

Agnes Moorehead

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Agnes Robertson Moorehead (December 6, 1900 – April 30, 1974) was an American actress.^[1] Although she began with the Mercury Theatre, appeared in more than seventy films beginning with *Citizen Kane* and on dozens of television shows during a career that spanned more than thirty years, Moorehead is most widely known to modern audiences for her role as the witch Endora in the series *Bewitched*.

While rarely playing leads in films, Moorehead's skill at character development and range earned her one Emmy Award and two Golden Globe awards in addition to four Academy Award and six Emmy Award nominations. Moorehead's transition to television won acclaim for drama and comedy. She could play many different types, but often portrayed haughty, arrogant characters.

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Early life

Moorehead was born in Clinton, Massachusetts, of English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh ancestry, to a Presbyterian clergyman, John Henderson Moorehead, and his wife, the former Mildred McCauley, who had been a singer. Moorehead later shaved six years off her age by claiming to have been born in 1906. Moorehead recalled her first public performance was at the age of three, reciting "The Lord's Prayer" in her father's church. The family moved to St. Louis, Missouri, and Moorehead's ambition to become an actress grew "very strong". Her mother indulged her active imagination often asking "Who are you today, Agnes?", while Moorehead and her sister^[2] would often engage in mimicry, often coming to the dinner table and imitating parishioners. Moorehead noted and was encouraged by her father's amused reactions. She joined the

Agnes Moorehead



Agnes Moorehead in *The Bat* (1959)

Born	Agnes Robertson Moorehead December 6, 1900 Clinton, Massachusetts, U.S.
Died	April 30, 1974 (aged 73) Rochester, Minnesota, U.S.
Occupation	Actress
Years active	1937–1974
Spouse	Jack G. Lee (1930-1952) Robert Gist (1954-1958)

chorus of the St. Louis Municipal Opera Company, known as "The Muny". In addition to her interest in acting, she developed a lifelong interest in religion; in later years actors such as Dick Sargent would recall Moorehead arriving on the set with "the Bible in one hand and the script in the other".^[3]

Moorehead graduated from Central High School in St. Louis in 1918. Although her father did not discourage Moorehead's acting ambitions, he insisted that she obtain a formal education. In 1923, Moorehead earned a bachelor's degree, with a major in biology, from Muskingum College in New Concord, Ohio, and while there she also appeared in college stage plays. She later received an honorary doctorate in literature from Muskingum, and served for a year on its board of trustees. When her family moved to Reedsburg, Wisconsin, she taught public school for five years in Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin, while she also earned a master's degree in English and public speaking at the University of Wisconsin (now University of Wisconsin–Madison). She then pursued post-graduate studies at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, from which she graduated with honors in 1929. Moorehead received an honorary doctoral degree from Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois.

Career

Moorehead's early career was unsteady, and although she was able to find stage work she was often unemployed and forced to go hungry. She later recalled going four days without food, and said that it had taught her "the value of a dollar." She found work in radio and was soon in demand, often working on several programs in a single day. She believed that it offered her excellent training and allowed her to develop her voice to create a variety of characterizations. Moorehead met the actress Helen Hayes who encouraged her to try to enter films, but her first attempts were met with failure. Rejected as not being "the right type", Moorehead returned to radio.

Moorehead met Orson Welles and by 1937 was a member of his Mercury Theatre Group, along with Joseph Cotten. She appeared in his radio production *Julius Caesar*, had a regular role in the serial *The Shadow* as Margo and was one of the players in his *The War of the Worlds* production. In 1939, Welles moved the Mercury Theatre Group to Hollywood, where he started working for RKO Studios. Several of his radio performers joined him, and Moorehead made her film debut as his mother in *Citizen Kane* (1941). She also appeared in his films *Journey into Fear* (1943) and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), based on a novel by Booth Tarkington. She received a New York Film Critics Award and an Academy Award nomination for her performance in the latter film.

Moorehead played another strong role in *The Big Street* (1942) with Henry Fonda and Lucille Ball, and then appeared in two films that failed to find an audience, *Government Girl* with Olivia de Havilland and *The Youngest Profession* with the adolescent Virginia Weidler.

By the mid 1940s, Moorehead joined MGM, negotiating a \$6,000-a-week contract with the provision to perform also on radio, an unusual clause at the time. Moorehead explained that MGM usually refused to allow their actors to play on radio as "the actors didn't have the knowledge or the taste of the judgment to appear on

[2]



the right sort of show."^[3] In 1943–1944, Moorehead portrayed "matronly housekeeper Mrs. Mullet", who was constantly offering her "candied opinion", in Mutual Radio's *The Adventures of Leonidas Witherrall*; she inaugurated the role on CBS Radio.^[4]

Moorehead from the trailer for *Johnny Belinda* (1948)

Moorehead skillfully portrayed puritanical matrons, neurotic spinsters, possessive mothers, and comical secretaries throughout her career. She played Parthy Hawks, wife of Cap'n Andy and mother of Magnolia, in MGM's hit 1951 remake of *Show Boat*. She was in many important films, including *Dark Passage* and *Since You Went Away*, either playing key small or large supporting parts. Moorehead was in Broadway productions of *Don Juan in Hell* in 1951–1952, and *Lord Pengo* in 1962–1963.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Moorehead was one of the most in demand actresses for radio dramas, especially on the CBS show *Suspense*. During the 946 episodes run of *Suspense*, Moorehead was cast in more episodes than any other actor or actress. She was often introduced on the show as the "first lady of *Suspense*". Moorehead's most successful appearance on *Suspense* was in the legendary play *Sorry, Wrong Number*, written by Lucille Fletcher, broadcast on May 18, 1943. Moorehead played a selfish, neurotic woman who overhears a murder being plotted via crossed phone wires who eventually realizes she is the intended victim. She recreated the performance six times for *Suspense* and several times on other radio shows, always using her original, dog-eared script. In 1952, she recorded an album of the drama, and performed scenes from the story in her one-woman show in the 1950s. (Barbara Stanwyck played the role in the 1948 film version.)

In the 1950s, Moorehead continued to work in films and to appear on stage across the country, including a national tour of Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*, co-starring Charles Boyer, Charles Laughton, and Cedric Hardwicke.

Sorry, Wrong Number also inspired writers of the CBS television series *The Twilight Zone* to script an episode with Moorehead in mind.^[5] In "The Invaders" (broadcast 27 January 1961) Moorehead played a woman whose isolated farm is plagued by mysterious intruders. In "Sorry, Wrong Number" Moorehead offered a famed, bravura performance using only her voice, and for "The Invaders" she was offered a script where she had no dialogue at all.

In the 1960–1961 season, Moorehead made guest appearances as Aunt Harriet in the short-lived CBS sitcom *My Sister Eileen* starring Shirley Bonne and Elaine Stritch as Eileen (an aspiring actress) and Ruth Sherwood, respectively, two single sisters living in New York City. That same season, she appeared in Pat O'Brien's ABC sitcom *Harrigan and Son*. In the 1963–1964 season, she appeared in an episode of the ABC series about college life, *Channing*. In 1967, she portrayed an Indian named Watoma on the ABC military-western series *Custer* with Wayne Maunder in the title role.

In 1964, Moorehead played the slatternly maid, Velma Carruther, to Bette Davis in the gothic thriller *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* and would receive her fourth and final Academy Award nomination for her work.



Also in 1964, Moorehead accepted the role of Endora, in the situation comedy *Bewitched*. She later commented that she had not expected it to succeed and that she ultimately felt trapped by its success. However, she had negotiated to appear in only eight of every twelve episodes made, therefore allowing her sufficient time to pursue other projects. She also felt that the



As Endora in *Bewitched* (1965)

television writing was often below standard and dismissed many of the *Bewitched* scripts as "hack" in a 1965 interview. The role brought her a level of recognition that she had not received before as *Bewitched* was in the top 10 programs for the first few years it screened.

Moorehead received six Emmy Award nominations, but was quick to remind interviewers that she had enjoyed a long and distinguished career. Despite her ambivalence, she remained with *Bewitched* until its run ended in 1972. She commented to the *New York Times* in 1974, "I've been in movies

and played theater from coast to coast, so I was quite well known before *Bewitched*, and I don't particularly want to be identified as a witch." Later that year she said that she had enjoyed playing the role, but that it was not challenging and the show itself was "not breathtaking" although her flamboyant and colorful character appealed to children. She expressed a fondness for the show's star, Elizabeth Montgomery, and said that she had enjoyed working with her. Co-star Dick Sargent, who in 1969 replaced the ill Dick York as Samantha's husband, Darrin Stephens, had a more difficult relationship with Moorehead, and described her as "a tough old bird...very self-involved."^[3]

In 1970, she appeared as a dying woman who haunts her own house in the early Night Gallery episode "Certain Shadows on the Wall."

In January 1974, Moorehead performed in two episodes (including the very first) of CBS Radio Mystery Theater, the popular series produced by old-time radio master Himan Brown.

Private life

Moorehead married actor John Griffith Lee in 1930, and they divorced in 1952. Moorehead and Lee adopted an orphan named Sean in 1949, but it remains unclear whether the adoption was legal, although Moorehead did raise the child until he ran away from home.^[*citation needed*] In 1954, she married actor Robert Gist, and they divorced in 1958. In the years since her death, rumors about Moorehead's being a lesbian have been widespread, most notoriously in the book *Hollywood Lesbians* by Boze Hadleigh, whose source for the allegation was Paul Lynde. However, Moorehead biographer Charles Tranberg (*I Love the Illusion: The Life and Career of Agnes Moorehead*, 2005) interviewed several of the actress's closest friends, including some who are openly gay, who all stated the rumor is untrue. Debbie Reynolds explicitly denied to film historian Robert Osborne that her "best friend" Moorehead was gay.^[6]

Moorehead was a devout Presbyterian (Reynolds described her as "terribly religious") and, in interviews, often spoke of her relationship with God. Erin Murphy stated that the actress would read Bible stories to the children affiliated with *Bewitched*.^[6] In one of her last films, *What's the Matter with Helen?* (1971, costarring Reynolds), she played an evangelist. Shortly before her death, Moorehead, who embraced her Reformed Calvinist roots, sought conservative causes to benefit after her death through her estate.

Death

Moorehead died of at the age of seventy-three in Rochester, Minnesota.

She appeared in the 1956 movie *The Conqueror*, which was shot downwind from a nuclear test site and was one of over 90 cast and crew members to contract cancer out of the 220 who worked on the picture.^[7] She is entombed at Dayton Memorial Park in Dayton, Ohio.

Moorehead bequeathed her 1967 Emmy Award statue for *The Wild Wild West*, her private papers, and her home in Rix Mills, Ohio, to her *alma mater* Muskingum College. She left her family's Ohio estate and farmlands, Moorehead Manor, to Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, as well as some biblical studies books from her personal library. Her will stipulated that BJU should use the farm for retreats and special meetings "with a Christian emphasis", but the distance of the estate from the South Carolina campus rendered it mostly useless. In May 1976, BJU traded the Moorehead farmlands with an Ohio college for \$25,000 and a collection of her library books. Moorehead also left her professional papers, scripts, Christmas cards and scrapbooks to the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

In 1994, Moorehead was posthumously inducted into the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

Filmography

Features:

- *Citizen Kane* (1941)
- *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942)
- *The Big Street* (1942)
- *Journey into Fear* (1943)
- *The Youngest Profession* (1943)
- *Government Girl* (1943)
- *Jane Eyre* (1944)
- *Since You Went Away* (1944)
- *Dragon Seed* (1944)
- *The Seventh Cross* (1944)
- *Mrs. Parkington* (1944)
- *Tomorrow, the World!* (1944)
- *Keep Your Powder Dry* (1945)
- *Her Highness and the Bellboy* (1945)
- *Our Vines Have Tender Grapes* (1945)
- *Dark Passage* (1947)
- *The Lost Moment* (1947)
- *Summer Holiday* (1948)
- *The Woman in White* (1948)
- *Station West* (1948)
- *Johnny Belinda* (1948)
- *The Stratton Story* (1949)
- *The Great Sinner* (1949)
- *Without Honor* (1949)
- *Black Jack* (1950)

- *Caged* (1950)
- *Fourteen Hours* (1951)
- *Adventures of Captain Fabian* (1951)
- *Show Boat* (1951)
- *The Blue Veil* (1951)
- *The Blazing Forest* (1952)
- *The Story of Three Loves* (1953)
- *Scandal at Scourie* (1953)
- *Main Street to Broadway* (1953)
- *Those Redheads from Seattle* (1953)
- *Magnificent Obsession* (1954)
- *Untamed* (1955)
- *The Left Hand of God* (1955)
- *All That Heaven Allows* (1955)
- *The Conqueror* (1956)
- *Meet Me in Las Vegas* (1956)
- *The Swan* (1956)
- *The Revolt of Mamie Stover* (1956)
- *Pardners* (1956)
- *The Opposite Sex* (1956)
- *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957)
- *Jeanne Eagels* (1957)
- *Raintree County* (1957)
- *The Story of Mankind* (1957)
- *Tempest* (1958)
- *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959)
- *The Bat* (1959)
- *Pollyanna* (1960)
- *Twenty Plus Two* (1961)
- *Bachelor in Paradise* (1961)
- *Jessica* (1962)
- *How the West Was Won* (1962)
- *Who's Minding the Store?* (1963)
- *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964)
- *The Singing Nun* (1966)
- *What's the Matter with Helen?* (1971)
- *Dear Dead Delilah* (1972)
- *Charlotte's Web* (1973) (voice)
- *Frankenstein: The True Story* (1973)

Short Subjects:

- *Operation Raintree* (1957)
- *Screen Snapshots: Salute to Hollywood* (1958)

References

- ↑ Obituary *Variety*, May 8, 1974, page 286.
- ↑ Kear, Lynn. *Agnes Moorehead: a Bio-Bibliography*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992). ISBN 0-313-28155-6. Page 2. Moorehead rarely spoke of her younger sister Margaret, who died when both were children, and was often thought of as an only child
- ↑ ***a b c*** Kear, Lynn (1992). *Agnes Moorehead: A Bio-Bibliography*. Greenwood Press, Connecticut. p. 12. ISBN 0-313-28155-6.
- ↑ Cox, Jim, *Radio Crime Fighters*, 2002, p. 18, McFarland, Jefferson, North Carolina, ISBN 0-7864-1390-5
- ↑ Richard J. Hand, *Terror on the Air!: Horror Radio in America, 1931–1952*. McFarland, 2006. ISBN 0-7864-2367-6
- ↑ ***a b*** "Debbie Reynolds". *Private Screenings*. TCM. September 25, 2002.
- ↑ Karen G. Jackovich, Mark Sennet (November 10, 1980). "The Children of John Wayne, Susan Hayward and Dick Powell Fear That Fallout Killed Their Parents" (<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20077825,00.html>) . *People magazine*. <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20077825,00.html>. Retrieved March 22, 2009.

Further reading

- Lynn Kear, *Agnes Moorehead: a Bio-Bibliography*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992). ISBN 0-313-28155-6
- Warren Sherk, *Agnes Moorehead: A Very Private Person*. (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1976). ISBN 0-8059-2317-9
- Charles Tranberg, *I Love the Illusion: The Life And Career of Agnes Moorehead* (Albany, Georgia: BearManor Media, 2005) ISBN 1-59393-029-1
- Quint Benedetti, (*My Travels with*) *Agnes Moorehead-The Lavender Lady* (Bloomington, Indiana: Xlibris, 2010). ISBN 978-1-4500-3408-1

External links

- Agnes Moorehead (<http://www.ibdb.com/person.asp?ID=68354>) at the Internet Broadway Database
- Agnes Moorehead (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001547/>) at the Internet Movie Database
- Guide to over 100,000 Moorehead documents spanning 1923-1974 at the (<http://digioll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/ead-idx?c=shs&id=uw-whs-us0161an>) Wisconsin Historical Society
- Interview with biographer Charles Tranberg from Harpies Bizarre (http://www.harpiesbizarre.com/tranberg_interview.htm)
- Listen to - Suspense 1951-02-15 Agnes Moorehead - The Death Parade (http://jack_benny.podomatic.com/entry/2011-02-15T13_41_01-08_00) with new introduction.

<div> <div></div> <div> <div>Preceded by</div> <div>Jack Benny</div> <div>19th Academy Awards</div> </div> </div>	<div> <div></div> <div> <div>Oscars host</div> <div>20th Academy Awards (with Dick Powell)</div> </div> </div>	<div> <div></div> <div> <div>Succeeded by</div> <div>George Montgomery</div> <div>21st Academy Awards</div> </div> </div>
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