

BIOGRAPY OF TALLULAH BANKHEAD

Tallulah Brockman Bankhead was born on January 31, 1903 in Huntsville, Alabama. Shortly after her birth, her mother died.

She was named Tallulah in honor of her paternal grandmother who had been named after Tallulah Gorge, Georgia where her newly wedded parents (Tallulah's great-grandparents) had spent their honeymoon. It is believed her father unconsciously blamed Tallulah for the loss of his beloved wife and seemed to favor Tallulah's elder sister, Eugenia, over her.

It is also believed that Tallulah's life-long ambition was to win her father's love back. Early on, she decided to pursue her father's adolescent ambition: to act on the stage.

The Bankheads of Alabama were a very political family. Her grandfather and her uncle were US Senators and her father was a US Congressman who became Speaker of the House.

At fifteen, Tallulah won a movie magazine beauty contest and convinced her family to let her move to New York. She quickly won bit parts, and made her major role debut at eighteen in ***Squab Farm***.

During these early New York years, she became a peripheral member of the Algonquin Roundtable. She was known as a hard partying girl-about-town. She also became known for her wit, although as screenwriter Anita Loos said: "She was so pretty that we thought she must be stupid."

In 1923, she made her debut on the London stage, where she was to appear in over a dozen plays in the next eight years. Famous as an actress, she was famous, too, for her drinking, drug taking (cocaine) and many affairs with both men and women. By the end of the decade, she was one of Britain's best-known celebrities.

She returned to the US in 1931 to be Paramount's "next Marlene Dietrich", but Hollywood success eluded her in her first four films of the '30s. Critics agree that her acting was flat, she was unable to dominate the camera, and she was generally outclassed by such actresses as Dietrich, Carol Lombard, Bette Davis, et al. Nevertheless, David O. Selznick called her the "first choice among established stars" to play Scarlett O'Hara.

Moviegoers thought otherwise. Her screen test for ***Gone with the Wind*** put her out of the running for good - Selznick decided that she was too old (at 34) for Scarlett's antebellum scenes (one also wonders if the cynical Bankhead could have played "Fiddle-Dee-Dee" Scarlett with anything approaching a straight face).

Returning to Broadway, Tallulah starred in unmemorable plays until she played Regina in Lillian Hellman's ***The Little Foxes*** (1939). Her portrayal gained her the New York Drama Critics Award for Best Performance. More success and the same award followed her 1942 performance in Thornton Wilder's ***The Skin of Our Teeth***.

In 1944, Alfred Hitchcock cast her as journalist and cynic Constance Porter in ***Lifeboat***. The performance is widely acknowledged as her best on film, and won her the New York Screen Critics Award.

Bankhead continued to perform in the 1950s and 1960s on Broadway, in the occasional film, as a highly popular radio show host, and in the new medium of television. Her appearance as herself on "The Lucy and Desi Comedy Hour" - a drunk, according to Lucille Ball - is a cult favorite as is her role as the Black Widow on television's "Batman".

But her career was in decline by the mid-1950s. Her outrageous behavior - fueled by a two-bottle-a-day consumption of Old Grand-Dad - continued unabated. And behavior that was endearingly wicked in a flapper starlet of the Twenties was becoming vulgar in an aging, falling star in the Sixties. Bankhead

never faded from the public eye, but was increasingly a caricature of her former self.

Tallulah Bankhead died in New York City of pneumonia arising from influenza and complicated further by emphysema, on December 12, 1968. She was 65 years old.