

FFRANGCON-DAVIES, GWEN LUCY (1891 - 1992), actress

Name: Gwen Lucy Ffrangcon-davies
Date of birth: 1891
Date of death: 1992
Partner: Margaretha van Hulsteyn
Parent: Annie Francis Davies (née Rayner)
Parent: David Thomas
Gender: Female
Occupation: actress
Area of activity: Performing Arts
Author: Nicci Obholzer

Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies was born on 25 January 1891 in north London, the eldest of three children of **David Ffrangcon-Davies**, son of a foundry supervisor at Bethesda, Caernarfonshire, and his wife, Annie 'Nan' Raynor, the daughter of a Manchester doctor with a holiday cottage in Conwy. Gwen had a sister Marjorie (1893-1964), later a singer, and a brother Geoffrey (1895-1915) who was killed in a Belgian trench in May 1915, ten months after leaving school.

David Ffrangcon-Davies had trained for the priesthood but, upon moving to London, pursued a career as a professional baritone. His singing took him to America and Europe. The family settled for some years in Berlin, where Gwen learned German. Rising fame coincided with increasingly erratic behaviour. He suffered a mental breakdown in 1907, remaining hospitalized until his death in 1918.

A practising Christian Scientist, Annie Ffrangcon-Davies took in lodgers after her husband's incarceration, enabling her children to continue their education - Gwen at South Hampstead High School. Gwen had long declared an ambition to go on the stage, so Annie gained her an interview with Ellen Terry. Ellen advised her to focus on the 3 Is: Industry, Intelligence and Imagination. Gwen took this advice on board, describing herself as 'ethereal from the waist up and all Welsh pony down below'.

Certainly, industry was the hallmark of Gwen's long career. Aged 17, she was singing in the chorus line or dancing the Charleston on stage. When war broke out, she filled gaps between theatre jobs, working at the Censor's Office, redacting letters from German prisoners of war.

In 1914 came Gwen's big break, when Rutland Boughton (previously her father's accompanist) commissioned her to play Etain in his opera, *The Immortal Hour*, at the Glastonbury Festival. Gwen was a triumph. She credited her success in the fairy role to her Welsh blood and memories of misty Welsh lakes. The opera became a cult, symbolising beauty and hope after the Great War. In another production exploring hope after war, Gwen played Eve in George Bernard Shaw's 1924 play-cycle, *Back to Methuselah*, again receiving many plaudits.

This interwar period was a particularly rich one for Gwen. In 1925, in London, she played Tess in Thomas Hardy's own adaptation of his novel *Tess of the Durbervilles*. As Hardy was frail, the whole cast travelled to Dorset where Gwen performed the 'confession' scene by his drawing room fire. The old man was moved to tears and they maintained correspondence until Hardy's death in January 1928.

Gwen also met the artist Walter Sickert in the late 1920s. From their first meeting, he wrote to her almost daily and painted her several times. 'La Louve: She Wolf', considered to be among his greatest work, hangs in the Tate. It portrays her off-stage, waiting to appear as Isabella of France in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* gave Gwen the lead part she most longed to play. She had first learned these lines as a teenager on holiday in Conwy, leaning out of her bedroom window, the moon rising over magical blue hills, the scent of stocks filling the night air. Despite now being 33, her portrayal was hailed as the first properly 'child-like' Juliet. Her Romeo, John Gielgud, was a gay 19 year-old, nervous about performing this iconic role of heterosexual love. Gwen no doubt felt empathy for John's predicament. She had experienced relationships with men; yet, soon she was to embark on a long lesbian partnership with the South African actress, Marda Vanne (1896-1970). For both John and Gwen, playing conventionally straight roles, often with each other, offered the protection of identification with an uncontroversial sexuality.

Throughout the 1930s, Gwen and John were box office gold, acting together in Daviot's *Richard of Bordeaux* and Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. Yet, when war was declared and theatres closed - and against the advice of friends who thought it might stymie Gwen's career - Marda persuaded her to work in South Africa.

They formed the Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies Marda Vanne Company, at a time when Africa was struggling to create an identity independent of its British colonial history. There were many political sensitivities, including racial segregation and antagonism between the white English-speaking and Afrikaaner populations. Nevertheless, Gwen and Marda brought professionalism to a country which had largely only experienced amateur live theatre. In addition, they encouraged a new generation of actors: Sid James was a member of the Company for their final tour in 1946. Sir Nigel Hawthorne saw their productions during his childhood in Cape Town. Edith Evans, **Lewis Casson**, Sybil Thorndike, Lawrence Olivier, **Ivor Novello** and Noel Coward all visited Gwen there, assisting her endeavours to promote a South African national theatre.

By the end of the war, relations with Marda Vanne had become strained. This was in part due to Vanne's heavy drinking, particularly problematic when Gwen went away - she journeyed via gunboat to England in 1942, for example, to star opposite Gielgud in *Macbeth*. By 1950, Gwen, anxious not to be forgotten by her British audience, returned to live in the UK, and began an acclaimed season with the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford. She worked extensively throughout the 50s and 60s in America and the West End. She won the Evening Standard Award for best actress as Mary Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey* - an award, she noted, that preceded no work for almost a year. In 1970, aged nearly 80, Gwen made her last stage appearance in *Uncle Vanya*. Marda died that year. Although they had ceased to be partners, their close friendship endured.

In her nineties, Gwen was twice a guest on *Desert Island Discs*, and interviewed in documentaries about her long career. She also appeared on the *Wogan show*, giving a word-perfect performance of her Conwy-inspired balcony scene from Juliet. At the age of 100 came her last television role: a Sherlock Holmes drama, *The Master Blackmailer*. In 1991, Gwen finally received recognition for her lifetime's contribution to acting and was created a Dame. During a newspaper interview in early 1992, Gwen was asked what she would have liked to have been if not an actress. 'Dead!' came the reply. She died a fortnight later on 27 January 1992, at home in Essex, two days after her 101st birthday.

Author

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Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies](#)

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