling of what happens; I had never heard of mother/daughter banquets but it was a very big thing in the 50's there; you can read about the culture and customs and backgrounds and apply them.*

**HM:** You made a big change in your career over the last few years by appearing as an ongoing character on *Knott's Landing*. How was that for you?

**JH:** *I was on *Knott's Landing* for seven years. Surprising to me because I signed on for just the first year and it sort of went on and on. I loved doing it. I liked the actors I worked with very much and sometimes I got an interesting story to do. I was, after all, a secondary character on the show, but I really enjoyed it and very often we got wonderful directors.*

**HM:** During all these years you've been on stage you've only done one musical, *Skyscraper*, what was that experience like?

**JH:** *It was terrifying. But I was very glad I did it, I made wonderful friendships, that's where Charles Nelson Reilly and I met and he has been a great friend and inspiration to me. Cy Feuer was a wonderful director to work for and he was very loving and gave me a lot of support and he made it as comfortable as possible. Still it was terrifying to stand on a huge stage and sing over an orchestra.*

**HM:** Where do you make your home now?

**JH:** *On Cape Cod in Chatham, Massachusetts.*



**HM:** Of all the marvelous roles you've played, which remains the one fixed closest to your heart?

**JH:** *There are several. I went to the Hundred Years of Broadway photo exhibit and there were two very special pictures of the production *A Member of the Wedding* with Brandon De Wilde, Ethel Waters and myself and I looked at them, one I'd never seen before, Brandon looking forward with that sweet little face and Ethel had a wonderful expression... that was a very special play for me, but *The Lark* was too and *The Belle of Amherst* and *The Last of Mrs. Lincoln*. Then there was a play I loved by Paul Zindel, *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little* and this last solo play I did about Isaak Dinesen, *Lucifer's Child*.*

**HM:** You are one of the few actresses that still wants to take theatre on the road so that people see these works and you. What is there about touring that you like so?

**JH:** *I think it's very exciting. Roberta Maxwell and I just finished a tour in January of Peter Schaffer's *Lettuce and Lovage*. We traveled with that for eight months. I just love it. Last year at this time, we were just going to Seattle and there were many, many people who came up to us thanking us for bringing this play there. That sort of says it, doesn't it?*

**HM:** What is it about the theatre itself that keeps drawing you back and keeps it alive?

**JH:** *It's where I began. I love theatre. Since I've been in rehearsal I've seen twelve plays. ▲*

By Mark Hall Amitin