Tallulah Bankhead Dead at 65; Vibrant Stage and Screen Star

By MURRAY SCHUMACH

Tallulah Bankhead, the star whose offstage performances often rivaled her roles in the theater, film and television, died at St. Luke's Hospital yesterday of pneumonia, complicated by emphysema. She was 65 years old.

The actress, a member of one of the most famous political families of Alabama, was admitted to the hospital last Friday after contracting influenza. The influenza developed into penumonia.

With her when she died were her sister, Eugenia Bankhead, and a nephew, William Brockman Bankhead 2d. Her marriage to John Emery, an actor, ended in divorce in 1941.

To admirers — and gossip mongers — for more than 40 years, Miss Bankhead was a personality as much as a star. Her vibrant energy, sultry voice, explosive speech and impetuous behavior seemed at times a phenomenon better suited for study by physicists than by journalists, who chronicled her antics with and without script.

The raw power and uninhibited style she discharged into even poor plays—and she had many—once prompted Arnold Bennett, the novelist, to write:

"I have seen Tallulah electrify the most idiotic, puerile plays into some sort of realistic coherence by her individual force."

The same force was de-



Tallulah Bankhead

scribed, from another point of view, by an awed observer who knew her socially, and said:

"A day away from Tallulah is like a month in the country."

One of Miss Bankhead's many feuds with producers resulted in a famous exchange with Billy Rose during rehearsals of "Clash by Night." She called him "a loathesome little bully," and he responded, "How can you bully Niagara Falls?"

Miss Bankhead's personal life had such flair that in recent years, when she did so little stage work, there was a tendency to underestimate her talent by a generation that had never seen her as the eternal

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prostitute, Sabrina, in Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth," or as the mercenary Regina in Lillian Hellman's "The Little Foxes."

The young were able to appraise her talent fairly only from revivals or television screenings of Alfred Hitchcock's "Lifeboat," in which, as the foreign correspondent, she won the best acting award in 1944 from the New York Film Critics.

In the latter phase of Miss Bankhead's hectic career, radio and television projected into millions of living rooms the personality more than the talent.

Better known to this vast new audience than any of the lines she uttered in plays was her throaty "Daaahling." with which she greeted friends and strangers. In the one word were blended her energy and sensuality, the Alabama draws to which she was born and the London insouciance she acquired in the theater in the nineteen-twenties.

Always in Spotlight

Miss Bankhead's ability to consume liquor became a subject for public appraisal and her ownership of a lion cub, of flamboyant love of baseball became better known than the fact that she had won important critical awards.

Miss Bankhead's fondness for baseball was concentrated in a passion for the New York Giants. She owned a few shares of stock in the club, which she vowed she would never sell, even when the franchise moved to San Francisco.

Willie Mays, informed of her death, said: "A wonderful lady has died."

She did not need anyone to encourage her to step into the spotlight wherever she went. At Yankee Stadium in 1938, for instance, when Joe Louis knocked out Max Schmeling in the first round, she wheeled upon four men behind her whom she suspected of pro-Nazi sympathies and her triumphant voice echoed back over the multitudes: "I told you so, you sons of bitches."

*She never tried to deny her marathon carousing. But one point she was determined to set straight in her autobiography, "Tallulah," published in 1952.

"In all my years in the theater," she wrote, "I've never missed a performance because of alcoholic wounds."

Miss Bankhead's unabashed style emerged very often in interviews and press conferences, where she needed no help from publicity men to make startling comments. During one press gathering in 1964, she said:

see, someplace in California, I think. Well, this man said: 'Look here Tallulah, you don't need a man, you need a caddy.' That's the way I am honey. I have a lot of stuff I leave around, that's just the way I am. I just can't think in terms of remembering gloves and furs and things."

Acted in Williams Plays

Tennessee Williams saw her in a different light. He came to know her when she appeared in a revival of his "A Street-car Named Desire," and a retised revival of "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore."

"Tallulah," he asserted, "is the strongest of all the hurt people I've ever known in my life."

He looked upon her as the result of "fantastic cross-breeding of a moth and a tiger." He extolled her "instinctive kindness to a person in whom she senses a vulnerability that is kin to her own."

- Mr. Williams scoffed at Miss Bankhead's periodic comments



Miss Bankhead as Regina in "The Little Foxes," a 1939 play

—out of pique or frustration—that she hated the theater and did it solely "to keep out of debtor's prison."

"She loves it with so much of her heart," the playwright said, "that in order to protect her heart she has to say that she hates it. But we know better when we see her onstage."

But those she had hurt with her biting tongue and her aggressiveness did not look upon her with such sweetness. During rehearsals for "The Skin of Our Teeth" in 1942, Elia Kazan, who had not yet attained his later stature as a director, was subjected to tantrums and abuse he did not forget for many years. Before the play opened, the actress's behavior had put the producer. Michael Myerberg, in the hospital with nervous prostration.

Long Democratic Line

Disparaging comments about Miss Bankhead sometimes stemmed from ignorance or malice. Thus, those who spoofed her campaigning for Democratic candidates for the White House forgot that her father, William, had been Speaker of the House of Representatives and that a grandfather and an uncle had been United States Senators—all Democrats from Alabama.

There were many stories about Miss Bankhead's stormy friendships with men. Generally, she ignored comments about her morals. But once she summed up her attitude:

"I'd rather go on like I do than be like a lot of women I know who only look clean."

Another time she retorted:

"I'm as pure as the driven slush."

Indicative of her restrained behavior were her antics at parties. At one, she threw the shoes of the women guests into the street. At another, she did a strip tease.

On another occasion, when

there had been an accumulation of tales about her behavior, or of her having given away a necklace worth thousands, or

lashes:
"I'm not the confidential type."

of her having gone for days,

without sleep as part of her

dread of loneliness, she said.

with a satiric flutter of eye-

Contrary to widespread belief, the animal spirits of this actress were generated by a woman only 5 feet, 3 inches tall and weighing less than 130 pounds. In her prime, her beauty, with the blue eyes, voluptuous mouth, honey-colored hair that fell in waves to her shoulder, impelled Augustus John to do her portrait.

Banks on Herself

As the wrinkles multiplied and the beauty faded, she sometimes turned some of her sharpest barbs against herself. One day, for instance, when she was preparing for a horror movie, she said:

"They used to shoot Shirley Temple through gauze. They should shoot me through lino-leum."

When her acting days had become more a matter of summer stock and memory, her fame remained international because of her personality. Millions of women recalled that during the twenties they had copied her hair-do and had tried to imitate her throaty insolence.

She was one of the few people who was known throughout the world by her first name. When a major corporation named a hair cream "Tallulah," without asking her, the actress, who traditionally refused to give testimonials, sued and

Jokes were made of her name. Bugs Baer, the humorist, once wrote that the man who christened her must have been chewing bubble gum.

Actually, she was named for

a paternal grandmother, who was named after Tallulah Falls,

Born into a wealthy Southern family, Miss Bankhead was reared by an aunt after the death of her mother.

As a child her tantrums were notorious among the Bankheads. Later, her sense of mischief and resentment of discipline caused her transfer through several finishing schools.

Not until she got a bit part in a Broadway show, in 1918, did Miss Bankhead find a constructive channel for her talent. However, New York showed no great enthusiasm for her during her first few years in the theater, when she appeared in "Squab Farm," "Footloose," "39 East," "Nice People," Everyday," "Danger," "Her Temporary Husband" and "The Exciters."

Won Fame Abroad

Impatient with her progress, Miss Bankhead left for London in 1923, where she became a sensation in "The Dancers."

Her fame spread throughout England and her clothes, her hair, her speech, became the rage with thousands of young girls as she drew acclaim in "The Green Hat," "Fallen Angels," "They Knew What They Wanted," "The Gold Diggers," "Her Cardboard Lover" and "The Lady of the Camellias."

Movies brought her back to the United States in 1931. But her films were not successful. She returned to Broadway in 1933 in "Forsaking All Others." For a time, it seemed that Broadway would bring her nothing but bad luck, as she performed in "Dark Victory," "Reflected Glory," "I Am Different" and "The Circle."

She received some encourage-

ment by doing Sadie Thompson, the prostitute, in a revival of "Rain." But she was derided for her Cleopatra in a revival of "Antony and Cleopatra."

In 1939, Miss Bankhead found the play that was worthy of her artistry, "The Little Foxes." In Miss Hellman's drama, she overwhelmed the critics with her performance of Regina Giddens, a woman of extraordinary selfishness and cruelty, who goads her husband to death for

Words like "superb" and "magic" were used to describe her performance.

For this role, and for her Sabina in "The Skin of Our Teeth," Miss Bankhead received the award of the New York Drama Critics Circle for the best acting of the season.

Her only claim to fame in the theater thereafter stemmed from her delivery of a 22mintue monologue in "The

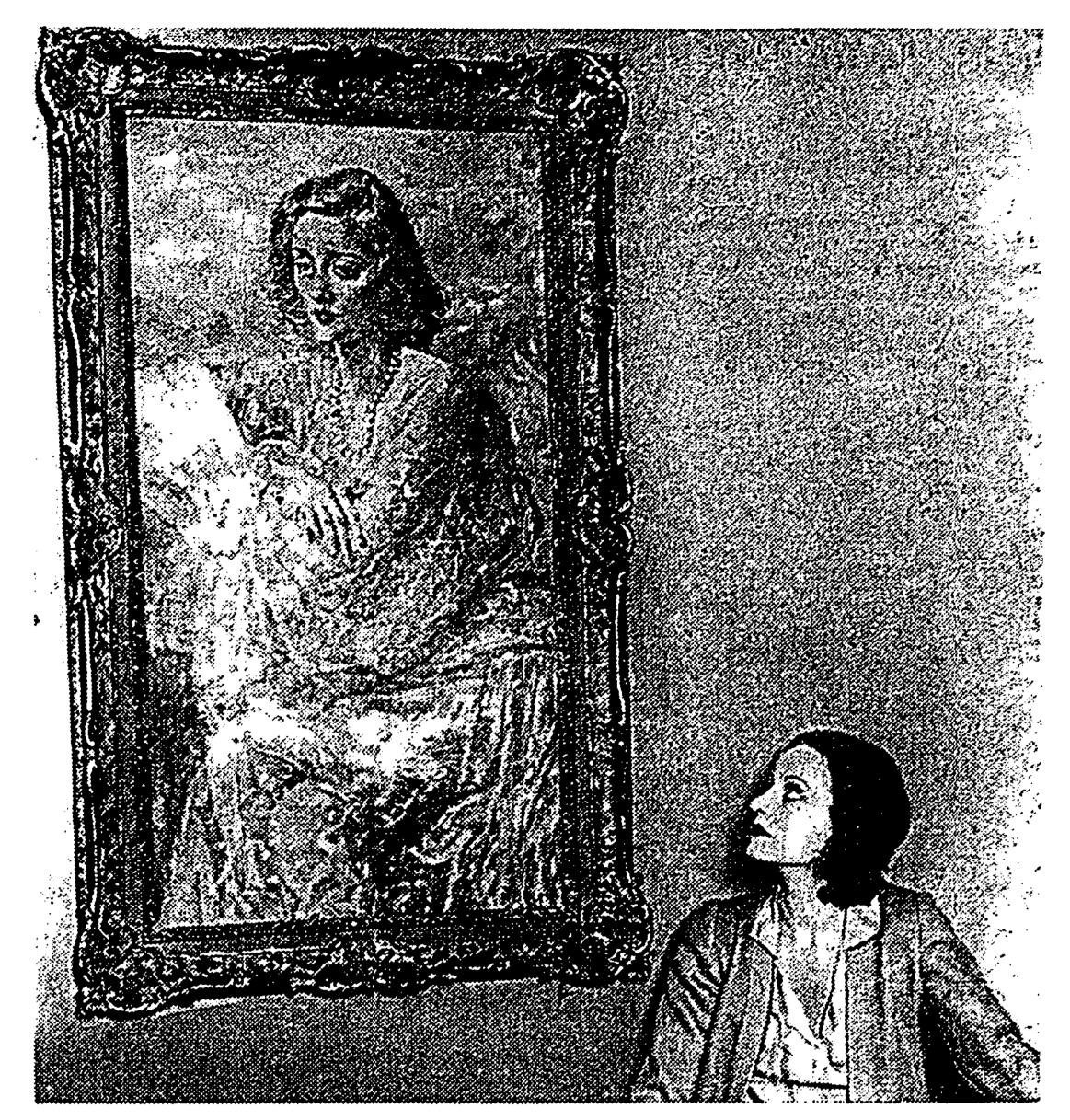
Eagle Has Two Heads."

Some of those acquainted with Miss Bankhead's love of talk said this was not much of a strain on her. One writer said she was so fond of talking that she had led "a lifelong filibuster."

Miss Bankhead, however, had a different summary of her life. "Live," she said, "in the moment."

A private funeral service will be held tomorrow at 3 P. M. at the St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Kent, just outside Chestertown. Md., where Miss Bankhead's sister lives. The actress had a summer home in the area. Her New York home was at 447 East 57th Street.

On Monday, a memorial service will be held in New York at 3 P. M. in St. Bartholomew's Church, Park Avenue and 50th Street.



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Tallulah Bankhead with the Augustus John portrait of herself in her London home, 1930.