



## Cornell, Katharine, (1893-1974) and Guthrie McClintic (1893-1961) 1893-1974

by Charles Krinsky

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Guthrie McClintic and Katharine Cornell in 1954.

For forty years, actress Katharine Cornell and her husband, director Guthrie McClintic, sustained one of the most celebrated and successful partnerships in the American theater.

McClintic first directed Cornell in 1925 when she starred as Iris March in Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat*. They went on to collaborate on a total of twenty-eight productions, most of which they presented under their own management. They achieved their greatest success in 1931 when, under McClintic's direction, Cornell portrayed Elizabeth Barrett in Rudolph Besier's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*.

Even in theatrical circles, little was known about Cornell's and McClintic's sexual lives beyond the general impression that both were gay. However, it seems clear that their relationship was a nonsexual one, at least after the first few years, and that both partners consistently pursued same-sex attachments. Nevertheless, McClintic and Cornell remained a devoted couple from their marriage in 1921 until McClintic's death in 1961.

Cornell was born on February 16, 1893, in Berlin, Germany, where her father Peter, a doctor, was completing postgraduate work in surgery. She grew up in Buffalo, New York, where, a few years after returning to the United States, Peter Cornell became part owner and manager of the Star Theater. Although Cornell was close to her father, her mother Alice suffered from depression and alcoholism, and the young girl seems to have endured a somewhat lonely and isolated childhood.

Cornell often attended performances at her father's theater, and she determined she would become an actress after seeing Maude Adams play the role of Peter Pan there. At fifteen, Cornell entered Miss Merrill's School in Mamaroneck, New York, where she studied dramatic arts and, after graduating in 1915, taught for a year.

In 1916, soon after her mother's death, Cornell made her professional debut as a member of the Washington Square Players (a forerunner of the Theatre Guild). After two years with the Players, Cornell joined the well-known Jessie Bonstelle Stock Company in Buffalo and Detroit.

Guthrie McClintic was born in Seattle, Washington on August 6, 1893. As a young boy, he ran away from home to join a repertory company. Stranded, he was rescued by his parents, who promised to support him in his theatrical ambitions. After attending local Seattle schools and the University of Washington, McClintic studied at New York's American Academy of Dramatic Arts from 1910 to 1912.

He began his career as an actor, but soon became a stage manager and casting director for a leading Broadway producer, Winthrop Ames. Ames offered to finance a production for Guthrie to direct as soon as a suitable project could be found.

The turning point in McClintic's and Cornell's lives and careers took place in 1921 when, still working as a

casting director, Guthrie saw Cornell during auditions for Rachel Crothers's play, *Nice People*, and wrote in his notebook, "Interesting. Monotonous. Watch." McClintic (whose first brief marriage to actress Estelle Winwood ended in divorce) and Cornell were wed on September 8, 1921.

On December 23, 1921, McClintic, having found his project, made a successful Broadway directorial debut helming Ames's production of A. A. Milne's *The Dover Road*. The same year, after appearing as Eileen Baxter-Jones in *Nice People*, Cornell became a star playing Sydney Fairfield, the daughter of a shell shocked World War I veteran, in Clemence Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement*.

Cornell and McClintic reached the height of their renown during the 1930s and early 1940s. With McClintic's encouragement, Cornell turned from the melodramas in which she first gained popularity to play a range of classical and challenging contemporary roles.

Among her greatest triumphs were Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* (1934); Joan of Arc in *Saint Joan* (1936), *Candida* in *Candida* (1937), a part she first acted in 1924; Jennifer Dubedat in *The Doctors' Dilemma* (1941); and Masha in *The Three Sisters* (1942). At a time when New York was increasingly becoming the hub of American theatrical activity, Cornell persisted in touring with her successes across the country, often before bringing them to Broadway.

Cornell's accomplishments were such that critic Alexander Woolcott called her "The First Lady of the American Stage." Many commentators remarked that Cornell's performances combined polished technique (and in particular a well-trained voice) with an air of sexual abandon. Considered a great beauty, her looks were highly distinctive.

She was slim (which made her seem taller than she was), with a wide face, angular features, full lips, high cheekbones, pale skin, and thick, black hair that she usually wore long. On seeing a photograph of Cornell, Bernard Shaw characterized her appearance as that of a "gorgeous dark lady from the cradle of the human race."

Cornell worked almost exclusively with McClintic after their initial success together. Throughout his career, however, McClintic continued to direct plays in which Cornell did not appear. Among his greatest successes without Cornell were Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset* (1935) and *High Tor* (1937), a revival of *Hamlet* starring John Gielgud (1936), and a stage version of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1936).

McClintic's directorial style was distinguished by a strong visual component, evident in sets, costumes, lighting, and stage composition. He was also known for his ability to elicit outstanding performances from stars and supporting players alike.

Cornell and McClintic were markedly dissimilar in personality and style of living, and they designed their living arrangements to accommodate these disparities. Offstage, Cornell was, like Greta Garbo (to whom she was often compared), reserved, self-effacing, and somewhat aloof. Over the years, she carried on a handful of long-term romances with women. In contrast, McClintic was nervous, hot-tempered, sociable, gossipy, and sexually promiscuous.

Early in their marriage, the couple rented (and later purchased) a large house at 23 Beekman Place in Manhattan, which they furnished with pieces used in their productions. By mutual agreement, the third floor of the residence was her exclusive domain, the fourth floor was his, while the floors below were open to both.

Their careers faltered after World War II, though McClintic and Cornell continued to enjoy some notable successes, as in their productions of *Antony and Cleopatra* (1947), which attained a long-run record for that play, and *The Constant Wife* (1951).

Cornell, who had long suffered from stage fright, retired shortly after McClintic's death, which occurred on October 29, 1961. Her last role was that of Mrs. Patrick Campbell in *Dear Liar* (1960), Jerome Kilty's dramatization of the Shaw-Campbell correspondence.

In later years, Cornell sold the Beekman Place house and, though she kept an apartment in New York, spent much of her time at her home in Vineyard Haven on Martha's Vineyard Island, Massachusetts.

Until her death on June 9, 1974, Cornell's neighbor and closest companion was Nancy Hamilton (1904-1985), a sketch writer and lyricist for several Broadway revues, who served as assistant manager and understudy when Cornell toured the European Theater of Operations in a revival of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* during 1944-1945.

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**Charles Krinsky** serves as Senior Lecturer in the College of Professional Studies of Northeastern University. His current research focuses on the construction of youth in American film and television. He is the editor of *Moral Panics over Contemporary Children and Youth* (2000).