



Bankhead, Tallulah (1903?-1968)

by Benjamin Trimmier

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Tallulah Bankhead is today remembered mostly as an irreverent wit and volcanic life force rather than as an actress. She was, however, a significant artist, originating two of twentieth-century American drama's most substantial female characters: Regina Giddens in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1939) and Sabrina in Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1943).

Born in Huntsville, Alabama on January 31, 1903 (or perhaps 1901) into a prominent political family, Tallulah was the daughter of a Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives and the granddaughter and niece of U.S. Senators. Her career began when she won *Picture-Play* magazine's national talent search at the age of 15. Her prize, a three-week studio contract, brought her east. The promised silent screen career fizzled, but she was to have remarkable theatrical successes, both in London and New York.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, Tallulah attempted a movie career, but with little success. However, her impact on the Hollywood community was considerable. She rented the palatial home of silent movie star William Haines and hosted parties whose regular guests included Ethel Barrymore, Marlene Dietrich, and George Cukor.

Her drug-taking, scatological language, and voracious sexual appetite were widely reported. Her sexual liaisons allegedly included Dietrich and Greta Garbo. Summing up the breadth of her indulgences, Tallulah said, "My daddy warned me about men and booze but he didn't say a word about women and cocaine!"

Unable to transfer stage success to cinema, Tallulah saw many of her most significant roles performed on screen by Bette Davis, who starred in the film versions of *Dark Victory* (1935) and *The Little Foxes* (1941), for which she received Academy Award nominations. Davis won an Academy Award for another Bankhead-originated role in *Jezebel* (1938).

Eventually Tallulah played a part worthy of her talents in Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1943). Although the New York Society of Film Critics voted her best actress for her performance in *Lifeboat*, the Academy Awards overlooked her.

Disheartened, Tallulah left Hollywood in 1944, embarking on a legendary revival of Noël Coward's *Private Lives*, which would occupy her for the next six years.

Tallulah turned to radio in 1950 with *The Big Show*. The ninety-minute variety program was a final attempt by NBC to attract dwindling radio dollars from burgeoning television markets. NBC invested an unprecedented \$50,000 per program.

As Mistress of Ceremonies, Tallulah was not only "Mistress" but also often the object of the show's humor,



Top: A portrait of Tallulah Bankhead created by Carl Van Vechten in 1934.

Above: Tallulah Bankhead in the film *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1943). The portrait by Carl Van Vechten courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

which centered on her drinking, advancing age, androgynous voice, and diminishing sexual appeal. A critical and commercial success, the program became a Sunday evening ritual in millions of homes.

The Big Show began an unintended transformation of Tallulah's career: she became a professional parody of herself. Ironically, that caricature is what resonates in gay mythology: the wisecracking, decadent, ambisexual, and larger-than-life diva.

Indeed, she profited from her persona, in lectures, personal appearances, and a best-selling autobiography, *Tallulah* (1952). She even played Las Vegas for a then astounding \$20,000 per week.

However, the price of Tallulah's self-parody revealed itself in a fabled 1956 New York revival of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Despite her gallant and purportedly engrossing portrayal of Blanche DuBois, her legions of gay admirers would not surrender to her efforts and laughed inappropriately throughout the performances. She was humiliated.

Although continuing to work in the theater, she would never again attempt parts beyond her natural range.

In 1963, she flirted with brilliance in Williams' *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. Unfortunately, addled from thirty years of cigarettes, bourbon, and opiates, she was unable to memorize her lines. The play closed on Broadway after five performances.

Encumbered by emphysema, Tallulah took refuge in her New York townhouse. She ventured out professionally twice more. She played a fanatical harridan in the 1965 pseudo-Gothic horror film *Die! Die! My Darling!* And in 1967, she portrayed a camp villainess, the Black Widow, on the popular television series *Batman*.

Tallulah Bankhead's death on December 12, 1968 warranted a photograph and two-column obituary on the front page of the *New York Times*.

Bibliography

Bret, David. *Tallulah Bankhead: A Scandalous Life*. New York: Robson Books/Parkwest, 1996.

Gill, Brendan. *Tallulah*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1972.

Israel, Lee. *Miss Tallulah Bankhead*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972.

About the Author

Benjamin Trimmier is a painter and installation artist affiliated with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City.