

Julie Harris Interview

By John C. Tibbetts

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John Tibbetts: Hello and welcome to The Green Room, I'm John Tibbetts. And please come join me, it's a celebration because it's my first opportunity to meet actress Julie Harris. It is our opportunity in Kansas City to see her and Brock Peters in *Driving Miss Daisy*, a Pulitzer Prize winning play. It's going to be a movie soon enough, yes, but this is a chance to see it on stage with this wonderful cast and Miss Harris, it's a pleasure to see you in Kansas City, although I assume you're no stranger to this area.

Julie Harris: No, I was here, I think the last time I played the musical with *The Belle of Amherst*. A solo play about Emily Dickinson.

JT: You've mentioned Emily Dickinson, we're going to talk soon about Daisy Werthan, a gallery of wonderful ladies that you've been fortunate enough to play onstage. Why don't we use this as our sort of profile of all of your years in the theatre since 1945. Let's talk about the great ladies that you've played. I suppose we have to start off with Sally Bowles.

JH: Well, a great lady.

JT: An irrepressible character, we're looking at a picture of her right now. Of course we're talking about *I Am a Camera*.

JH: Yes.

JT: I believe that was your first Tony Award.

JH: you know I don't, it's so terrible about the Tonys.

JT: One of them.

JH: I guess it was. *The Member of the Wedding*, I was a supporting actress, Waters starred in that. But yes, Sally Bowles in *I Am a Camera* went on to be a sort of fictional great lady although she was based on a true woman that Christopher Isherwood had known and Sally grew out of that sort of period when she was a really rebellious young Englishwoman living in Berlin before the war.

JT: With long, red fingernails.

JH: No, long green.

JT: Were they green? Remember what you say about them?

JH: Green fingernails. No, I don't.

JT: How to seduce men.

JH: Anyway, irrepressible Sally Bowles went on to be a rather thoughtful woman and political woman and had an interesting life, I think.

JT: Now, this picture of her we're looking at, you have a rather interesting hat on.

JH: The little, it was a little black velvet pancake of a hat, yes, sat saucily on one side of my head.

JT: Is there anything about Sally Bowles that has stayed with you over the years? Not just that people bring it up but something in her character that's been especially memorable for you?

JH: I don't, it's interesting that you should ask that, cause of course the play was so extraordinary and unique and eventually that story turned into *Cabaret*. And since I was the original Sally Bowles, you know it was sort of like what was it like, people say, what was it like to the real, the first Sally Bowles? And I say, well, it was interesting because it was a part that was the actor's dream. And John Van Druten thought of everybody in the world except me, when he was casting it. And originally he wanted Joan Greenwood, that marvelous English actress with that sleepy, very seductive voice. And then whenever I meet Cloris Leachman, she always says, you know, I could have played Sally Bowles. And I say, Cloris, why didn't you? And she said, because I had to smoke and I won't smoke on stage. I thought, well, tough luck, Cloris. I got to play Sally. I didn't mind smoking.

JT: In fact, at that time, the young, the work irrepressible certainly would apply to the Carson McCullers story as well. Was it a part that you were becoming typecast in, or was it, were there other roles you were doing at this time in the late Forties?

JH: Before *The Member of the Wedding*, I was really playing young character parts in *The Young and Fair* directed by Harold Clurman about a girl's school, I was a kleptomaniac, a very troubled girl, you know. And I was generally cast as that sort of, the strange, offbeat girl. But, so that, when John picked me for Sally Bowles finally, when there was no one else to do it, it was very much against typecasting because I, Sally was a sexual creature and very flamboyant and outgoing. Her neuroses were all covered up by this show and flamboyance, you know? So that was against typecasting cause I just the season before had been Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, which is totally different from Sally. That was rather nice, I thought, I was, I was pleased to be doing a part that I wasn't really right for but it was frightening, I remember when we opened Sally Bowles, *I Am a Camera*, in Hartford, Connecticut, that was the only time that my nerves were so bad I threw up before the performance. And I don't think I've ever done that since but I used to, my entrance wasn't in the beginning scene and I used to walk, pace backstage

saying my first entrance lines, over and over and over just to be sure they were really there in my head.

JT: They say that about pianists, sometimes, before a concert starts, the first measure of their music becomes a blank in their mind. Is it sometimes the same with that first line?

JH: I guess so, I guess under those circumstances, you're sort of, your heart is spinning and your blood is coursing through your body too fast and it could sort of blank you out. As a matter of fact, when I think of that I think of the first performance in Seattle, Washington, *The Belle of Amherst*, which was a solo play, the first time I'd ever been in a play by myself on the stage and I came very early in the play, I say my name is Em, and I forgot who I was and Charles Nelson Reilly who, and Bill Luce who wrote the play were standing in the back of the theatre mouthing, Emily Dickinson. It was just my heart was racing so fast I momentarily blacked out and I stared very hard and then of course I said, Emily E. Dickinson.

JT: Let's stay with those two literary ladies Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Brontë. In portraying women like this, do you necessarily then have to become something of an authority, do you have to read their works and their poems? Is that part of your preparation?

JH: Yes, you see, *The Belle of Amherst* would have ever come into existence if I hadn't done all that research. By the time Charles Nelson Reilly, I had done two records for Caedmon of the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson, the first one had been I think a rather good selling record and so Caedmon made a second. And it was from that a young man Nick Bonaker [?] said to me, would you do a church benefit for my father's church. And I said, but I don't do anything solo, Nick. And then I thought about it and I thought, well, I said, I could put together a program of Emily Dickinson's poems and letters. He said, wonderful. So, I did that myself. I put a program together in chronological order and started with a letter, the play began, with me saying, Dear Abiah, in writing to Abiah Root and Charles Nelson Reilly happened to see that church benefit. It was at the Booth Theatre in New York City. And he came racing backstage and he said, oh, this has to be in the theatre. This, these are words that the theatre needs. And so for eight years we worked on finding people who would put money in such a play, in such a project. Found Bill Luce who wrote the play and so really, really it came from my interest in her and I had done an enormous amount of research, mainly, have you see *The Dead Poets Society*?

JT: Yes, indeed.

JH: You remember when he's, is it Walt Whitman, he's teaching the boys first and there's a long introduction to Whitman's works? He says to the boys, tear up those pages. Well, that's the way I feel about interpretations of somebody's work. I say, tear it up, just go to the work. Read the work, read the letters, read the poetry of this woman and you'll know who she was.

JT: And you must have heard for any number of people for whom their first exposure to Miss Dickinson was through your work, don't you think?

JH: Well, it was certainly, came at time when it was sort of out there in the air. But I have, since, since becoming acquainted with Miss Dickinson, I have never thought that there wasn't a time when she wasn't there for us in some form or another. From the 1890s on, when the first poems found publication and I used to in the Fifties, when I lived in New York City I used to go to a dentist on West End Avenue and I used to pass the Emily Dickinson High School, now this was in the early Fifties and I thought, they'd named a high school after this obscure little New England poet? And she's not so obscure. Fame was very much on her mind because she was, well, I shouldn't say that, I think she felt that she would become recognized but that it might not be in her lifetime but that what she was thinking and feeling and putting down about the human condition and the human heart was going to find an outlet. And I'm just now reading a book by Jean Rhys that came out in the Thirties called Good Morning Midnight. Well, that's taken from the first line of one of Miss Dickinson's poems. There's a play, the heart, what is it the one about the feathers, the play that was I think in the late Forties, no Fifties it must have been. And I've forgotten who wrote this play in New York, it was about homeless men in Central Park and it's called *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers*, which is again a line of Miss Dickinson's poem. And Martha Graham, in the Forties, did a dance based on the life of Emily Dickinson. So she's, you know, very much, people are very much aware of her.

JT: But in an odd kind of way, I don't think we could say the same thing from Charlotte Brontë, of course even though we know the book, the book.

JH: The book, yes.

JT: The book but is she more of a blood and thunder creature by comparison than with Miss Dickinson?

JH: They were in a strange way, the Brontës came before, lived in the Thirties and Forties, the 1830s and 40s. And Emily Dickinson became very aware of them in her lifetime in, say when she was 30, just as she became aware of Charlotte, of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and when someone was going to Florence, she said, oh, visit the grave of Mrs. Browning, leave a kiss there for me. And she was a great admirer of Emily Brontë's poems, so much so that it was her wish that when she died, that the great poem "No Coward's Soul Was Mine" should be said at her graveside ceremony. And Colonel Higginson read that poem when Emily Dickinson died. So, they were very much aware of each other and sort of akin, those Brontë girls who lived in the West Riding of Yorkshire and had lonely lives, very much into themselves, the same as Emily Dickinson, although, life was certainly harsher in England on the Yorkshire moors for the Brontës than it was for Dickinson, I mean she was well cared for.

JT: Was there a theatrical quality to these two sisters though that led to that more gothic atmosphere that they indulged in?

JH: Well, the three girls, there was Anne, there was Anne the youngest, and Emily and Charlotte. And then their brother Branwell. So, their two older sisters had died when they were in their early teens, 10 and 12, I think. Maria and Elizabeth. But yes, I'm reading another book by Jean Rhys, The Wide Sargasso Sea, which is an imaginative, reworking of Mr. Rochester's wife, who he brought from the Caribbean, Jamaica, Martinique and it's a thrilling book. It's as if that Antoinette/Bertha married Mr. Rochester and he finally brought her to England. And she became mad. Really, the book said she was mad before.

JT: You just spilled the beans for those who have not read the book. Is it possible to find anymore?

JH: I mean, Jane Eyre, if you read Jane Eyre, you see, people get fascinated and books do come out of favor and back again. But if they're great books like Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre, they find audiences again and again and again. I find that thrilling.

JT: There's a great quote by Nathaniel Hawthorne at that time. He says, damn these female scribblers for putting me out of business. They were good and they had female audiences as their readers, didn't they?

JH: Ah, yes. They were very good. And it's exciting when you read the history of Jane Eyre because when that was taken to, finally sent to the publisher who became its publisher, it was read by a reader in the publishing house and then he gave it to the publisher and he took it home for the weekend and started it on Friday evening and just excused himself from meals and everything and finished it Sunday and said, we'll publish this.

JT: Is there something in you that responds to females who have an outwardly quiet demeanor but inside have this volcanic imagination such as the Brontës had, and Dickinson, too?

JH: I think it's primarily the work that has thrilled me. And then when I read about them, it's so exciting because they were so, such unusual people. Really unique. There's, you can't fictionalize and make it more exciting than the Brontës' own lives. I mean, they were extraordinary. The circumstances were just extraordinary. The highs and the lows and the pain and the

JT: Frustrations

JH: Frustration, yes. Just remarkable.

JH: And like Charlotte said, with courage to endure. I mean, we can learn things from these people because they that's what they live by with courage to endure, I mean, and they, and with grace and humor and fortitude and they had this moral fortitude, I mean by that, Charlotte had, could have left. She became fairly well to do in her lifetime because Jane Eyre was such a big success and she could have moved away from the parsonage and away from her father but that

wasn't a choice for her at all. I mean, she wanted to be there for him, she wanted to take care of him. And she also managed to find a husband at the same time in a quite remarkable way.

JT: Were you aware recently that in *The New York Review of Books* in all seriousness a comparison was made between Charlotte and Emily with the Collins sisters of today?

JH: Yes, yes.

JT: I don't know quite what to make of that.

JH: No, no.

JT: While we're talking about this remarkable gallery of female characters that you've played, some of them real, some of them not so real, leading up of course to Daisy Werthan. *L'Alouette*, Joan of Arc, another character and we see her here with a sword upraised. Did you like the feel of maille and armor against your skin? The costume now we're talking about?

JH: Well, now my armor in *L'Alouette* or *The Lark*, was not real armor. It wasn't, I wore a woolen suit and when I put that armor piece on, that was leather, that was leather painted silver so it was. And my sword, was a sword of St. Catherine, which she had found behind an altar. You see, Anouilh's Joan, he says, she's a lark. And Shaw's Saint Joan is an entirely different girl, a big, strong country girl. But

JT: Talkative, too.

JH: Yes, but the Joan of Anouilh is little lark, now I was once in Ireland, many years ago on Brittas Bay. I say my first European lark, which is, I liken it to our sparrow here. Our English sparrow. And a lark, a lark is a tiny bird and it takes off and starts signing. Sing-sing-sing. And makes these spirals up into the sky until you see it disappear but it's singing all the time. Well, that's what Anouilh felt was his Joan of Arc. And indeed, she's still singing, we're still hearing that song.

JT: Was he referring to the Andrew Marvell poem, "The Lark Ascending"? [George Merideth?]

JH: Probably he was.

JT: The silver sounds, Ralph Vaughn Williams wrote a musical description of this too, a tone poem.

JH: Well, now when was that poem?

JT: "The Lark Ascending", the Marvell poem, would have been what, Elizabethan times.

JH: Oh, yes, of course, then. Yes. “Hark, hark the lark at heaven’s gate doth sing.”

JT: I was looking at your hair, too. Short, straggling across your forehead. In all of your roles, we never know quite what to expect your hair to look like. It seems an odd detail to talk about but it’s a shock when we finally see you, there’s your hair, okay fine, but onstage, it’s always different.

JH: Well, for *The Lark* of course, Joan, it didn’t have to be like a true medieval bowl haircut because I thought in that time she was not getting proper haircuts like the soldiers. So, she’d hack it off one way or another. And for *The Member of the Wedding Party* Frankie cut her hair purposefully because she hated it and then she’s sorry because now when she has to go away for the wedding, it’s miserable and short and ugly.

JT: At least in *East of Eden*, we got to see the gorgeous long hair. Tell us about your character Abra.

JH: Well, Abra is a darling girl torn between the man she’s supposed to love and the man she really does love and they happen to be brothers, which is a real dilemma.

JT: Working with the immortal James Dean. Any intimations at that time?

JH: Oh, absolutely. He was already immortal with that first movie. He was, he was very remarkable. In many ways lovable, many ways strange and rather dangerous

JT: What do you mean, dangerous?

JH: Well, that you didn’t that you couldn’t count on him. He was elusive. He was a will-o’-the-wisp. He was somebody that might lead you over the precipice and say, oops, sorry.

JT: He’ll stand back while you go on over.

JH: Yes, that was your fault.

JT: Now, we have a long, long black gown here and hair on top of your head for *Victoria Regina*.

JH: That’s *The Last of Mrs. Lincoln*.

JT: Excuse me, Emily Todd. Yes, but the gown kind of is the same, isn’t it?

JH: The same as Victoria, well, that was the same time, 1860s and Victoria was reigning in England but that drawing that you’ve made of Mary Todd, is her inauguration ball gown.

JT: Let's stay with her a moment. Is it hard to play a character who, the intimations of madness of course have to be there.

JH: Yeah.

JT: I mean, how much can you indulge in that sort of thing with a character like this?

JH: I love Mary Lincoln because I think I love her husband. I love him.

JT: This is a ménage à trois we're talking about.

JH: I really love Abraham Lincoln. I mean, he is a great hero to me. I measure everything by him. He has the grandeur I think of America. He stands for America for me. There's a greatness in that man that is so extraordinary. And I think, there again, his story, his own personal story is so exciting, so unique. He gave us so much. He gave us so much with such simplicity. And Mary Todd, I think it was a true marriage. I think they were very opposite. I think she was superficial in many ways. She was intelligent, an intelligent woman for her time. She was well versed in politics and knew what was going on. A little thing that is important to me is until right up until the time he died, she made his shirts.

JT: Really?

JH: Yes. She sewed his shirts. And that's an important thing to me, I think. She may have been extravagant when she got there but she didn't want people to think that they were just country bumpkins, which was her fault, he didn't care. But she did. She wanted to be known as an educated family and not just yokels from Kentucky and Illinois out there in the backwoods somewhere.

JT: In this gallery of extraordinary women, we find extraordinary things to deal with and as an actress of course, you find them too. With Daisy Werthan, though, it's a character that seems outwardly on with fewer handles, fewer handholds to climb onto if you follow my parallel. How do you get to a character like this?

JH: Well, there are a lot of things that help you along the way. Alfred has written a very full character, maybe it's because it's someone he really knew and he's remembering his grandmother, his aunts. She was a teacher, she was the youngest of 12 children. And the sisters all put up money so she could go to school and be a teacher. Those things we know about her in the play, she says that.

JT: And we find out she still is a teacher, too, in a way.

JH: Yes, that's what she loves, too. You see that she must have been a wonderful teacher. So, all those things, you begin to think about and go back in and hold on to, her pride in that. Her love

of books. Alfred told me, he said, you know, Mama was always reading, always reading and when she read something it meant she had to refer to something else. She always had books around her. And always had the dictionary, she loved, to read the dictionary. Now, I have now on the set, I asked if I could please put a dictionary on my table. I never refer to it but it's there. And

JT: I think the moment when you present Brock with the book, with the primer is very special.

JH: It is a very special moment. Cause she does it, she has the grace to do it very well, I think. Don't you, in that scene? She does it kindly, I mean, here's a man in his Sixties that can't read, who is illiterate and instead of making him feel smaller for that, she makes him feel what a big adventure it will be to be able to read.

JT: How long have you been associated with the play?

JH: Since last, a year ago August.

JT: And It's taken you a lot of places already.

JH: Yes, it's taken us, it will have taken us probably 30 cities.

JT: And you'll stay with it now how much longer? You've got a lot of cities left.

JH: Yes, we have. We have about 14 I guess or something like that and we end the 21st of January. I don't like to say that even because it's just around the corner. But that's the last performance, January 21st.

JT: A personal note if I may, on where you live, then, where's your family, and all of that.

JH: Well I live, I was born in Michigan, near Detroit, and I have a niece that lives there still with her family. I have a brother that lives in Wilmington, North Carolina. He has two boys and I have a son, who lives in New York State and I live in Massachusetts now.

JT: What does your son do?

JH: Well, he's sort of a jack-of-all-trades. He lives in a rural area and does things here and there.

JT: When you want to get away from it all, you have a place to go.

JH: Yes, yes, I do. I live on the edge of a salt marsh and it's a very peaceful place.

JT: Julie Harris, welcome to Kansas City, again and thank you so much for introducing us to Miss Daisy.

JH: Thank you.

JT: Just a quick profile about Mary Baker Eddy, as short as you want to make it, the nature of the character, how you got to know this woman to play her.

JH: Well, I didn't do as much research as, except for the voiceover for the film about her life but, and I was asked to do it and I have to almost do it immediately after I said that I would, after reading the script. But I hadn't really known that much about Mrs. Eddy. So, I went completely on sort of instinct in that, there again her words made me feel what she was.

JT: Don't you think any great artist or any great person, that's true of?

JH: Absolutely, I do. Yes, I think when you hear Mother Teresa speak, you know exactly, you know so much about her. That simplicity and that sweetness.

JT: So many great people.

JH: That strength.

JT: So many great people have so many great or distinctive voices. Isn't that odd?

JH: Yes.

JT: I couldn't be talking about Julia Ann Harris, could I? Thanks so much.