

Kevin Spacey and Irene Worth in *Lost in Yonkers*



Martha Swope

All In The Dysfunctional Family:

The Stars of "Lost In Yonkers"

Irene Worth on her career and the secret of Grandma Kurnitz.

By Gerard Raymond

HALF AN HOUR INTO the first act of *Lost in Yonkers*, the new Neil Simon play on Broadway, Irene Worth makes a truly dramatic entrance. Prior to this, four characters on stage have described with pure terror Grandma Kurnitz, the formidable matriarch of the family.

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The build-up is intense. Then Grandma steps out of her bedroom. Dragging a lame foot and wielding her cane like a deadly weapon, she enters. Commanding attention, she seats herself in her favorite chair. Her glasses glint as she surveys her family and challenges them with a

single, guttural, "So?" Irene Worth is having a time of her life.

"I have never done anything like this ever, especially with a padded body and all that sort of thing," Worth explains.

We are in her dressing room at the Richard Rodgers Theater. For the



role of Grandma, Worth employs a thick German accent, and wears a corset and pads to give shapeless bulk to her small frame. Only once before has she played such a character role, the hunch-backed Dr. Mathilde von Zahnd in Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists*, in 1963. Olivier loved to transform himself physically for character parts. "If Larry could do it, I can too. This is my bash at it," she says with a laugh.

Now in her mid-70s, Irene Worth is one of the great actresses of both the British and the American stage. Born in Nebraska and raised in California, she made her Broadway debut in 1943 in *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*. Later she spent over three decades in England playing the great roles of the classical repertoire. Over the years she has played opposite the great names in recent theater history: Ralph Richardson, John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Alec Guinness, Noël Coward and Paul Scofield. She also worked with the directors Tyrone Guthrie, Peter Brook and Andrei Serban. In 1965 she won a Best Actress Tony for Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice* (co-starring with Gielgud) and then a second in 1976 for the revival of Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

Through nearly half a century, this actress has dedicated herself to her craft, taking risks, and ready to experiment. This total devotion to the theater led her to leave America for England in 1944 partly on the advice of Elizabeth Bergner, her co-star in *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*.

"I wanted to become a classical actress. One of the most fulfilling things, if you want to be an actor, is to be able to do classical repertoire—Shakespeare, which I love, and all the 17th and 18th-century plays. I dedicated my life and my energies to achieving that. I was very fortunate to be able to live there and be accepted and I have been terribly lucky to be able to come back and forth."

The first time Worth returned to

this country was with Alec Guinness in T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* in 1950. She had originated the part of Celia in Edinburgh the previous year.

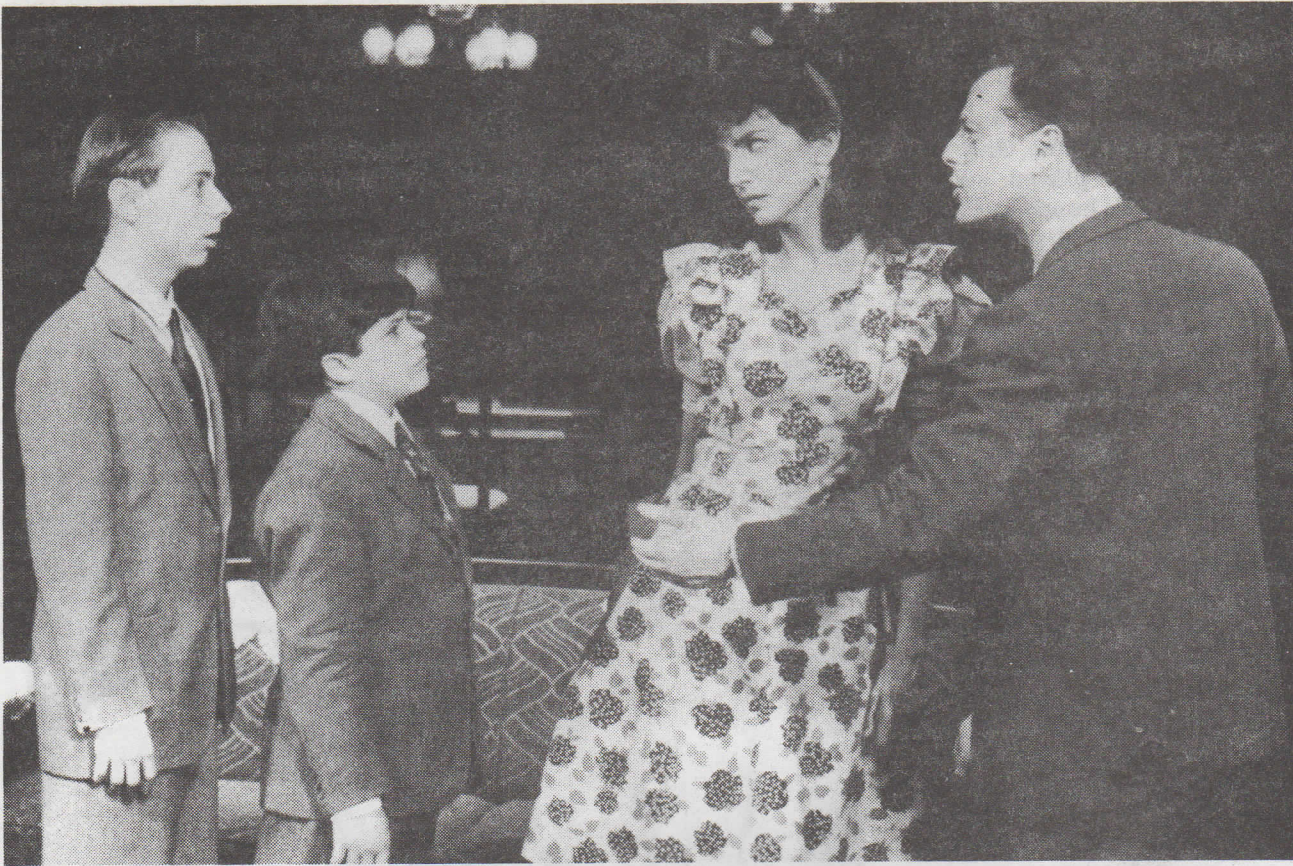
"Michael Redgrave came round to see me one night in *The Cocktail Party*. He told me that I should go to the Old Vic and do all the great classical roles. 'You must do

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Mercedes Ruehl and Irene Worth play daughter and mother in *Lost in Yonkers*.



Martha Swope

Stage kids Jamie Marsh and Danny Gerard with their Aunt Bella (Mercedes Ruehl) and father (Mark Blum).

Cleopatra,' he said, and I said 'Oh Michael, I am not ready for it yet.' He insisted I had to play Lady Macbeth and all these great roles and I said they hadn't asked me. He said you don't wait for them to ask you, you ask them. So I told my agent, 'Would you ask Tony [Tyronne] Guthrie if he would consider inviting me to join the Old Vic?' Tony replied, 'Good Heavens, does she really want to come here? We'd love to have her as our leading lady.' It just happened quite easily."

In that season Worth played Helena (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*) and Lady Macbeth at the Old Vic, and then she toured South Africa with these plays in 1952.

"That was an extraordinary and absolutely unforgettable period for me. I have to tell you that apartheid was not as fierce then as it got to be later. I mean it was total apartheid but it was not as cruel as it later became. I think we all left just in time or we would have all been sent to jail. Many of us came to the organizers of the Old Vic tour and

said we absolutely insisted on playing to the natives. So we went to the native colleges and had special morning performances. I remember how we did Macbeth. We just covered together some old packing boxes to create the ramparts. Afterwards we talked to the students and those were very, very precious experiences."

Guthrie then invited Worth, along with Alec Guinness, to lead the inaugural season at the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario the following year. It was another triumph for Worth and the press dubbed her "the first lady of Stratford."

Worth has been associated with some of the major reference points of 20th-century theater, including Peter Brook's international company. How much of her career was chance and how much of it was consciously planned?

"The only conscious choice I made, was first to go to England and then to join Peter Brook. You know I am

rather a rebel, I don't conform very easily. I was getting very fed up with the theater. I thought the theater was miles behind contemporary painting, sculpture, music and Peter had really saved me, in a way. I felt the mannerisms of my previous great successes led to the most terrible self-indulgent acting and I hated it so much. But when I did *King Lear* with him, that changed my life. He taught me so much."

Brook's *King Lear* (1962), a landmark in Shakespeare production, toured the world as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's tetracentenary tour and opened the New York State Theater in 1964. Worth's powerful portrayal of Goneril is indelibly captured in Brook's 1971 film version of the production. But she feels the National's Theater's experimental production of Seneca's *Oedipus*, which Brook directed in 1968, is his "ultimate" production. One actor described as a "barbaric mass" the effect of Brook's orchestration of hums, shrieks and cries.



the 5th Shiraz International Festival of the Arts in 1971. But after spending an year with Brook's company Worth returned to England.

"I decided that I'd better be in a popular play in the West End and make me some money," she laughs. "So I chose a play which I thought was going to be a success but it was a serious flop. That taught me never to do things for the wrong reasons. I won't tell you the name of the play because I don't know if the author is still alive and I wouldn't want to hurt his feelings. It was really not a good play. But I thought it was so middle-of-the road that everybody would adore it, because they usually do. Or they did. I think perhaps audiences are getting more discerning now, at least in America. I'm proud that playwrights have somehow advanced. Their seriousness and dedication has really paid off. I don't find mediocre plays floating around now."

Perhaps the actress is being too kind or diplomatic. But her support for others in the business was noted by Frank Marcus, the author of the hapless play that she won't mention, *Notes of a Love Affair*. Marcus, better known for *The Killing of Sister George*, wrote that Worth's "fortitude and kindness to her fellow actors increased my huge admiration for her. But, far more significantly, she proceeded to develop her performance, turning each occasion into a 'happening'."

A few years after the London flop, Worth returned to settle in America. She still appeared on the English stage in the RSC's *Coriolanus* (1977) and David Hare's *The Bay at Nice* (1986) at the National, but made her home in the U.S.

"My life changed after I came here to do *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1975). That was a great moment for me. It was a play that I had hated and dreaded when it was first done. Anyway, as the years went by I knew suddenly that it was a play I wanted to do. I was asked to do it in London but I said no, because it has got to



Zoe Dominic

Sir John Gielgud (Oedipus) and Irene Worth (Jocasta) in Seneca's *Oedipus*, directed by Peter Brook in 1968.

"It was very difficult for people to take but it was a brilliant and very visionary production. I will never forget John Gielgud with two tiny little black patches over his eyes, pounding his cane on the floor of the stage as he left the stage. At each step he pounded with that stick, and this wonderful voice rang out: 'Lead Me' and he left the city that he felt he had destroyed.

"So when Peter asked me if I would like to join his experimental theater group, I said, 'Yes I will, by George I will!' We went to Paris and worked in an old factory, and then to Iran—to Teheran and eventually to Persepolis."

Brook's international company performed *Orghast*, a major step in his quest for the development of an international theater language, at

Irene Worth
Selected Career Highlights

- 1943:** *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, New York
1949: *The Cocktail Party*, T.S. Elliot
1951-2: *Richard III*, Old Vic
Othello
The Merchant of Venice
Macbeth
1955 *Queen of the Rebels* (World Premiere, England)
1955 *A Life in the Sun*, Thornton Wilder
1956 *Free Exchange*, Georges Feydeau
1957 *Mary Stuart*, Friedrich Schiller, New York
1960 *Toys in the Attic*, Lillian Hellman, New York (Page One Award—Newspaper's Guild of New York)
1962 *King Lear*
1963 *The Physicists*, Dürrenmatt, London
1968 *Oedipus*, Seneca, London
1964 *Tiny Alice*, Edward Albee, New York (Tony Award)
1966 *A Suite in Three Keys*, Noël Coward, London 1966 Evening Standard Award
1967 *Heartbreak House*, G.B. Shaw, United Kingdom
1970 *Hedda Gabler*, Henrik Ibsen, Stratford, Ontario
1975 *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Tennessee Williams, New York Tony Award
1977 *The Cherry Orchard*, Anton Chekhov, New York Obie Award
1977 *Coriolanus*, William Shakespeare, London
1979 *Happy Days*, Samuel Beckett, New York
1980 *John Gabriel Borkman*, Henrik Ibsen, New York
1980 *The Lady from Dubuque*, Edward Albee, New York
1982 *The Chalk Garden*, Enid Bagnold, New York
1984 *The Golden Age*, A.R. Gurney, New York
1986 *Bay at Nice*, David Hare, London
1988 *Coriolanus*, William Shakespeare, New York



Irene Worth, photographed by Lord Snowdon.

have American actors. If Chance Wayne is not American there is no point in doing it. English actors are marvelous but American actors are American. So I was very grateful for the chance to do it in America.

“People know the lamentable story about my arriving to do *Sweet Bird of Youth*. I was all ready to go to Chicago where it was being done. I had a heavy coat and rehearsal jeans. Then the company went bankrupt and I was stranded in New York. I decided I was going to do that play, whatever happened. So I stayed on and it all . . . you know . . . I’ve always said it was like a Judy Garland film, it all started in disaster and ended with a Tony.”

The revival of *Sweet Bird of Youth* first opened at BAM in 1975 with Christopher Walken as Chance Wayne the young gigolo, and then moved to Broadway. Then Worth played in Andrei Serban’s produc-

tion of *The Cherry Orchard* for Joe Papp in 1977 at Lincoln Center. The production received mixed reviews but Worth won an Obie for her performance as Madame Ranyevskaya.

“It was interesting—all the new opportunities I had for doing plays that I wanted to do. I’m a very, very lucky and fortunate person. I’ve never had to struggle. It’s only now in my old age that acting becomes somehow more difficult. The more you know, the more dangers there are.” Is it because one gets more critical of oneself? “Yes and you expect more of the production, but I’ve always had a very magical life in the theater.”

I remind her of something she wrote in 1972 that indicated otherwise, and she corrects herself immediately. “What I have just said to you was not totally true because I had forgotten that there were two occasions when I lost faith. Once I



“There used to be the casting couch. It seems to have gone now. But as a woman, you still have to tread carefully in this business.”—Irene Worth

didn't have a part in a play for almost a year and Olivier asked me if I would like to join the Chichester Theater company that he was forming in 1961. When I said yes, he changed his mind and asked Margaret Leighton instead. That was rather a blow. It was a fallow period for me until I played Goneril. I just lost complete faith in myself and I felt I had no talent whatsoever. I don't ever want to go through such agony again.

“Then a bit later, just before I did *Sweet Bird of Youth*, there was another fallow time. At that point I didn't lose faith in my talent but I was very much in despair because I didn't have a play in which I felt I could go on growing and fulfilling myself. Those were desperate times.”

Worth said once that the theater is the “wrong place for a woman.” “Being a woman in the theater? Oh, that's hopeless. . . It's not easier for men, but men are listened to more than women. If an actor makes a suggestion in the theater the director almost immediately says ‘yes, good let's try that.’ If a woman does—this is very crude but it is a simple analogy—the director may very easily take offence and think that the actress. ”

“Is being a diva?” I suggest.

“Yes. There is enormous discrimination, and I don't care what you say, it still is there. Women directors, for example, are not taken seriously, not that I want to be a director because I think I'd be a very bad one. The emancipation of woman has been a long time coming but it hasn't done much yet.

“Among actors I think, almost on a child-like level, we take each other as equals—there is no real discrimination between men and women. If you can do your part, you can do your part and that's that. But beyond that there is still terrible

trouble for women to establish themselves and to maintain themselves as women. There used to be this awful thing of the casting couch. It seems to have gone, thank God, at last. But you have to be very tactful, tread very carefully and I hate that. I don't like that kind of—well hypocrisy perhaps is too harsh a word—I don't like being anything not totally forthright and open.”

Did she draw on her own experiences in life to portray the fierce Grandma Kurnitz in *Lost in Yonkers*? Her reply is typically unequivocal. “My life and career has absolutely nothing to do with Grandma. This might amaze anyone who was interested in where we get all our characters from, but I have based an enormous amount Grandma's behavior on a man I know. I've seen in him Grandma's gesture, at-

titude, and that unflinching rectitude. He has that absolute conviction that what he says and what he thinks is right and if anybody disagrees with him they are wrong. So that's a nice observation—to see how we really are amalgamated, isn't it?”

Does she want to keep acting? “No, not particularly, unless I find something that's really very fascinating. The theater is a hard taskmaster and it needs enormous dedication. You are not free to go to concerts and to go to other plays, to travel and live. I think there is a great life beyond the theater. And then I am getting older, you know. I feel that I have been very lucky and feel tremendously fulfilled as far all the great roles in repertoire are concerned. I am just dying to do King Lear, but I don't suppose I'll ever manage that.” □

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