



Moorehead, Agnes (1900-1974)

by Linda Rapp

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Agnes Moorehead is probably best known for her role as Endora, the tart-tongued mother-in-law on the situation comedy *Bewitched*. When she took on that part, however, she had already had a long, varied, and distinguished acting career.

Sources often give the year of Moorehead's birth as 1906. Like many actresses of her era, she shaved a few years off her age in order to remain in contention for good parts. Agnes Robertson Moorehead was in fact born December 6, 1900 in Clinton, Massachusetts, where her father was serving as a Presbyterian minister. His pastoral assignments took the family to Hamilton, Ohio in 1904 and to St. Louis eight years later.

Moorehead spent four years in the ballet and chorus of the St. Louis Municipal Opera Company. By the time that she graduated from high school she was considering a career on the stage. Her parents did not discourage her ambitions, but her father insisted that she receive a sound education first. She enrolled at Muskingum College, a Presbyterian school in New Concord, Ohio that had been founded by her uncle. She appeared in student plays there before graduating in 1923. She then continued her studies at the University of Wisconsin, from which she graduated with a master's degree in English and public speaking. While studying at Wisconsin she also worked as a high school English teacher and drama coach.

In 1926 Moorehead went to New York, where she auditioned successfully for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. While pursuing her course there she taught acting at a private school and appeared in several plays. She graduated from the Academy with honors in 1929.

The following June she married John Griffith Lee, who had been a fellow student at the Academy. Finding no success as an actor, Lee took over the management of the large Ohio farm that had been in Moorehead's family since her great-grandparents' day.

Moorehead, meanwhile, was embarking on a theatrical career. She toured with several companies, but when the Depression made opportunities scarce, she turned to radio. Her talents were much in demand. She was featured on many shows, sometimes as many as seven or eight in a day.

Among the most memorable of Moorehead's radio performances came in *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1943) on the *Suspense* program. In a role written especially for her by Lucille Fletcher, Moorehead portrayed a bedridden woman who is going to be murdered. She was severely disappointed when the lead role of the film version of the play went to Barbara Stanwyck.

Moorehead's radio work included several performances with Orson Welles. Beginning in 1937 she spent two years acting on the extremely popular program *The Shadow*, and she also had an uncredited bit part in Welles' classic *War of the Worlds* (1938).

Moorehead also participated with Welles in the Mercury Theatre Group, memorably appearing in a modern-



Agnes Moorehead dressed in costume as a witch for the "Rapunzel" episode of the television show *Shirley Temple's Storybook* (1958). Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

dress production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in 1937. When the company moved to California in 1939 to work with RKO films Moorehead also traveled west and began her screen career.

Moorehead appeared in more than sixty films over three decades. She was nominated for the Academy Award for best supporting actress four times (1942, 1944, 1948, and 1964).

Moorehead's first cinematic role was as Charles Foster Kane's mother in Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). Welles also directed her in her second film, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), for which she garnered her first Academy Award nomination and won the New York Film Critics award.

At the same time that Moorehead was appearing in films she made occasional returns to the stage, including a performance as Lady Macbeth in a 1947 production directed by Welles.

Moorehead's busy professional schedule kept her from spending much time with her husband, but fan magazines alluded to her eagerness to take every opportunity to return to Ohio and work beside him on the family farm. The stories are reminiscent of those that portrayed Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne as delighting in agrarian domesticity.

Moorehead divorced Lee in 1952. She complained that her husband--by then estranged--called her his "meal ticket."

The following year she married Robert Gist, who was some twenty years her junior. The union was short-lived. The couple separated in 1954 amidst charges by Moorehead that Gist had been unfaithful. They eventually divorced in 1958.

While Moorehead continued to appear in numerous films, she also had a successful turn as a director in a 1955 stage production of George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*. The play opened in San Francisco and then toured Canada and the Pacific Northwest to enthusiastic audience response.

Moorehead also had great success with a one-woman show in which she toured both in the United States and abroad from 1954 until 1970. Her readings included selections from the works for which she was best known, including *Sorry, Wrong Number*, *Don Juan in Hell*, and later *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964, directed by Robert Aldrich), for which she received a Golden Globe Award and an Academy Award nomination. Among the other sources from which she read were the Bible and the works of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marcel Proust, James Thurber, and Robert Frost.

Moorehead made numerous television appearances beginning in 1953 and won an Emmy award for her guest performance on *The Wild, Wild West* in 1967, but many viewers remember her primarily for her role as Endora, the acerbic witch mother-in-law on the situation comedy *Bewitched* (1964-1972). The part brought her five more Emmy nominations. Moorehead's co-stars on *Bewitched* included gay actors Paul Lynde and Dick Sargent. The role of Endora was a campy romp, with Moorehead arrayed in extravagant costumes and displaying the personality of an imperious diva.

Moorehead starred in a revival of *Don Juan in Hell* in 1973 and continued to work in television, movies, and on the musical stage in Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's *Gigi* until ill health forced her to retire. She died of lung cancer in Rochester, Minnesota on April 30, 1974.

There had long been rumors in Hollywood about lesbian relationships involving Moorehead, but she was consistently circumspect in commenting on her personal life. She admitted "a certain amount of aloofness on [her] part at times, because an actor can so easily be hurt by unfair criticism," adding that "an artist should . . . maintain glamour and a kind of mystery."

No doubt Moorehead's circumspection was also motivated by the knowledge that openness as a lesbian

would have had disastrous consequences for her career.

Her *Bewitched* co-star Lynde, himself closeted, was less reticent, saying, "The whole world knows that Agnes was a lesbian--I mean classy, but one of the all-time Hollywood dykes." He further stated that "when one of her husbands was caught cheating, so the story goes, Agnes screamed at him that if he could have a mistress, so could she!"

Patricia White calls Moorehead's body of work her "queer career," pointing out that her roles "encompassed a gallery of types connoting female difference." These included a WAC officer, a madam, and the superintendent of a women's prison. Moorehead often played unmarried women--spinster aunts, nuns, governesses, and ladies' companions. In White's analysis, these "character types . . . connoting 'asexuality' or 'masculinity,' have qualities that significantly overlap with those attributed to lesbians" and "connote, if not lesbian identity, at least the *problem* of heterosexual identity."

Such roles made Moorehead a lesbian icon on stage, screen, and television.

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