

Will Geer: Stage Presence

By Fritz Lyon



You had to be there.

Will Geer may be best remembered as Grandpa Walton – if only because more people watched “The Waltons” TV series than all of his other film, television, and stage appearances combined – though that may be no great tragedy. His folksy, homespun delivery had a sincerity and intelligence that distinguished his characterization well above the norm in acting for television, or even for film. Grandpa Walton would surely rank among the all-time favorites of regular series roles showcasing the talents of older veteran actors in their twilight years.

But to see Will Geer perform on stage, in person, was a fundamentally different experience than watching him on TV – on a higher plane of existence, let alone the

performing arts. He was a one-man phenomenon, the likes of which I myself had never before seen, nor have I witnessed anytime since.

One particular and striking moment stands out in my memory, and I keep thinking that if you had been there, you would have had the same experience and reaction; you would have understood how Will Geer stood above any other actor you had ever seen or studied.

While I can take you back to that moment, it will take time to set the stage. Alas the prologue is less about Will Geer than it is about me – my perspective, where I was coming from, my preconceptions – to explain why this particular performance was even more amazing because it amazed me. At the time, I wouldn't have thought that possible.

To make a long story short, before that Will Geer moment, I couldn't have imagined that I might be the kind of person likely to be impressed by some old actor reciting Walt Whitman poems – and for all sorts of reasons.

I was full of myself.

It was the Sixties in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan where Will Geer and I crossed paths. What a time that was.

I left school after my freshman year to start being a writer, and when I came back a year later, my first play won a Hopwood, a local legendary writing contest (with several “winners” in several categories). I studied with Professor (Kenneth Thorpe) Rowe, who (we were told) started the first college play writing course at Michigan when the Hopwoods began in the late 1920's, and whose most famous student had been Arthur Miller. My ego inflated beyond reasonable proportion.

One of my high school teachers read that play and told me I didn't know what I was doing, and that therefore I needed to get on the stage (and backstage), if only as a bit player (or crew member), to learn from the ground up. Problem was I already had a crowded course schedule with a double major, and all of my electives were taken up by play writing class with Prof. Rowe every semester.

That excuse, oddly enough, got me a shortcut to advanced courses in the Speech (including theater) Department in acting and directing while skipping all the introductory

classes. So I was soon part of that community as well. Hey, I studied acting and writing both! Double Ego major.

But I was way too busy. No money, so I was dependent on (ten) scholarships and loans, meaning I had to stay above a 3.4 GPA every semester to keep the scholarships. I had to get all A's or drop out. Plus for food money I ran a movie theater on Friday and Saturday nights. Not a moment to spare.

The APA Repertory Company was an extraordinary professional theater group that prepared and launched its season of several concurrent productions in Ann Arbor before taking them to New York. Will Geer, while associated with the APA, was by no means the only great actor in town. The cast of characters on the playbill would include Ellis Raab and Rosemary Harris, Donald Moffat (my favorite) and the First Lady of the American Theater, Helen Hayes, among several other distinguished actors and actresses.

As drama critic of the *Michigan Daily*, however, I was not the only observer to hail the APA as the best professional repertory theater troupe of its time. Before getting in free as a critic, I started out as a volunteer usher for the shows I wanted to see. Later I graduated to selling season tickets on the “Diag” on campus during registration. For every seven season subscriptions I sold, I got one free. The first year I hawked season subs, I sold more than 50, getting seven free subs for myself (some of which I shared or traded with other actors).

Thus I saw Will Geer on stage many times. But the one moment I remember most, curiously enough, was in an ordinary classroom.

I honestly don't remember how I met Will, but at that time, we knew each other on a first-name basis, and I had watched him as an actor.

Contrary to what you might expect, his reputation did not precede him, or stay with him, or at least not much.

I may have heard of the Blacklist connection, but politics, in that sense, was not so much an issue in our world. We both knew we were both anti-war, but I don't remember lectures either way, it was simply accepted in our crowd.

Remember this is the University of Michigan, Arthur Miller was our guy, I studied with his teacher. At the bar after play writing class on Tuesday nights I don't remember any discussion or argument as to whose side we were on. It was obvious. But it was also ancient history among the under grads in our day.

Probably more important to me personally was Will's Woody Guthrie connection. I had also been a folksinger of sorts, so that name clearly rang a bell. Still I don't remember that I ever talked to Will about Woody Guthrie, though I do remember missing a folk music performance he gave with a folksinger friend of mine from high school (I was working at the movie theater that night) but hearing some comments on that subject repeated later by my friend. So it remained a distant connection, a curiosity, yet I still don't even know if Will sang, or rather simply told stories about his earlier experiences.

Will Geer was not the only unforgettable character in my life at the time, thus I was not easily impressed. And due to inflation, I seemed egocentrically unafraid to put myself in the company of giants.

As a folksinger myself, I had performed with a trio in suburban Detroit. Our local group would alternate sets with the national star attraction(s) on tour, and at the end of the evening, the club owner insisted that we all join together in a "hootenanny" singalong. Woody Guthrie? Hell, I sang with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee! And I will never forget the times I spent talking to Sonny.

During my year away from school, I lived in a cabin on the northern coast of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where I was befriended by the grandson of Sitting Bull! And I will never forget our conversation at the sacred burial ground he allowed me to visit with him.

By the time I heard Will Geer speak, I had been in the presence of the likes of John F. Kennedy, Adlai Stevenson, and Malcolm X.

Why would I ever be dumbstruck by an old blacklisted actor who used to be a fellow traveler with Woody Guthrie during the Depression, for cryin' out loud?

I'll tell you what made me curious. I still remember the "hook," as we say in the journalism biz.

Somewhere, maybe (and probably) from Will, I had heard a line about his past experience as an "actor." It still seems odd, but here it is:

During the years after he was blacklisted in Hollywood (and nearly disappeared from "the movies"), when it was tough to find any sort of job, Will Geer made money by doing poetry readings at ladies' garden clubs and such.

Now I don't know how much of that is true, I can't imagine he actually made a living wage at such an occupation, I wouldn't know how long or how many times that may have happened, and I was just as skeptical if not more so when I heard it the first time.

Still, it sounded to me like that old story must have had some grain of truth in it. And if so, that begged the next question.

How could any actor make one single dollar reciting poetry to anybody? It didn't make a stick of sense.

That was the question on my mind, however, when an actress/student friend, as I remember, told me that Will Geer was supposed to be doing something at her next (advanced) acting class. I probably used my own usual connections in the Speech Dept. to get a signed permission slip to sit in on that class.

This I had to see.

The stage is set in the unlikeliest of all places: a long and narrow yellow-brick classroom, like a tunnel, not a theater. Rows and rows of public school chair/desks with an aisle down the middle, two or three desks/students on each side. Ordinary, drab, dull, entirely without imagination or emotion and undoubtedly hostile to same. Cold. Banal. Impossible. The worst theater setting you could possibly envision, including a ladies' garden club meeting.

We're almost there. You're starting to see the next scene through my eyes. An obnoxious kid, not about to be surprised by anybody.

Despite the following, I am not a visionary. I don't see dead people or living spirits, I have never seen nor do I believe in flying saucers, sorry to group all those together. If you do believe, at least you can say that even someone as blind as me could have seen what I saw.

Oh, and one last little detail.

I must confess that I absolutely hated Walt Whitman, whom I considered to be a pompous blustering buffoon, unfortunately bonkers after the Civil War (but who wouldn't be?), yet flaunting a preposterously phony style and excessive language that was long gone and thankfully so.

Will was dressed in his usual outfit, right out of the Dust Bowl, and those who saw Grandpa Walton certainly would have recognized him at a glance. But we didn't know Grandpa Walton back then, so he looked sort of like a hayseed, if you will. Not exactly dressed for the occasion perhaps. He didn't lecture the class, or teach us or tell us anything about acting. That day Will Geer didn't speak to us in his own voice, his conversational voice, at all as I remember. Professor (Claribel) Baird introduced him, briefly, then got out of the way.

He didn't recite Walt Whitman.

He became Walt Whitman.

He knew the words by heart, but it was far more than that. With that peculiar, seemingly plainspoken intonation, yet grouping his words and phrases oh so deliberately for meaning and clarity, articulating each syllable but in a natural voice, he could declaim words of great poetry as if he himself were thinking and creating them as he spoke.

His voice full and booming, his chest swelling with pride, he walked slowly toward us, looking at each one of us one by one, looking straight into our eyes, then reaching out to us, extending his arm and his hand to each one of us, to me, and as I reached out and up to him, gripping my hand, his voice and body shaking with the power of his words:

“I hear America singing!”

I heard Walt Whitman singing, for the first time. I had read Walt Whitman. And I didn't get it...not until I *heard* his poetry, in his own loud and boisterous voice, for all time, and he reached out to me directly, the words echoing and reverberating in every muscle of my body. He was singing to me, though I had been deaf to him before. Now I finally understood.

Will Geer, as Walt Whitman, was mesmerizing. The experience to me seemed akin to being born again, hearing words for the first time, transfixed by a sudden understanding of the heart and soul of those words.

What was best about that experience was that it was art, not gospel. Understanding was not a divine mandate, but rather a discovery of the mind. This was not a priest, but a profound poet of the American spirit, revealed to us by an actor.

Now I know full well that I saw and heard Will Geer, who was acting. But I believe everyone in that classroom could have sworn they saw and heard Walt Whitman himself that day. It wasn't like acting, even like Method acting. Instead it appeared as a transformation in front of our very eyes. The actor became the poet, who sang for us as if his lyrics were being composed at that very moment.

His audacity was awesome. His reaching out and connecting with his audience, literally and figuratively, broke through that invisible "fourth wall" that separates actor from audience, and yet it did not. We in the audience still believed in him as an actor, and suspended our disbelief that he was actually Walt Whitman. For that moment, he most forcefully endeavored to persuade us that he was. We listened, and we understood.

Then he became Robert Frost.

In those days, the two household names of contemporary American poets were Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg. Not to revisit old arguments, but my sense of the consensus at the time was that the former was the great one, though the latter was more the popular and public celebrity.

Seeing Will Geer as Walt Whitman, I might have expected that Carl Sandburg would be a more likely voice for Will than Robert Frost could provide. Anyone could speak Sandburg, and Will's lazy drawl would have seemed a perfect match. Frost, it seemed to me, was a reader's poet: not so much tuned to the ear as to the nuance in

wording and meaning. I would have thought that “acting” Frost would have been an intellectual exercise at best.

But as Will Geer was Walt Whitman, lo and behold, Will Geer was suddenly and very subtly Robert Frost: wise, reserved, nimble, yet deft and deadly clever, sometimes a sardonic smirk behind the lines, or a bittersweet reminder, or a wistful sigh. Unlike gregarious Whitman, Robert Frost seemed physically isolated, alone, wrapped in his own thoughts – unlike Sandburg, the quieter, fussier, deeper poet-persona.

As opposite as Whitman and Frost, extrovert and introvert, might appear, the same approach worked for both. Will sounded like Robert Frost talking his thoughts. His delivery seemed so plain and simple that the poet’s meaning became as obvious as a conversation.

Robert Frost would have loved it. In fact, he probably couldn’t have done it himself, let alone done it any better. Will Geer personified Robert Frost’s thinking, in live performance, as Frost himself might only have dreamed.

Let us also remember that Will Geer was at one time renowned as a classic Shakespearian actor. That same magic Will had in turning complexity into straightforward simplicity probably worked for Shakespearian English as well, although that I never saw but once.

To be sure, I never saw Will Geer act in a play by William Shakespeare. But I did have occasion to see firsthand what that might have been like.

It was about ten o’clock at night, Will and I were talking and walking across campus. In retrospect, maybe it was timed and choreographed, but Will and I happened to be walking behind a building known as the Women’s League when we came upon Helen Hayes, descending from the back stairs of her private apartment on a top floor above the theater where the APA performed. She was out walking her little dog.

As we approached on the ground, and the formally dressed First Lady of the American Theater was still a few steps above us, Will made a graceful Elizabethan bow before Her Highness, then looked up to her and announced in his finest Shakespearian manner:

“Good evening, fair Helen, and may I introduce to you this young man, Fritz Lyon, who is a student at this university.”

In response, she turned and looked down at me, then held out her hand for me to kiss.

What else could I do? I swear it happened. So goofy I could have laughed out loud. I'm sure the same was true for Helen Hayes.

When Will was acting, and suddenly you were in the scene – no matter who you were – you went along with it.

I knew Will Geer. He introduced me to Walt Whitman, too.

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