



## AGNES MOOREHEAD

by Martin Grams, Jr.

The opening night for the *March of Time* program shift to NBC studios found the cast of 30-odd decked out in white ties and the women in formal evening gowns. After the gala la-de-dah, the show went back to its' hair-down norm. An audience of about fifty at getaway was also largely in formal attire. Though the *March of Time* program had been on the air for more than six years at CBS, tension was relaxed by a wag asking, "Where's Mr. Paley?" The cast of the radio drama laughed.

A control room was specially rebuilt for this program, which was directed by Bill Spier, who would later become synonymous with *Suspense* and *The Adventures of Sam Spade*. Covering eight news subjects, the *March of Time* program revealed the versatility of the stock company, most notably Agnes Moorehead, bedecked in furs, playing a Yiddish East Sider, a gangster's (Baby Face Martin) mother, a customer in Bangor, Maine sports shop, Wally Simpson, Signorina Mussolini and the Queen of England. And this was all in the same 30-minute broadcast!



Agnes Moorehead was a gifted character actress who ranged easily from being elegant, assured and arresting and comical in a wide variety of stage, screen, radio and television roles. She was nominated for five Academy Awards, appeared several times on Broadway and toured for years with three other stars in a dramatic recital of George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell* during the early 1950s.

Miss Moorehead was born in Clinton, Mass., December 6, 1906 and attended school in Reedsburg, Wis., where her father was a Presbyterian minister. It was in church, she once said, that she learned to act, mimicking members of her father's congregation. It was also in church, she recalled, that she made her first public appearance, at the age of 3, singing "The Lord is My Shepherd."

After study at Muskingum College in Ohio, Moorehead took a job teaching public speaking and English at the high school in Soldiers Grove, Wis., where she also coached the town drama group. In addition, she appeared for three seasons as a dancer and singer with the St. Louis Municipal Opera Company during its outdoors festivals. Once she had earned enough for expenses, Agnes Moorehead, who had determined for years on a stage  
(Continued on Page 3)

career, headed for the Big Apple, enrolling at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts where she was an honor student.

Roles in Broadway productions came quickly for the young actress, who spent hours at New York's docks listening to immigrants, studying their voices, gestures and mannerisms. When the Depression appeared to limit the opportunities on Broadway, she turned to radio, where she soon found steady, if often anonymous, work on both dramatic and comedy shows and in soap operas. In addition to performing on such shows as *The Cavalcade of America* and *The March of Time* (the former of which was probably her favorite program), and on comedy shows with Bob Hope, Phil Baker and Fred Allen, she played the lead role of *Joyce Jordan, Girl Interne* in a daily serial.

After becoming a member of Orson Welles' Mercury Players, she was brought to Hollywood for her first film role, a small part as the mother of Charles Foster Kane in Welles' 1941 classic *Citizen Kane*. Subsequent film roles gave wide scope for her versatility and dramatic ability as a character actress. "I never was pretty enough to play a heroine," she said. "As a little girl, I was the long, gangly type, almost as tall as I am now (5 feet 6), sad and pathetic. I have no vanity at all." Among the parts she played were those of a Chinese peasant in *Dragon Street* (1944), a glamorous French aristocrat in *Mrs. Parkington* (1944), the aunt of the deaf-mute in *Johnny Belinda* (1948), and a woman of far more than 100 years in *The Lost Moment* (1947).

Discussing her career in a newspaper column that she wrote in 1965 as a substitute for vacationing Cynthia Lowry, an Associated Press writer, she commented:

*"I have played so many authoritative and strong characters that some people are nervous at the prospect of meeting me for the first time. There is a certain amount of aloofness on my part at times, because an actor can so easily be hurt by unfair criticism. I think an artist should be kept separated to maintain glamour and a kind of mystery. Otherwise it's like having three meals a day. Pretty dull. I don't believe in the girl-next-door image. What the actor has to sell to the public is fantasy, a magic kind of ingredient that should not be analyzed."*

Moorehead gained the largest audience of her forty-five year career by playing Endora, the cantankerous mother-in-law witch in the ABC television series, *Bewitched*. That series ran for eight years (1964 - 1971) and earned her four Emmy nominations. She even guested on numerous television specials. When Bette Davis was taken ill, Moorehead stepped in to play the Red Queen in NBC's *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1966). She was awarded a Best Supporting Actress Emmy for her portrayal of a cunning criminal in "The Night of the Vicious Valentine" (Feb. 10, 1967) segment of *The Wild, Wild West* television series.

In late 1973, Agnes Moorehead revisited the early days of radio broadcasts when she gracefully joined Himan Brown in starring in two broadcasts of *The CBS Radio Mystery Theater* (including the series' premiere), before dying of lung cancer four months later. Moorehead secretly confronted director Himan Brown about her impending doom during the rehearsal of the first episode. She would have loved to have done more episodes, she told him, but time was at least kind enough for her to appear in two episodes.

The actress apparently left an estate of \$400,000 in Zanesville, Ohio where her will was filed at the Muskingum County probate Court. The will, which did not set a total assets figure, had been filed August 23, 1973 by the actress. In June of 1974, the beneficiaries were named, including a \$100,000 house to the John Brown University, Siloam Spring, Arkansas, along with Bibles and biblical materials.

**Martin Grams, Jr.** is the author of *Suspense: Twenty Years of Thrills and Chills*, *The History of the Cavalcade of America* and *Inner Sanctum Mysteries: Behind the Creaking Door*.

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