



'...but I never dared  
to call her Kit...'

**K**ATHARINE CORNELL'S graciousness remains an important part of this critic's introduction to Toronto—both to the city and the Royal Alexandra Theatre. Her production there of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* brought me from my Montreal to widen my eyes at rich experience.

Judith Anderson was the true tragedienne as Olga, eldest of the three sisters; Ruth Gordon was the dynamic member of the family. (Actually she was the sister-in-law.) Miss Cornell was the beautiful one.

The beautiful, the gracious one is a description which fitted the beloved American actress who died a week ago. I had missed her reputation-winning performances as *Candida*, *Juliet*, *St. Joan* and *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Her nationwide tours, reviving the American theatre's proudest tradition had not included Montreal.

So when she arrived there to play S. N. Behrman's *No Time for Comedy*, I secured seats for the Saturday night. (As a very junior critic, I wasn't invited to the opening.) Then I began to worry. What if something happened to Miss Cornell before Saturday? Or to me? So I begged time off for the Wednesday matinee.

Laurence Olivier was no longer playing opposite her, but Francis Lederer was quite dashing enough. No classic, *No Time for Comedy* was comfortably contemporary, with a star who transcended modern times and comedy. Here was a woman richly suited to the stage, a fine figure with individual grace, a husky voice and a fascinating face.

It has been widely conceded that Katharine Cornell was a beauty. Actually she was two beauties. In profile, the girl from Buffalo was purely classic; full face she was exotic, even Oriental.

That combination of physical beauty dominated the Cornell creativity. Others had other advantages. Judith Anderson was more impressive, Lynn

Fontanne more brilliant, Helen Hayes more loveable, Elisabeth Bergner more technically expert, Lillian Gish more delicately haunting.

But Miss Cornell was more beautiful, greater, more gracious. She presided as *Cicopara* in *Valentina* tea-gowns, was a true countess in Christopher Fry's *The Dark Is Light Enough*, a proper princess of Egypt in his later work, *The First Born*, a Spanish portrait in a patch in Kate O'Brien's *That Lady*. Always, the American aristocrat was Miss Cornell.

I met her on King Street, walking her dog after opening night of *That Lady*. "You didn't like us last night," she observed, coolly. "I liked *you*, Miss Cornell," was all I could say, having labelled the play as fustian.

Buffalo girls summered in Cobourg, and Miss Cornell kept up her connections there, even helping restore the little opera house. Once a train from Montreal stopped there and she boarded. We sat together for the rest of the journey. She was no longer cool, but gracious again, and asked me to call her Kit as her friends did. I never dared.

Last weekend, by odd coincidence, Helen Hayes left Toronto to visit Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in Genesee Depot, Wis., to hear how successful their world cruise, taken on her example, had been. So those two other First Ladies of the American Stage must have been together when the news came through of the death of Katharine Cornell.

Miss Fontanne, older but a beauty still, and Miss Hayes, who is younger and never aspired to more than prettiness, must have exchanged some historic reminiscences and rare gossip. They may have argued about her technique, but they must have regretted the loss of her charm, dignity and yes, beauty. Of those three high sisters in art, Kit Cornell was the beautiful one and a loss of beauty is always a cause for mourning.