

Memorial Minute for Charlotte Hackstaff Fitch

Written by Len Berkman, read by Ellen Kaplan, Faculty Meeting October 2011

Once upon a time, until 1976, Smith College officially had a Department of Theatre and Speech. Speech was embodied in a single, radiant, once flame-haired and soon snow-haired individual with a name that struck some as a flag excitedly greeting a welcome wind: Charlotte Hackstaff Fitch. When, in spring 1976, Charlotte retired to spend three-and-a-half more decades living near her favorite southeastern Massachusetts beach, Speech at Smith College retired with her. Charlotte joined the faculty of the Department of Theatre and Speech in 1948, an instructor then, who was to rise to full Professor in 1973. Her ties to Smith began, however, in the fall of 1930 when she became a first-year undergraduate who already knew that theatre was to be the anchor of her life. Among second-year undergraduates that year was another soon-to-become theatre forerunner: the later-famed Broadway lighting designer, Peggy Clarke Kelley, class of 1935, whose remembrance of student Charlotte bicycling across campus to what was then our modest theatre headquarters is of a Charlotte equally vivid and inspiring to those of us who knew Charlotte many years later. As recorded in the *Smith Quarterly* in 1976, here is Peggy on Charlotte: "Through the 2000 Smith girls on campus, frequently flashed a vision of Charlotte Fitch bicycling from Gardiner House to the Quad to Students Building, the glorious domain of the theatre nuts, bright orange hair blowing, eyes gleaming, clad in her red, red gym suit like a burning ember or an Olympic torch."

Fittingly, the College chose Charlotte to represent Smith at the ceremonial installation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, as the Queen Mother became the new Chancellor of the University of London on November 23, 1955. Charlotte had served as Red Cross Hospital Recreation Worker during World War II and through to 1947. In her 14 year acting and dance career prior to joining our Smith faculty, Charlotte had taught at the Duncan School of Dance, performed at the famed Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey, at the Woodstock Playhouse in New York, and on Broadway with the legendary Katharine Cornell in *Romeo and Juliet*. For the length of her 28 years of teaching at Smith, Charlotte was our dialect and diction specialist for nearly every Smith production. She took on the directing helm herself for our productions of Jean Anouilh's *Waltz of the Toreadors* and two George Bernard Shaw plays, *You Never Can Tell* and *Heartbreak House*.

Charlotte served as Dean for the classes of 1955 and 1963. In her final year at Smith she became Director of our Department of Theater and Speech Graduate MFA program, at that time a large-scale sweep of playwriting, acting, directing, dramaturgy, and design pre-professionals, numbers of whose thriving careers bridge to the present day and whose voices are the more crystal clear for their studies under Charlotte's tutelage. Charlotte herself returned once to the stage after her retirement, co-starring at age 77 in the Your Theatre production in New Bedford, Massachusetts of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. The tribute to Charlotte of a Theatre and Speech Department colleague when Charlotte exited from Smith feels equally appropriate for her passage from our planet: "We shall miss her bustle, her rich laughter, her mellifluous voice. A total stranger to her encountered Charlotte as she roamed her favorite beach just a few years ago, learned that she had taught at Smith, and responded to her eager interest in current Smith and Northampton. The report of this chance meeting that reached our campus ran as follows: 'I have just met the most beautiful woman in her 90s that I could ever imagine. It was at night. She lit up the sky.'"

-- Len Berkman, Anne Hesseltine Hoyt Professor of Theatre