



## Le Gallienne, Eva (1899-1991)

by Yolanda Retter

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First Row (l to r): Eva Le Gallienne in *The Master Builder* (1925) and as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* (1929).

Second Row (l to r): Le Gallienne in a portrait photograph (1931), and in *The Swan* (1923).

A gifted actress who loved her craft, Eva Le Gallienne was one of the most successful figures in American theater for several decades. In addition to being an actress, she was also a director, producer, teacher, and memoirist, as well as a translator of the works of Ibsen, Chekhov, and others.

Le Gallienne was born in London on January 11, 1899, the daughter of English poet Richard Le Gallienne and his second wife, Danish journalist Julie Norregard. Her parents divorced when she was three years old and her childhood was divided between time with her mother in Paris and time with her bon vivant father in England.

Le Gallienne's first professional stage appearance was at the age of 15, in Maurice Maeterlinck's *Monna Vanna* in 1914. A year later, she and her mother sailed for New York. After refusing to be over-directed in New York, Eva traveled to Arizona and California where she worked in several theater productions.

In 1918, Le Gallienne had an affair with the flamboyant Hollywood actress Alla Nazimova. When the glow with Nazimova faded, she became involved with set designer and writer Mercedes de Acosta, a former paramour of Nazimova's. While Le Gallienne and de Acosta were together, they visited Europe and spent time at Natalie Barney's lesbian salon in Paris.

Although Le Gallienne had many lovers, she was never comfortable with her lesbianism and briefly considered a "front" marriage to actor Basil Rathbone.

By 1920, Le Gallienne had returned to New York. She signed a contract with theater impresarios the Shuberts and became popular on the theater circuit. She earned recognition in Arthur Richman's *Not So Long Ago* (1920) and scored a triumph in Ferenc Molnár's *Liliom* (1921).

Dissatisfied with the commercial theater of the day, Le Gallienne sought to develop a repertory company that would offer quality productions at low prices. In 1926, she opened her Civic Repertory Theater, for which she not only acted but also produced and directed plays, especially the works of Chekhov and Ibsen. It was a great critical success.

A year later she founded The Apprentice Group, a free school for actors. Poet May Sarton, a graduate of the school, became one of Le Gallienne's lifelong confidantes.

In 1927 Eva began a relationship with married actress Josephine Hutchinson. When Hutchinson's husband initiated divorce proceedings and named Le Gallienne as a correspondent, the media had a field day. They referred to Hutchinson as "the shadow actress." At the time, the term "shadow" was a euphemism for "lesbian."

Five months later, Le Gallienne daringly produced *Alison's House*, a play about Emily Dickinson, who by then

was suspected by a small cognoscenti to have been a lesbian. The critics panned the production, but the play won a Pulitzer Prize.

After the Hutchinson divorce scandal, Le Gallienne began to drink heavily. According to biographer Robert Schanke, Le Gallienne's guilt over her lesbian feelings continued to haunt her. One cold night, she wandered drunkenly over to a neighbor's house and told her, "If you have any thoughts about being a lesbian, don't do it. Your life will be nothing but tragedy."

In late 1929, just after the stock market crashed, Le Gallienne graced the cover of *Time magazine*. The accompanying article reported that The Civic Repertory Theater was one of the few theaters still playing to full houses. It also noted that the audience always contained "personal admirers of Directrix Le Gallienne, including mannish-looking women in suits tailored like hers and carrying canes."

During the Great Depression, President Roosevelt offered Le Gallienne the directorship of the National Theater Division of the Works Progress Administration. Le Gallienne refused the position on the grounds that she was more interested in nurturing true talent than in providing jobs for hungry actors.

In declining this position, she lost an opportunity to keep the Civic afloat. To entreaties that she move the company uptown to Broadway and charge higher admission prices, she responded that "the theater should be an instrument for giving, not a machinery for getting." Despite its large audiences, however, the Civic's expenses often exceeded its income, and the company folded in 1935.

In the late 1930s Le Gallienne began a relationship with theater director Margaret Webster. Le Gallienne, Webster, and producer Cheryl Crawford co-founded the American Repertory Theater, which ran from 1946 to 1948. During the post-World War II anticommunist hysteria, however, left-leaning Webster and Crawford were harassed by government witch hunters. Le Gallienne, ever apolitical, escaped unscathed.

Although Le Gallienne continued performing until the end of her life, after the closure of the American Repertory Theater she mostly lived quietly with her companion Marion Evensen. In the late 1950s, she had a notable success as Queen Elizabeth in *Mary Stewart* and also appeared in several television specials, winning an Emmy for one performance. In 1964, she received a Tony Award for her production of Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

At the age of eighty, Le Gallienne was cast along with Ellen Burstyn in Daniel Petrie's film *Resurrection*. Le Gallienne's performance as Grandma Pearl earned her an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress.

Her last role was in 1983 in a segment of the television drama *St. Elsewhere*. The episode was a fiasco, reportedly because Le Gallienne was drunk during most of the taping.

Le Gallienne died at the age of 92 on June 3, 1992.

She had acted in or directed nearly 150 live theater productions, given 16 film and television performances, made dozens of radio broadcasts, and recorded a score of records and tapes. She wrote four books, including the memoir *With a Quiet Heart* (1953), a biography of Eleanora Duse, and numerous articles for periodicals.

Actress Jane Alexander wrote that: "People called Helen Hayes the grand dame of the theatre but it really should be Le G[allienne]. There is nobody else like her; she did it all."

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#### **About the Author**

**Yolanda Retter** was a lesbian activist based in Los Angeles. She was head librarian/archivist at the Chicano Studies Resource Center at UCLA. She compiled the Lesbian History Project website: <http://www-lib.usc.edu/~retter/main.html>.