Janice Kingslow

Ryan Ellett

Emma Janice Kingslow (born August 5, 1924) was a native of Tazewell, Virginia, but spent most of her life in Chicago. She participated in various theater projects while growing up, including running a puppet show for civic groups as a teenager herself. But Kingslow did not get seriously into acting until she reached her 20s. A graduate of Chicago’s Hyde Park High School, Woodrow Wilson Junior College, and the Chicago Teacher’s College, Kingslow was a teacher in the Chicago schools when she took her first steps in professional acting.

In 1945 Kingslow won the role of understudy to multiple roles in the state play Anna Lucasta. By the end of the decade she had moved into the lead role and played theaters from Chicago to New York. Along the way she also earned bit parts on Chicago stations WMAQ, WGN, WENR, and WCFL before landing a main role in 1947 on Richard Durham’s *Here Comes Tomorrow*, a soap opera featuring a Black cast. Upon that show’s conclusion Kingslow was immediately cast in Durham’s follow-up series, *Destination Freedom*. With success on the stage and airwaves, many observers of the Black theater community thought she was destined for stardom at the end of the 1940s.

But just a few years later Janice Kingslow was committed to the Manteno State Hospital, described as “catatonic and out of touch with reality.” The pressure of show business expectations were too much. Despite her successes, Kingslow began finding herself regularly passed over for roles because she was too light to be cast as a Black character and because she was Black herself, entirely dismissed from any roles for white performers. Her promising career dried up.

After years in the hospital and more years of slow recovery, Kingslow – Janice Kingslow Gilbert after her marriage – began working with individuals with mental illness. She was even recognized in the Chicago Tribune for her therapeutic work. Kingslow died at the age of 59 on March 6, 1984, in Chicago.