

All About Eve

BY CLAIR SCHULZ

In this age of comedy clubs and rapid-fire jokespewers it is important to remember that there is a difference between women who merely recite gags and the gifted handful of true comediennes blessed with the ability to evoke laughter with intonation, a line from a song, or just a look. It is not easy to recall a punch line spoken by Lucille Ball or Carol Burnett, yet they remain two of our favorite entertainers because of what they did that cannot be written into a script. We should never forget that Eve Arden also belongs in that select group of funny ladies.

The actress we know as Eve Arden was born Eunice Quedens in Mill Valley, California. For years she claimed that her birthdate was April 30, 1912, but after her death on November 12, 1990 a spokesman for her family gave her age as 83 which would suggest that she was born in 1907. Whatever the year of her birth one thing is certain: here was a person who was probably "acting up" during her diaper days. While her divorced mother was working, Eunice was engaged in make-believe games and was soon delighting neighborhood children by assuming all the parts in impromptu plays.

She remembered that her first real taste of show business came when she played a page in a pageant at a Dominican convent in San Rafael. In high school she performed in song-and-dance skits and was the

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star of the senior play. One night some friends of her mother dropped her off in front of a San Francisco theatre and practically dared her to get an acting job. She left her name and address and within a few weeks she was given a walk-on role that didn't pay much, but at least it got her foot in the stage door. It was with that theatre troupe that she had a memory lapse which was almost as embarrassing as forgetting her lines. One evening after the curtain came down she removed her make-up and headed for a streetcar only to be called back by the stage manager who reminded her that she would probably want to stick around for the second act of the play.

Like many performers young Eunice suffered through some lean times in the early thirties, but she did find work with the Bandbox Repertory Company that toured the resort and hotel circuit. She was acting in *Lo and Behold* at the Pasadena Playhouse when Lee Shubert spotted her while scouting singers and dancers for the *Ziegfeld Follies*. She was told to be in New York on August 15, 1934 if she was interested in the salary of \$100 a week...and indeed she was.

What was even more appealing than the money was the chance to rub elbows with Fanny Brice, have her own musical number, and get her name up on the marquee. But she would have to make one change: Shubert said to her in so many words, "We want you, but Eunice Quedens will have to go." So she plucked her new identity from two objects close at hand: Eve from



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a novel she had been reading and Arden from some Elizabeth Arden cosmetics.

Eve was pleased with her work in *Follies* and particularly proud of Robert Benchley's praise of her in *The New Yorker*. (Benchley later became a friend and appeared in two movies with her.) When the musical revue closed after two years in New York, she appeared in a Theater Guild production called *Parade* that contained material written especially for her comedic talents.

Eve's first movie, *Oh Doctor!*, was a trifle, but it did get her a screen test at Universal. The director working on *Stage Door* saw the test and invited her for a reading. She wasn't awed by the company of stars like Ginger Rogers and Katharine Hepburn; when the others present seemed reluctant to read what Eve knew instinctively were the best lines, she grabbed them and delivered them like an old pro. But her presence in the movie is notable not for anything she said but for what she wore. She suggested to director Gregory La Cava that she could do some "business" with a cat

and that idea grew into her appearance in the film with a living furpiece around her neck.

During the next few years she was playing everything from a saloon owner to a trapeze artist at RKO, Paramount, and Universal with the likes of Clark Gable, Lana Turner, and Judy Garland. She teamed with Danny Kaye on stage in the hit Cole Porter musical *Let's Face It* and repeated her role in the movie version opposite Bob Hope. She also appeared with Gene Kelly and Rita Hayworth in what may be the quintessential 1940's film, *Cover Girl*.

Because Eve felt that doing so many pictures in succession put a strain on her already shaky marriage and because she wanted more freedom to do plays and radio programs, she signed a seven-year contract with Warner Brothers that limited her work to two or three movies a year. Her performance in one of those films, *Mildred Pierce*, earned her an Academy Award nomination for best supporting actress in 1945. In *One Touch of Venus* and *The Kid From Brooklyn* she was perfecting the kind of wisecracking characters she began playing in Lubitsch's *That Uncertain Feeling*. Arden, her own severest critic, said that one of the few pictures she made that she could actually watch and enjoy her work is the rather obscure *The Voice of the Turtle*, which starred Ronald Reagan.

It may have been a turn on the dance floor in Chicago with CBS kingpin William Paley in 1948 that elevated Eve from the "Who's she?" level to the "I know her!" plateau. Although she had done some work on *The Danny Kaye Show* and *The Village Store*, she was not well-known in that medium. Shortly after that night at the Ambassador East she was asked to read for the part of an English teacher named Constance Brooks. Eve didn't like the script she was shown and it wasn't until Al

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Lewis, the man responsible for developing the characters and for putting those very funny lines in their mouths, did a rewrite that she agreed to take the part.

Our Miss Brooks was simply intended to be a summer replacement series starting July 19, 1948, but when it was topping the ratings at the end of its thirteen-week run a spot was made for it in the regular season schedule. Lewis was a writer who had an ear for amusing dialogue, but the success of the program was due to its perfect cast. Gale Gordon was superb as the cranky principal Osgood Conklin, Jeff Chandler portrayed the frugal and shy Mr. Boynton with skill that belied his virile appearance, Richard Crenna as Walter Denton was the best snickering and adenoideal teenager north of *The Aldrich Family*, and Jane Morgan played the absent-minded landlady who was frequently in a surrealistic world that Connie Brooks could only occasionally penetrate.

But it was Eve Arden who gave the show not only its driving force but also its heart. Her Miss Brooks was a woman who, just after losing a battle in her unrequited romance with Boynton or receiving an unrealistic demand from dictatorial Conklin, would turn a sympathetic ear to the problems brought to her by Denton, Conklin's daughter Harriet, or Stretch Snodgrass, the school dunce. It took a real actress to be convincing as both Mother Superior and Milton Berle, and it is difficult to think of anyone who could have brought it off as well as Eve Arden did.

With the exception of Chandler, who was replaced by Robert Rockwell, the entire cast moved to television on October 3, 1952. Arden described that a typical week on the program consisted of a first reading on Friday morning, rehearsal from ten to five on Monday followed by an in-house

dress rehearsal, and afternoon walk-through on Tuesday afternoon, and then filming with three cameras at about 7:30 that evening. That gave her four days to be with her family each week.

It may be surprising to learn that this woman who almost always appeared smartly dressed on television or in movies was very much at home in dungarees with her family on their farm in Hidden Valley. She had adopted two girls during the 1940's, but after her divorce she was beginning to think she wouldn't ever find a good husband and father for the girls until Barry Sullivan suggested touring in a stage production with "a guy named Brooks West." It wasn't love at first sight. In fact, when Brooks asked "Why don't we get married?" she responded not with a "Yes" or "No" but in typical Miss Brooks fashion: "Oh?" In 1951 the "Oh?" became a "Yes."

The newlyweds soon adopted another child and in 1953 there were two more additions to their household: an Emmy for Eve's work on *Our Miss Brooks* and a baby boy.

As Miss Brooks Eve was earning \$200,000 a year, receiving fan mail from teachers, and garnering honors from the National Education Association the PTA. With the fame came a hectic schedule during the 1952-53 season when she was doing the show on both TV and radio and trying to answer an avalanche of requests to teach or lecture. But she never regretted playing the role and remembered fondly the people who told her that Connie Brooks had helped them recover from life-threatening illnesses.

Our Miss Brooks rolled along smoothly for three seasons before the powers that were in control tinkered with a good thing. For the 1955-56 season Madison High School vanished and Connie was sent to teach at an elementary school; only Gale



GALE GORDON & EVE ARDEN

Gordon remained from the original supporting cast. On September 21, 1956 school was out for Miss Brooks.

The following season Eve starred in a program based upon the autobiography of Emily Kimbrough. She played novelist Liza Hammond who had to cope with the rigors of traveling on lecture tours and raising twin girls. *The Eve Arden Show* lasted just one year.

The break from television gave her a chance to work with husband Brooks in *Auntie Mame* on the west coast. In 1959 both of them appeared in support of James Stewart and George C. Scott in Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder*.

Eve's appearance in a Las Vegas revue in 1962 demonstrated that she was loaded with talent. She sang, she danced, she told stories, and during the course of the evening she impersonated everyone from Jackie Kennedy to Bette Davis. This successful run and her later work in *Hello Dolly* and *Applause* showed that, like Judy Holliday, she was very much at home in musical comedies.

After taking some time off to tour Europe with her family during 1963 and 1964, she returned to work in *Hello Dolly* and did guest shots on television programs like *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* and *Run For Your Life* before being called by Desi Arnaz to be in a new series with Kaye Ballard. *The Mothers-in-Law* gave Eve and Kaye a chance to ham it up as distaff versions of Oscar and Felix who enjoyed meddling in the affairs of their children. Though the program only ran for two seasons it produced a number of memorable episodes.

Versatile performer that she was Eve Arden was rarely idle even in the twilight of her career. She would appear in *Cactus Flower* in Miami around Easter, do a summer stock version of *Butterflies Are Free* in New Jersey, and be in Australia for *Applause* in September. In the movie version of *Grease* she went back to school with a promotion to principal and four years later she reprised her role as Miss McGee in *Grease II*. It wasn't until the death of her husband in 1984 that she curtailed her performing schedule.

In 1985 she revealed that Brooks had been fighting alcoholism for most of the thirty-three years of their marriage. Whether this was caused by the insecurity of a career that was minor when compared to that of his wife's had not been ascertained, but it is patently clear that Eve supported Brooks by encouraging him to enter detox centers and by attending AA meetings with him. By raising four children, being a farm wife, and having a career Eve was truly a modern woman who had it all, including the heartaches.

Eve Arden was surprised to learn in 1983 that she was Woody Allen's favorite comedienne. She shouldn't have been, for she has always had fans who love her even more than they love Lucy. For many of us this Eve remains the apple of our eye. ■