

Dame Judith Anderson (1897-1992)

Regarded by theatre critics as one of the greatest classical actresses of her era



Dame Judith was born **Frances Margaret Anderson** in Adelaide, South Australia. She attended Norwood High School, and began acting in Australia before moving to New York in 1918 where she established herself as a dramatic actress of note making several appearances in William Shakespeare's plays..

Anderson made her professional debut as Francee Anderson in 1915 at the age of 17, playing the role of Stephanie at the Theatre Royal, Sydney, in *A Royal Divorce*. In the company were some American actors who influenced Francee to try her luck in America. She went to California but was unsuccessful, so she tried New York, with equal lack of success. After a period of poverty and illness, she found work with the Emma Bunting Stock Company at the 14th Street Theatre in 1918-19. She toured with other stock companies until 1922 when she made her Broadway debut in *On the Stairs*

using the name Frances Anderson. Twelve months later, she had changed her name to Judith and had her first triumph with the play *Cobra* co-starring Louis Calhern. She toured Australia in 1927 with three plays - *Tea for Three*, *The Green Hat* and *Cobra*.

By the early 1930s she had established herself as one of the greatest live-theatre actresses of her era and was a major star on Broadway throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In 1931, she played the Unknown Woman in the American premiere of Luigi Pirandello's *As You Desire Me*, filmed the following year with Greta Garbo in the same role. This was followed by Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Luigi Chiarelli's *The Mask and the Face*, opposite Humphrey Bogart, Zoe Akins' *The Old Maid*, in the role later played on film by Bette Davis. In 1936, she played Gertrude to John Gielgud's Hamlet in a production which also featured Lillian Gish as Ophelia.



As Lady Macbeth (1937 & 1941) - live theatre

In 1937, she joined the Old Vic Company in London and played Lady Macbeth opposite Laurence Olivier. In 1941, she played Lady Macbeth again in New York opposite Maurice Evans. In 1943, she played Olga in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, in a production which also featured Katharine Cornell, Ruth Gordon, Edmund Gwenn, Dennis King,

Alexander Knox and Kirk Douglas in his Broadway debut. The production was so illustrious, it made it to the cover of *Time*.



From left to right: Gertrude Musgrove (Irina), Katherine Cornell (Masha) Judith Anderson (Olga), live theatre production of Chekov's Three Sisters (1942) live theatre

In 1947, she triumphed as Medea in Euripides' tragedy of that name. It was produced by John Gielgud who also played Jason. She won the Tony Award for Best Actress for her performance, touring in this role to Germany in 1951 and to France and Australia in 1955-56.

In 1953, she was directed by Charles Laughton in his own adaptation of Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* with a cast also featuring Raymond Massey and Tyrone Power. In 1960, she played Madame Arkadina in Chekhov's *The Seagull*, first at the Edinburgh Festival, and then at the Old Vic, with Tom Courtenay, Cyril Luckham and Tony Britton. In 1970 she realised a long held ambition to play the role of Hamlet. She did this on a national tour of the United States and at New York's Carnegie Hall at the age of 73. In 1982, she returned to *Medea*, this time playing the Nurse opposite Zoe Caldwell in the title role. Caldwell had appeared in a small role in the Australian

tour of *Medea* in 1955-1956. Anderson was also nominated for the Tony for Best Supporting Actress.



Backstage after a performance of *Medea* in Paris, 1955

In Hollywood, her striking and not conventionally attractive features meant that her opportunities were limited to supporting character actress work. She naturally preferred the stage in any event. However, she did make a handful of significant films. In particular, she was nominated for a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her role in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940). As the housekeeper Mrs. Danvers, Judith Anderson was required to mentally torment the young bride, the "second Mrs. de Winter" (Joan Fontaine), even encouraging her to commit suicide; and taunt her husband (Laurence Olivier) with the memory of his first wife, the never-seen "Rebecca" of the title. "Mrs. Danvers" as conceived by Judith Anderson is widely considered one of the screen's most memorable and sexually ambiguous female villains.

This led to several film appearances during the 1940s in such films as *Lady Scarface* (1941), *Kings Row* (1942), Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944) with Gene Tierney, René Clair's *And Then There Were None* (1945), Ben Hecht's *Specter of the Rose* (1946), and

Jean Renoir's *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1946). She continued returning to the New York stage, playing the role of Lady Macbeth twice, and winning a Tony Award in 1948 for her historically acclaimed bravura performance in the title role of *Medea*.

Anderson holds the unusual distinction of winning two separate Emmy Awards for playing the same role - *Lady Macbeth* - in two separate productions of *Macbeth*.



As Memnet in the film *The Ten Commandments* (1956)

Her stage and film work continued and by the 1950s she was also appearing in television productions. She played Herodias in *Salome* (1953), Memnet in Cecil B. de Mille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), gave a memorable performance as Big Momma in the film of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), Evil Stepmother in *Cinderfella*, and Buffalo Cow Head in *A Man Called Horse* (1970). Anderson also recorded many spoken word record albums for Caedmon Audio in the 1950s through the 1970s. She received a Grammy nomination for her work on the *Wuthering Heights* recording. In 1970, at the age of 73, she achieved a long held ambition to play the role of Hamlet. She did this in New York's Carnegie Hall while on a tour of the USA.

In her later years she played two more prominent roles in productions that took her as far away from her Shakespearean origins as possible. In 1984 she appeared in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* as the Vulcan High Priestess (at the age of 87), and the same year commenced a three-year stint as matriarch *Minx Lockridge* on the NBC serial *Santa Barbara*.



As a Vulcan High Priestess in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984)

Anderson loved the city of Santa Barbara, California and spent the remainder of her life there, dying of pneumonia in 1992, aged 94. She was survived by a number of nieces and nephews, both in America and Australia.

Anderson was married and divorced twice, first to Benjamin Harrison Lehmann (1937-1939) and second to Luther Greene (1946-1951). Neither marriage, both of which occurred after she turned 40, produced children, but she did serve as godmother for friends' children. Anderson was created a Dame Commander of the British Empire (DBE) in 1960 and thereafter was often billed as "Dame Judith Anderson".

On 10 June 1991, she was named a Companion in the Order of Australia (AC) in the Queen's Birthday Honours. The citation read "in recognition of service to the performing arts"



Probably her best-known film role – as Mrs Danvers in Rebecca, with Joan Fontaine as the young Mrs de Winter

References

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