

## PREFACE

On director Margaret Webster's desk in the offices of the Theatre Guild on West Fifty-second Street in October 1943 were neatly arranged pencils, promptbooks, volumes of Shakespeare's plays, a telephone, typewriter, and other detritus of a Broadway director preparing for one of the most momentous openings of a theatrical lifetime.

There was also an elaborate timepiece containing three clocks. At a glance, it provided the time in London, where she had spent her childhood and begun her theatrical career; in Hollywood, where her elderly parents lived; and in New York, where she was preparing for the most daring production of *Othello* in American stage history. Webster had for the first time dared to cast an African American actor as Othello in a Broadway production. Three years in the making, Margaret Webster's *Othello* opened at the Shubert Theatre on October 19, 1943, with Paul Robeson in the leading role. The creative force behind this historic event in American stage history was the thirty-eight-year-old director known to all as "Peggy."

Webster has been called the greatest woman pioneer working in the American theater at midcentury. I became interested in her story while preparing a reference work, *Margaret Webster: A Bio-Bibliography* for publication in the early 90s. Although Webster had written four books (three are now out of print) about her theatrical family and her career, no biography of this important director on Broadway and at the Metropolitan Opera yet existed. When interviewed, Webster's friends and acquaintances all passionately agreed that her story needed to be written as an important chronicle of American theatrical history and of women's struggles in a male-dominated profession.

The challenge of investigating and making sense of Webster's extraordinary career was exciting but intimidating, given the large number of roles she played as an actress and the many productions she staged in the non-profit and commercial theater in England and America. But as I came to know more about Webster in the course of the research for this book, what surprised me more than the enormity of her accomplishments as an actress, director, and author, was the tendency of this intelligent and talented pro-

fessional woman to undermine those accomplishments at critical junctures. Seemingly without fail, she would choose to take a backwards step in her career, rather than letting the momentum created by a major accomplishment propel her forward. How does one account for a talented woman's curiously self-defeating patterns of indecisiveness and poor choices? Were they attributable to factors of her gender, sexual preference, lack of self-esteem, domination by stronger women, or, was she a victim of the male-dominated theatrical establishment of the day? The questions were intriguing, the answers elusive, and the facts that emerged challenging and oftentimes disheartening.

In trying to understand the contradictions and paradoxes of Webster's remarkable professional career that spanned forty-eight years of the twentieth century, I worked through the usual primary sources: reviews, letters, diaries, books, videotapes, and recordings. I regret that I could not talk with Margaret Webster herself, but I did manage to gather testimonies from friends and colleagues who knew or worked with her. What became clear from my conversations was the enormous admiration and love that people held for Webster. Their recollections were vivid, passionate, eloquent, humorous, and perceptive. To a person, they urged me to tell the considerable story of a woman who, as actress Eva Le Gallienne said of her, had to be exceptionally talented (and I might add courageous) to overcome the ingrained prejudices, the skepticism, and the distrust that stood in the path of so many women of her time.

### *Acknowledgments*

This book could not have been written without the archival legacy provided by Margaret Webster. She recorded her life and creative endeavors in family papers, letters, books, essays, articles, speeches, lectures, stage designs, lighting diagrams, property plots, legal documents, committee notes, scrapbooks, photographs, manuscripts, and promptbooks for plays and operas.

This biography would also have been impossible without the generosity of Margaret Webster's many devoted friends, including her literary executor, Diana Raymond, and Eva Le Gallienne's literary executor, Eloise Armen. Le Gallienne's biographer Helen Sheehy shared letters and documents that came into her possession relating to Margaret Webster's life. Mrs. Raymond shared legal documents, photographs, letters, and cards written by Margaret Webster. She also permitted me to read the typescript of the biography that she had written on her cousin and novelist Pamela

Frankau. Timothy d'Arch Smith, Pamela Frankau's nephew, allowed me to spend time in his flat in London reviewing documents on his aunt, the Rebecca West controversy, and his personal correspondence with Margaret Webster following Pamela Frankau's death.

I am, moreover, deeply grateful for the support, hospitality, and friendship of Margaret Webster's remaining friends. Berenice Weiler was generous with her time, papers, books, and recollections. She shared her memories of Webster's wit, candor, and remarkable voice.

I have profited from the efforts of fellow biographers and scholars, most particularly, Helen Sheehy, whose biography of Eva Le Gallienne inspired me to continue my search for the truth of the story, along with Kenneth Bauer, Jared Brown, Katharine Cockin, Jonathan Croall, Martin B. Duberman, Richard Findlater, James Harding, Ronald Harwood, Mary C. Henderson, Lyle Leverich, Norris Houghton, Robert A. Schanke, Susan Spector, Donald Spoto, J. C. Trewin, and William Wright.

I am grateful to the following for interviews and for their keen interest: Charlotte Abramson, Eloise and Seth Armen, Hartney Arthur, Eric Bentley, Travis Bogard, Oscar G. Brockett, Angela F. Brown, Gail Cohen, Ruth Ford, Maud Gatewood, Carol Gelderman, Earle R. Gister, Uta Hagen, Allean Hale, Mary Porter Hall, Bill J. Harbin, Joseph Hardy, Wylie Harker, Mary C. Henderson, William Herz, Watts Hill Jr., Barbara Hogenson, W. Kenneth Holditch, Norris Houghton, Don Lee Keith, Vance Kepley, Robert Lantz, Samuel Leve, Rhoda Levine, Marilyn S. Miller, Arnold Moss, Charlotte K. Motter, Ruth Nathan, Bobbi Owen, Herman Middleton, Jane T. Peterson, Catherine Phinizy, Henry Popkin, Eulalie Regan, Betty P. Reigot, Vera Mowry Roberts, Sybil Robinson, Frederick Rolf, Beckett Royce, Eugenia Rawls Seawell, Marian Seldes, Gina Shields, Hugh Southern, August Staub, Barrie Stavis, Elaine Steinbeck, Eugene Stuckmann, Alice Welsh, Liz Woodman, William Woodman, and Glenn Young. Paul M. Goodson was particularly helpful in the locating of documents on Jane Brundred.

Special thanks are due to casting director Liz Woodman for arranging interviews with various individuals; to Rhoda Levine, who shared with me her experiences as a director and choreographer with the New York City Center Opera Company; and to Sloane Shelton, Gina Shields, and Hugh Southern for their recollections of the National Repertory Theatre.

My thanks also to Alice L. Birney, Literary Manuscript Historian, Library of Congress, who steered me through the Margaret Webster and Eva Le Gallienne archives; Patricia Willis, Curator, American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, where the Theatre Guild Collection resides; Mary Ellen Rogan, Senior Archivist, New York Public Library, for helping to cross-reference the Webster materials; Donald

Ritchie, Associate Historian, U.S. Senate, for advising me on the unpublished testimonies relating to Joseph McCarthy's Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations; the staff of the Museum of the City of New York, where the correspondence between Margaret Webster and Frederick Fox is housed; Richard Shrader, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Jeanne T. Newlin, Curator, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard College Library; Fred Haberman, University of Wisconsin at Madison; Angela F. Brown, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research; and Herman Middleton of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro for sharing documents, playbills, and records of the activities of the National Repertory Theatre.

I am grateful for the assistance of the University Research Council at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for generous research grants and for the Carolina/Alumni Distinguished Professorship Fund for awards that supported my travel to archival collections and to interview the many individuals who were invaluable repositories of information and recollections on British and American theater at midcentury.

My gratitude to LeAnn Fields, my editor, for her encouragement and incisive observations and to her assistant Allison Leifer.

Finally, I especially want to thank Vera Mowry Roberts and Berenice Weiler for their persistent encouragement over the span of years that I worked on this biography.