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EVA LE GALLIENNE: FIRST LADY OF REPERTORY.

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EVA LE GALLIENNE: FIRST LADY OF REPERTORY

by

Robert A. Schanke

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Speech and Dramatic Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Tice L. Miller

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 1975

**TITLE**

EVA LE GALLIENNE: FIRST LADY OF REPERTORY

**BY**

Robert A. Schanke

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**GRADUATE COLLEGE**

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## PREFACE

On the evening of April 5, 1964, New York's Belasco Theatre was filled with such notable theatre personalities as John Gielgud, Katharine Cornell, Margaret Leighton, Lillian Gish, June Havoc, and Lillian Hellman. They had come to see Eva Le Gallienne star in her adaptation of Chekhov's The Seagull. But more important, they had come to celebrate her fiftieth anniversary in the theatre. That night Adlai Stevenson, the United States' delegate to the United Nations, presented her with a silver bowl from the American National Theatre and Academy in recognition of her "outstanding contributions to the art of the living theater and her leadership in the cause of repertory in America."<sup>1</sup> The next day, Howard Taubman of the New York Times pointed out that "after fifty years in the theater, Eva Le Gallienne's gallantry in serving is undiminished. . . . She still pursues an unshakable goal with invincible determination."<sup>2</sup>

At the time of the presentation she was not only acting and directing, but also serving as honorary president of the National Repertory Theatre, an organization devoted to touring the classics. Such activity was really nothing new for her. From 1926 to 1933 she had managed her own Civic Repertory Theatre in New York City, where she

championed the plays of Ibsen and Chekhov. In the mid-forties she had founded, along with Margaret Webster and Cheryl Crawford, the American Repertory Theatre. Although all three companies collapsed, Le Gallienne never lost her determination to establish a repertory theatre. Even at the age of seventy-five she said, "if I were twenty years younger, I'd have another shot at it. I still believe there is a vast audience who wants the best in the theatre."<sup>3</sup>

Her career could have been much different. From 1920 to 1925 she was one of Broadway's leading ladies, having starred successfully in Not So Long Ago, Liliom, and The Swan. Her future in the American theatre was assured. She could have had for the asking nearly any role she wanted. With success, however, she had learned to resent the long runs, the type casting, and the high ticket prices. The New York theatre, she argued, had become "big business," and she was not interested in that. She left Broadway, therefore, and spent the rest of her career trying to establish a repertory theatre.

Her valiant efforts did not escape criticism. Led by George Jean Nathan, her detractors complained that she posed as a "reincarnated Joan of Arc with faint overtones of Jesus."<sup>4</sup> In the 30s and 40s her persistence in presenting Ibsen and Chekhov caused many critics to call her work dull and irrelevant. And yet she continued. She refused to abandon her vision of what theatre in America should be. When asked recently if she had ever grown

weary of the struggle, if she had ever thought of giving up, she answered bluntly and firmly, "no, I've never been lazy!"<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this study is to detail and to analyze the triumphs and disappointments she encountered in trying to achieve her high ideals. Miss Le Gallienne supplied valuable information during two lengthy interviews conducted in the summer of 1974. In these discussions and in occasional telephone conversations, she was not only gracious in her comments, but genuinely warm and inspiring. Other helpful interviews were conducted with Tedd Fetter, a former apprentice at the Civic Repertory Theatre and currently Curator of the Music and Theatre Collection of the Museum of the City of New York; Mary Merrill, Curator of Costumes at the Museum of the City of New York; Marnie Andrews of the Press Department of the Seattle Repertory Theatre; Dr. Rod Bladel, Librarian at the Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library; Michael Kahn, Artistic Director of the American Shakespeare Theatre; Staats Cotsworth, an actor who performed with Le Gallienne in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s; Katherine Squire, an actress who toured with Le Gallienne during the 1939-1940 season; Sloane Shelton, an actress who toured with Le Gallienne as a member of the National Repertory Theatre; and Margaret Hilton, an actress who performed in Le Gallienne's 1975 production of A Doll's House at the Seattle Repertory Theatre. Through correspondence, actors Paul Ballantyne



and Irene Worth provided revealing impressions of Le Gallienne's acting.

Miss Le Gallienne has published two autobiographies: At 33 and With a Quiet Heart. Although they are both stimulating reading, they lack critical objectivity and trace her career only to 1951. Many of her productions, even successful ones, are not mentioned, and others only briefly.

In 1967, Paul Reuben Cooper completed a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Illinois entitled "Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre." Although it covers the years from 1926 through 1935, the primary focus is on the six seasons the company performed in its own New York theatre. His emphasis is on her management of the theatre. Only slight discussion is provided about Le Gallienne's acting. He does deal with her directing, but limits his analysis to only a few productions. Because of his more limited emphasis, Cooper did not deal with out-of-town reviews of productions nor with the Otto Kahn Collection at Princeton University. These papers provide valuable information about the founding of the Civic Repertory Theatre. In 1969, Le Gallienne donated seventeen of her Civic costumes to the Museum of the City of New York. Cooper did not have access to these costumes when he conducted his research.

In order to make this study complete, research was undertaken at the following libraries: Joseph Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago, the Chicago Historical

Society, the Wisconsin Historical Society, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University, Butler Library of Columbia University, Theatre Collection of the Museum of the City of New York, Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library, Theatre Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia, Cleveland Public Library, Detroit Public Library, Amherst College Library, Princeton University Library, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives. Additional information was supplied by the libraries of the University of Indiana, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Texas at Austin.

## FOOTNOTES TO PREFACE

<sup>1</sup> New York Times, March 25, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> New York Times, April 6, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Eva Le Gallienne, July 26, 1974.

<sup>4</sup> George Jean Nathan, "The Theatre," American Mercury, 13 (March, 1928), 377-78.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Eva Le Gallienne, July 30, 1974.

## CHAPTER I

### THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS: HER EUROPEAN BACKGROUND

The story of Eva Le Gallienne begins when she was born in London on January 11, 1899. It was a significant time in English history. Not only was it the turn of the century, but it was also the end of an era which began with Queen Victoria's coronation in 1837. For more than forty years, Englishmen had enjoyed prosperity and peace. But by the last quarter of the century, developments occurred to threaten the security and moral smugness of the Victorian age. The growth of England's export trade was brought to a halt, leading to the depression of the 70s and 80s. Pessimism resulting from the poverty and unemployment was so prevalent that between 1886 and 1888 more than 51,000 Englishmen migrated to other continents. Only a few months after Eva Le Gallienne was born, Parliament declared war on the two Boer Republics of South Africa, causing great internal dissension in England.

The restless atmosphere was clearly reflected in the arts of the time. The 1890s was the "mauve decade," the "fin de siecle." Dissatisfied with the idealized and highly moralized conventions of Victorian society, a segment of

English artists had first turned to depicting the actual and the commonplace. By the 90s, however, many had found such subjects vulgar and boring and had begun instead a search for beauty. Influenced by Baudelaire and Verlaine, they sought not a utilitarian art but an intensity of feeling, with heavy emphasis on symbolism, music, and color. The founder of the English aesthetic movement, Walter Pater, declared, "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end."<sup>1</sup> He believed that man must live intensely and with no regard for morality.

If Pater was the founder of the movement, Oscar Wilde was its chief spokesman. In his sensational personal life he put Pater's theory into practice, bringing himself considerable disgrace but also great popularity. His comedies, which appear to modern audiences as delightful farces, were intended as satires on Victorian manners. Although less well-known, his serious writings also represent the movement. His hero in The Picture of Dorian Gray is in search of intense sensations. In his quest for pleasure he bans every belief and every feeling which limits enjoyment. Salome, written in 1893 with decadent imagery and perverse passions, reflects the work of the French symbolists. Arguing "art for art's sake," Wilde proclaimed, "as long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or pleasure . . . it is outside the proper sphere of art."<sup>2</sup>

One of Wilde's close associates was Eva's father,

Richard Le Gallienne. They first met after Le Gallienne's successful publication of a book on George Meredith in 1890. The book's popularity, besides gaining him a position on the London Star where he worked alongside George Bernard Shaw, drew him into the top literary circles. In 1891 Le Gallienne and Wilde, together with William Butler Yeats, Arthur Symonds, and Max Beerbohm, founded the Rhymers' Club. Meeting casually at Samuel Johnson's Chesire Cheese Restaurant on Fleet Street, members discussed literature and read their latest creations.

Through these meetings Le Gallienne grew to respect Wilde's impudent humor, recognizing the intended seriousness:

Out of the 1890 chaos he [Wilde] emerged an astonishing, impudent microcosm. In him the period might see its own face in a glass. And it is because it did see its own face in him that it first admired, then grew afraid, and then destroyed him. . . . Wilde did gaily and flippantly what some men were doing in dead earnest, with humour and wit for his weapons. . . . Indeed, he made dying Victorianism laugh at itself, and it may be said to have died of laughter.<sup>3</sup>

Eva's father idolized Wilde for attempting to escape from the deadening Victorian conventions, but even more so for living his life fully, daringly, and without compromise.

During these years with the Rhymers' Club, Richard Le Gallienne began to develop an interest in the theatre.

Perhaps inspired by J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre production of Ghosts, he traveled to Norway in anticipation of meeting Ibsen. Knowing that the playwright usually lunched at the Grand Cafe in Christiania, he and a friend waited there expectantly:

Punctually on the stroke of one, there entering the doorway was the dour and bristling presence known to all the world. . . . The great ruff of white whisker, ferociously standing out all round his sallow, bilious face, as if dangerously charged with electricity, the immaculate silk hat, the white tie, the frock-coated martinet's figure, dressed from top to toe in old-fashioned black broadcloth, at once funereal and professorial. . . . All was there apparitionally visible before me: . . . there he was, with a touch . . . of grim dandyism about him. . . . He might have been a Scotch elder entering the kirk. . . . As one man, the whole cafe was on its feet in an attitude of salute. . . . All remained standing till he had taken his seat, as in the presence of a king.<sup>4</sup>

To Eva's father, Ibsen represented the finest in modern playwrights. He was startling, ruthless, and gallant. Like Oscar Wilde, he refused to compromise.

Although his own writing was not as shocking as Wilde's or Ibsen's, Richard Le Gallienne did reach popular

success in 1896 with his novel, The Quest of the Golden Girl. It is a long, romantic novel with the narrator searching for his ideal love. Commentators have suggested the narrator was actually Le Gallienne thinking back about one of his first loves:

How lovely she used to look with the morning sun turning her hair to golden mist, and dancing in the blue deeps of her eyes; and once when by chance she had forgotten to fasten her gown, I caught glimpses of a bosom that was like two happy handfuls of wonderful white cherries. . . . She wore a marvelous little printed gown. . . . I found beneath that pretty print such a heart as seldom beats beneath your satin, warm and wild as a bird's. I used to put my ear to it sometimes to listen if it beat right. Ah, reader, it was like putting your ear to the gate of heaven.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that the novel solidified his popularity, it did not bring him great wealth. He later said that "the publishers got all the gold and poor Richard got the girls." One of the girls he got--indeed the one he described as his "golden girl"--was Eva's mother, Julie Norregaard.

There is little information available about Julie Norregaard's life. She was born in Flensburg, Denmark, but before her first birthday her parents fled with her to Copenhagen in order to escape the German invasion of Schleswig-Holstein. Her family was very interested in the



arts, and since one of their relatives was Veihe, an actor considered the "Edwin Booth of Copenhagen," they attended the theatre often. On one memorable occasion the family saw a performance of Ibsen's A Doll's House, starring the actress who created the role of Nora, Fru Dybvad.

Although nothing is known about her formal education, by the 1890s Eva's mother had accepted the position of correspondent for Denmark's well-known newspaper, Politiken. On one of her trips to London in 1894, she and a friend attended a lecture entitled "The World, The Flesh, and The Puritans," given by the dashing young poet, Richard Le Gallienne, at the Playgoers Club. As the story goes, she "turned to her companion and firmly announced, 'That is the man I shall marry!'"<sup>6</sup> An educated, engaging woman, she was always interested in exciting adventures. She liked the "glamour in the theatre--the latest successes, the spectacular hits."<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly she had read Le Gallienne's poetry. Now she was further impressed by his flowing raven locks, his pale face, and bright blue eyes.

They were married in 1897, one year after The Quest of the Golden Girl was published. It was actually Richard's second marriage. Mildred Lee, whom he had married in 1891, was a waitress he had met when a college student in Liverpool. She had died in 1894, leaving him with one daughter, Hesper. Soon after Richard and Julie were married, they departed on a lecture tour of the United States. During their stay in New York in the spring of 1898, the couple

attended the American premiere of Hedda Gabler, starring their friend, Elizabeth Robins. When the New York Telegraph described the event the next day, the Le Galliennes were singled out as typifying the intellectual audience; they were called "members of the elect."<sup>8</sup>

While on the lecture tour, Richard Le Gallienne began "an intermittent affair" with Louise Theresa Wooster, a witty, Vassar-educated woman from Connecticut. They had met after one of his lectures in Bridgeport, and he "proceeded as if no wife had been present."<sup>9</sup> Once Julie Le Gallienne became aware of the affair, she departed hastily for Copenhagen, leaving her husband to spend the summer in and around the Wooster home. He escorted "Tess" to concerts, picnics, and lectures. They were known to spend many evenings drinking absinthe, a dangerous alcoholic beverage. By the end of the summer, Le Gallienne reluctantly departed for England.

His reunion with his wife was an eventful occasion, however, for shortly afterwards their daughter Eva was born. He was so gladdened by her birth that he dedicated his next book of poetry to her:

When Eva talks and knows all that I say

Oh won't that be a most exciting day!

When Eva talks,

When Eva walks--

Oh won't that be a most exciting day!

I am afraid we'll sit up long past seven--

I have so much to ask her about heaven.

When Eva talks,

When Eva walks--

I am afraid we'll sit up long past seven!

Eva, we are so glad you came,

For life is such a lonely game

With only one to play it, dear--

As Hesper found for six long years;

But now the games you have, you two!

We are so glad you came--are you?<sup>10</sup>

Richard Le Gallienne had become a lonely man. Eva's birth seemed to bring him the inspiration he needed, and for a short time she kept her parents together.

They bought a house, The Old Manor, located at Chiddingfold in Surrey. It was a large, comfortable home. Although the front had a Georgian facade, trimmed with ivy, the house boasted a number of gable and lattice windows. The oldest part was covered with a mass of yellow tea-roses and faced a large lawn with a lovely garden of shrubs and roses. Because of mounting expenses, they sold the house in 1902 to their friend William Faversham, a popular actor of the day, and moved to the St. John's Wood area of London.

Soon after Eva was born, her parents resumed their active theatregoing. On one occasion they traveled to Stratford-upon-Avon to see Sarah Bernhardt star as Hamlet. Finding her performance "interesting, personal, intellectual,

and in parts electric," Richard waited for the star outside the stage door after the performance. He described later that as she opened the door, "the wonder was enacting. She had bloomed in the doorway, half orchid, half Queen. The moment had come, and it would be gone. . . . We gazed . . . at the strange beauty, the imperious distinction, the siren charm, of Sarah Bernhardt."<sup>11</sup>

According to his wife, Julie, however, the episode did not end there. There were officials waiting with the mayor to escort Madame Sarah to the train. When she "bloomed in the doorway," she smiled at these men but suddenly found Richard Le Gallienne in the crowd. "When Sarah caught sight of him," claimed Mrs. Le Gallienne, "her smile became genuinely dazzling. The 'siren' stretched out her hand and went toward him: 'Mon poete, votre bras!' she said in that magical voice. Not content with taking him to the station in the mayor's carriage, she insisted on his accompanying her to London." Mrs. Le Gallienne never told her daughter how long he stayed away.

In spite of their mutual interest in the arts, the Le Galliennes were unable to save their marriage. During his 1900 lecture tour to the United States, Richard not only renewed his affair with Miss Wooster, but began another with a woman by the name of Veda, an attractive and sensuous governess in the employ of Minneapolis millionaire James Carleton Young. When Le Gallienne returned to New York, she joined him at his apartment where they lived together off

and on for three years. In 1903 Veda bore him a son who died the following year. Hoping to comfort her, Le Gallienne sent Veda to Paris for a vacation. The very night she sailed, he met Irma Hinton Perry, the woman who became his third wife.

By May of 1904 the future of the Le Gallienne marriage seemed determined. Dining one day in New York with Miss Wooster, Le Gallienne was informed, much to his supposed surprise, that his wife was suing him for divorce. Miss Wooster remarked, "he was thunderstruck! This was the first he had heard of it! And I was sorry to bring him the news, for he was like a maniac." He insisted there was no foundation to the rumor and produced a letter from his wife which read, "we are growing into the perfect married understanding, free from all hypocrisy. I love you to tell me all you do, to be frank with me as I am with you."<sup>12</sup> Regardless of his protestations, by the end of the year the Le Galliennes had separated, because of his "will to romance," as he himself called it.

When Julie Le Gallienne finally applied for divorce in 1911, she said objectively of her husband: "He is a fine fellow. Poetic temperament seems to need frequent change. No poet can remain long married to the same woman."<sup>13</sup> At another time she was quoted as saying, "he was always very charming, when he was charming."<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after their first separation, Richard Le Gallienne moved to the United States where he continued his literary career. By 1908 he was recognized by the Boston

Herald as the "chief of the literary decadents and leader of the aesthetic cult in London."<sup>15</sup> Two years later he wrote his only play, Orestes, A Tragedy, at the request of William Faversham, who played it in London in 1912. At the same time, he was a member of New York's Poetry Society, an informal club holding evening poetry meetings. Here he associated with such writers as Amy Lowell, Sara Teasdale, Vachel Lindsay, and Robert Frost. Another member was Theresa Helburn, later to become producer for the Theatre Guild.

By 1921 he had gained sufficient recognition to be designated one of the judges of the annual prize given by Poetry Magazine. From 1924 through 1939 he wrote for the New York Times Book Review and Sunday Magazine, reviewing books on literature ranging from Restoration theatre to Rousseau. In that same period he began a weekly column about Paris for the New York Sun called "From a Paris Garret."

When he died in Menton, France, in 1947, he was described by the New York Times as a "realistic romantic" whose style was evidence of "metrical perfection" and "polished workmanship."<sup>16</sup> Le Gallienne himself, however, provided the best description of his artistic feeling in a speech which he presented at the University of Chicago in 1924. He maintained, "the inner core of reality is romance. It is a period of romance. Never was there such a will to live glamorously, gloriously. Beauty is everywhere. . . . It is poetry that releases the inner radiance."<sup>17</sup> At another

time he wrote, "anything that is not beautiful, or that cannot be made beautiful, has no place in literature."<sup>18</sup> His conception of art was perhaps that of a realistic romantic, and it was that attitude he passed on to his daughter. From the time Eva was six and until she was eighteen years old, she never saw her father. Yet after he died, she wrote, "although we had seen so little of each other, I felt deeply bound to him."<sup>19</sup> In spite of the many years of separation, her first six years in the household of Richard and Julie Le Gallienne had left a lasting mark.

Eva first became aware of the family problems during Christmas of 1903. Rather than spending the holidays with her parents as usual, she and Hesper were sent to stay with their Nanny in Farncombe. Suddenly they learned they were to join Mrs. Le Gallienne in Paris, without their father.

Not long after the two girls arrived, Hesper and Nanny went back to England; Mrs. Le Gallienne moved with Eva to another apartment where she opened a hat shop on the premises; Eva began attending a school which her mother had chosen very carefully, the Collège Sévigné. Luckily she was a child interested in reading and studying, for the school was extremely serious, a kind of college prep school, priming girls for the Sorbonne. She attended classes in the morning only, listening to lectures and taking detailed notes.

The school's intellectual atmosphere encouraged her desire to read. Her mother, who treated her always as an adult, allowed her to read anything she wanted. She began

with Robinson Crusoe and continued with The Count of Monte Cristo, The Three Musketeers, novels by Dickens and Thackeray, and even Grimm's Fairy Tales.

Julie Le Gallienne was genuinely concerned about developing Eva's cultural interests. A few years earlier, when Richard was on a lecture tour to America in 1902, she took Eva to see her first play, The Water Babies. Aged as only a three-year-old can be, Eva stomped up and down the room when they returned home, repeating, "I will be a water baby. I must be a water baby." Her kind but insistent mother replied, "to be a water baby one must be able to read and write, and you can neither read nor write." She consented with amusement to take her daughter to the theatre manager once she had learned.<sup>20</sup> During their years in Paris, Mrs. Le Gallienne frequently took Eva on Sunday excursions to Versailles, the Louvre, the Musée de Cluny, the Tuileries, and Fontainebleau. She made certain her daughter saw the Ballet Russe with Nijinsky and Ida Rubenstein.

If Eva ever wavered from her childish infatuation with becoming "a water baby," an event took place in 1906 that made her even more determined. To help celebrate Christmas, Mrs. Le Gallienne bought tickets for them to attend a dramatization of The Sleeping Beauty, starring Sarah Bernhardt. Shortly after the play began, the scene changed to a large hall in a castle; an old woman was sitting in front of her spinning wheel. Eva remembers it vividly:

Suddenly, from off-stage came the sound of a voice--