

Mrs. Henry B. (Renee) Harris Dies

by Robert J. Landry

Variety

Wednesday 10 September 1969

Theatre Owner-Producer Was Linked to Another Broadway Era

Although she was married three times afterwards, she always remained Mrs. Henry B. Harris and when she died at Doctors Hospital, N.Y., at 93, she was press reported either as Mrs. Henry B or as Renee Harris. Modern stagefolks might well have reacted with their usual "whodat?" but to many with memories or personal acquaintance the lady was something special.

Her theatrical link was first of all to Harris, a showman whose consideration for actors and general distinction made him a folk hero of the legitimate theater. In his gallant death, among many famous men, he went down on the ill-fated Titanic in 1912, yielding places to women in the lifeboats, which were too scandalously few, the British designers having sold themselves on the myth that the ship was unsinkable.

Walter Lord's book on the Titanic, "A Night to Remember," drew extensively on Mrs. Harris' recall. She was in the last lifeboat to pull away, urged by her husband, John Jacob Astor and Isidor Straus.

The Actors Fund expects that a memorial service will be organized later, upon Lord's return from overseas.

There was irony and misadventure in the widow's subsequent experiences. Many who had known her in recent years were taken by surprise at the disclosure of her three further marriages to Lester B. Consolly, L. Marvin Simmons and Zach C. Barber, none known to have been in show biz. She did quip that she had four marriages but only one husband, Harris, and that he had spoiled her for other men.

As a theatrical producer in her own right, Mrs. Harris is chiefly identified with "Damaged Goods," which starred Richard Bennett in 1913. This was the play dealing with syphilis, the very word then taboo which a young press agent named Edward L. Bernays helped promote for public health reasons. Bernays has since written of Bennett's out-foxing him on money, when the play scored.

The big fiscal folly of Mrs. Harris' life was her refusal late in the 1920s of an offer of \$1,200,000 for the Hudson Theatre. She thought it was worth \$2,000,000, according to one explanation, and in another version, resisted the sale since the theatre would have been razed for an office building. Be that as it may, the Hudson was foreclosed on during the Depression, apparently by a panic-motivated bank while the proprietress was in Europe. Hurrying back, she sold homes on Park Avenue, in Palm Beach and Long Island, disposed of a yacht and still could not save the theatre.

Apparently one of her activities as heiress and show woman had been to send a troupe of legit performers to Paris during or just after World War I. While this is now familiar and would excite little notice, it was pioneering at the time and General John J. Pershing wrote her a commendation.

Whether Renee Harris was immediately or gradually reduced from affluence to poverty is as vague as, and possibly intertwined with, her subsequent marriages. Confirmation is lacking on one report that for a time she was employed by one of the newswire services.

The Hudson Theatre was bought into, long afterwards, by the Lindsay-Crouse partnership for \$275,000 (reportedly later sold for \$800,000). The house is now the Avon Theatre, devoted to beaver films and for some time Andy Warhol's Manhattan address.

Renee Harris' circle of showfolk friends was a broad one. These included Vinton Freedley, Ward Morehouse, Robert Breen and many others who valued her for her spirit and grit. Her only known surviving relative is Mrs. Warren P. Munsell.

Mrs. Harris resided in recent years at the Spencer Arms Hotel on West 69th St. Standing on the sidewalk one time, watching a neighborhood fire, a hotel employee said, "This is nothing for you after the Titanic." A woman standing by asked in sudden excitement, "Were you on the Titanic? Were you saved?" Renee Harris deadpanned, "No."

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