



Skinner, Cornelia Otis (1901-1979)

by Michael G. Cornelius

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Although she is now all but forgotten, during the middle of the twentieth century, American author and actress Cornelia Otis Skinner was renowned as a sublime comic talent and gifted character actress.

The daughter of actors Otis Skinner and Maud (Durbin) Skinner, Cornelia Otis Skinner was born in Chicago on May 30, 1901. After attending Bryn Mawr College and studying acting at the Sorbonne, she joined her father's company in the dramatic play *Blood and Sand* on Broadway in 1921.

She appeared in five more Broadway shows, including *Will Shakespeare* and *The Wild Westcotts*, before embarking in 1926 on a three-year national tour in a one-woman show she also wrote and produced.

She penned her first play, *Captain Fury*, in 1925, and went on to compose seven other dramatic works, most notably *The Wives of Henry VIII* (1931) and, with Samuel Taylor, *The Pleasure of His Company* (1958). She also performed in such plays as Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1946) and Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1956).

A Renaissance woman, Skinner was the author of numerous essays and several collections of light verse. Her work is characterized by wit and deft social criticism.

Collections of her work include *Tiny Garments* (1932), *Excuse It, Please!* (1936), *Nuts in May* (1950), and *The Ape in Me* (1959). Her best known work is the best-selling *Our Hearts Were Young and Gay* (1942), a humorous travelogue written with Emily Kimbrough describing a European vacation. Skinner also penned a well-received biography of Sarah Bernhardt, *Madame Sarah* (1967).

Although she is best known as a stage actress, and especially for her one-woman shows and monologues, Skinner also appeared in several films. Her first role was a small part as Miskah in *Kismet* (1920), and her most notable roles were as Mrs. Hammar in *The Swimmer* and as Miss Holloway in *The Uninvited* (1944).

Our Hearts Were Young and Gay is an interesting mix of lesbian homoerotic subtext and an almost childish naïveté regarding sexuality. Kimbrough seems surprised by such erotic contexts as the painting "Leda and the Swan" and startled to hear why Oscar Wilde was sent to prison. Skinner, the narrator of the book, recites these passages with an almost bemused tone, though she never describes her relationship with Kimbrough as anything more than homosocial.

Skinner's works often feature close bonds between young girls. She was also attracted to sexually ambiguous roles as an actress. Perhaps the best example of this is the rather heavy-handed lesbian subtext in *The Uninvited* involving the Gail Russell character's late stepmother (one of the ghosts now haunting the manor) and Skinner's mysterious Miss Holloway.

Despite her marriage to Alden Sanford Blodget (1928?-1964), the relationships that were most important in her own life seem to have been with other women.



Cornelia Otis Skinner in 1913.
Photograph by Arnold Genthe, September 4, 1913.
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