

Ruth Draper: Complete recorded monologues--Ruth Draper (1954-1956)

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Essay by Susan Mulcahy (guest post)*



Ruth Draper

The great monologue artist Ruth Draper was an exception to many rules. Born in 1884 in New York City, she grew up in the elite society written about by Henry James and Edith Wharton (both family friends). Women of her class and upbringing did not work, especially in the theater. But Draper managed to remain part of her social world while pursuing a career on the stage and, by the mid-1920s, had become the most celebrated solo artist in the business.

Draper defied the very nature of theater, an ephemeral art that disappears once the curtain comes down. Other legendary performers of bygone eras, like Sarah Bernhardt and Eleanora Duse, are known today by reputation alone. But thanks to a series of audio recordings, Draper's career at times has even thrived in the years since her death in 1956. Because of the recordings, her audience continues to grow and she has influenced countless professionals. Mike Nichols was such an ardent fan he often played Draper's recordings for actors and writers with whom he worked; Lily Tomlin always cites Draper's recordings as a seminal influence on her own career; and David Mamet has called Draper "one of the great dramatists of the 20th century."

Solo performers existed before Draper came along, but she reinvented the form, taking the monologue to heights it had never reached before. The most popular of Draper's original character sketches, "The Italian Lesson," which depicts a morning in the life of a hilariously overscheduled New York society matron, circa 1925, is both of its time and timeless, qualities essential to the durability of Draper's art.

Starting as an amateur in the early years of the 20th century and professionally from 1920 until 1956, Draper created a wide range of characters both comic and tragic--from Manhattan socialites and Southern belles to Continental divas and French war widows. With only a hat or shawl and perhaps a chair as props, she summoned up women of all ages, nationalities, and social classes--the wealthy elite to the working poor. With a distinctive profile and deep-set brown eyes, Draper was just five foot four but was capable of projecting a majestic presence from the stage. She could do almost any accent and even at the end of her career, when she was in her 70s, Draper effectively portrayed characters decades younger. And she was so adept at

conjuring up unseen characters, she could have been an illusionist; Draper's gift for crowding a stage all by herself led the influential British critic Kenneth Tynan to call her art, "the best and most modern group acting I had ever seen."

When Draper first began performing, film was in its infancy, which made stage stars, either in legitimate theatrical productions, in vaudeville shows or on the platform circuit, enormously important figures in the world of entertainment. Draper toured extensively as a professional, filling theaters in the United States, Europe, South America, South Africa, Asia, and Australia. She performed at the White House and at Windsor Castle; Henry James called her a genius and wrote a monologue for her; and George Bernard Shaw upon seeing Draper perform declared, "That's not acting, that's life." Most of the great actors of Draper's day, including John Gielgud, Uta Hagen, Laurence Olivier, and Vivien Leigh, were enthusiastic fans of her work.

Despite all of that success and adulation, Draper today would be nothing but a footnote in theater history without the audio recordings she made for RCA from 1954 to 1956. She could have made records much earlier in her career; industry executives in England, where she was even more popular than in her native United States, had pursued her as early as the 1930s. Though interested in preserving her work, she concluded after initial tests that studio versions of her monologues would not be successful. As audio technology improved, she continued conversations about but never made a real effort to get her work on tape or vinyl. By the early 1950s, record executives were less interested and she talked about renting a Dictaphone and recording some of her sketches herself. After an astonishing late-career revival on Broadway, that did not turn out to be necessary.

In the late 1920s, Draper had broken records for solo performers on Broadway, but as the years passed, her star faded in the United States, mostly because she stopped creating new monologues. By the time she returned to Broadway in January of 1954, after a hiatus of six years, she had no idea what to expect. The response stunned her. "Nothing comes within Miss Draper's sharp-eyed range without being touched by her power of illumination," wrote Walter Kerr in the "New York Herald Tribune," advising his readers that Draper offered "matchless work not to be missed." The powerful columnist Walter Winchell commented that "Ruth Draper's return to the Broadway scene was the major event of the week." Ed Sullivan booked her on his TV show and crowds flocked to the Vanderbilt Theater.

With Draper a hot commodity again in New York, the time was ripe for recording. Charles Bowden and Richard Barr, her Broadway producers, were instrumental in setting up the RCA sessions, which began in April of 1954 after her seven-week Broadway run ended. Another key participant was Richard Mohr, musical director for the Red Seal label, who oversaw the process. After five sessions held from April to June of 1954, Draper, who always toured and traveled extensively, did not return to the RCA studios in New York until the spring of 1955, when three more sessions were held. One more took place in October of that year and the final RCA session was held in February of 1956. All told, Draper recorded more than 20 original monologues out of her repertoire of close to 50.

RCA released only one album, containing three monologues, before deciding the material did not have commercial appeal. But Arthur and Luce Klein, the founders of Spoken Arts, a small label

known for its theatrical and literary recordings, realized the potential in Draper's work and, in the early 1960s, put out five albums containing 11 of Draper's pieces. The albums were critically lauded and received radio airplay, mostly on stations that specialized in jazz and classical music. Though Draper was filmed a few times, too, the films did not have the same impact as the audio recordings, which possess an element crucial to Draper's success--audience participation. Like the crowd at a live theater performance, listeners to her audio tracks must see the limousine carrying Mrs. Clifford in "Three Women and Mr. Clifford" and visualize the neighbors stopping to chat with the old lady "On a Porch in a Maine Coast Village." As Draper told Studs Terkel in a 1956 radio interview: "The audience must work as well as I do."

From the 1960s to the 1990s, the Spoken Arts albums, and later cassettes, helped Draper's posthumous fan base grow, but by the late 1990s, the company had changed focus and ultimately dropped the recordings. I discovered this while researching a 1999 article about Draper for "Vanity Fair." Realizing that she soon would be forgotten without the recordings, I tracked down the masters and produced two compact disc compilations--"Ruth Draper and Her Company of Characters: Selected Monologues" and "More Selected Monologues." They include nine of the pieces that were part of the Spoken Arts releases along with seven monologues that had not been heard since Draper's death. The web was relatively new in 2000, but it turned out to be an ideal platform for distributing Ruth Draper's recordings. The CDs have created thousands of new Draper admirers, Annette Bening among them; the award-winning actress was so captivated by Draper's work, she performed four of the monologues at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles in 2014.

As a performer, Draper did not fit easily into any category. Her audio recordings are equally unique. Though the work she began to record when she stepped into the studio in 1954 had been composed 30 or 40 years earlier, it sounded fresh and even modern then, and still does. Dante and Shakespeare "seemed to know the things that always would be true," says the ridiculously busy society matron in "The Italian Lesson." So did her creator.

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