

Six decades on, Rosemary Harris' career is still in the 'Pink'

by Anne Marie Welsh

The glow's the same in person as on stage: warm, feminine, direct - no frills or frippery.

At the Old Globe in San Diego, where she's performing in her first one-woman show, "Oscar and the Pink Lady," Rosemary Harris, who's just turned 77, said she took the plunge because "It's a wonderful role and there's something about the message - although I don't like that word. There's a philosophy that this book and the play revealed to me, and if people can take that away, I think they will be enriched."

ROSEMARY HARRIS - At age 77, the acclaimed actor Rosemary Harris is taking on her first one-woman show. CNS Photo by John Gastaldo. Harris and her British director, Frank Dunlop, were still rehearsing the solo play adapted from Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's novella when they sat down to talk about their six decades of dedicated work on English and American stages.

She's starred opposite John Gielgud, Richard Burton, Peter O'Toole, Robert Preston - and lately as Aunt May Parker with Cliff Robertson as Uncle Ben in the "Spider-Man" movies. Her stage roles have ranged from Shakespeare to Neil Simon, Noel Coward to Edward Albee during stints at London's Old Vic, on Broadway, with the APA Repertory Company and the National Theatre of Great Britain. Her prizes: Tony, Drama Desk, Emmy, Obie and Golden Globe awards.

Dressed simply in black that set off a bright yellow enameled butterfly on her lapel, Harris said, "We all take life a little bit for granted when really it's like Oscar says: 'Life isn't a gift; it's a loan.' That's such a wonderful idea. Because none of us know how much time we have left. The decades whiz by."

Oscar is the 10-year-old protagonist of Schmitt's book, a bald leukemia patient who's "quite a handful" as Harris put it. Oscar narrates his own story in the novella, telling how an elderly volunteer "pink lady" becomes the only person who treats him like a real human being.

He's dying, he knows. But his parents are too heartbroken to speak the truth to him. The doctors are just as bad because, he concludes, they're good at prescribing medicine but "look guilty" all the time because their bone marrow treatment fails to restore his health.

Though he doesn't believe in God, Oscar agrees to Granny Pink's plan that he should write to God, describing each day of the next 12 as if it were one decade of his life. Schmitt allows Oscar the fantasy of growing up - courtship, a wife, a midlife crisis, old age.

Harris reads Oscar's letters, with their multiple voices and many mentions of her character, an imaginative grandmother who has persuaded Oscar that she was once a world-class wrestler.

A CHAMELEON

Calm and radiant, Harris was an imaginative adventurer, too. Born in England, she spent much of her childhood in India, where her father served in the British air force. Harris' mother died when she was a teenager, and she was estranged from her father, she said.

"Who's happy as a teenager anyway? I was unhappy and bereft though I did have a wonderful (maternal) grandmother, Granny Maude." The young Rosemary loved adopting other personas to fool even family members; once, she did dress as a wrestler "in a bathing suit and leggings."

After these childhood days as what Dunlop affectionately called "a con artist," Harris trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and won a prized contract that introduced her to the American playwright Moss Hart. He offered her a role in the New York production of his "The Climate of Eden" (1952). "So, I packed my trunk and came to America on the first Queen Mary."

The show was not a success, and Harris returned to England, where - "though I didn't like it," she said - "they made me do 'The Seven Year Itch.'" She spent a year in that hit and was soon working in classical productions at the Bristol Old Vic, which Dunlop founded, and at the Old Vic, which returned her to Broadway in Tyrone Guthrie's production of "Troilus and Cressida."

There, she met Ellis Rabb, the actor and impresario determined to create an American repertory company. By 1959, he had established the APA (Associated Producing Artists), and at the end of that year he and Harris married.

Their APA-Phoenix Repertory Company, an artist-run ensemble of actors and directors, launched the career of Globe artistic director Jack O'Brien, among many others. The group staged new works and noteworthy revivals featuring such eventual Old Globe stalwarts as actor Richard Easton. And Rabb became a regular at the Globe, too, as both an actor and director, introducing O'Brien to longtime Globe boss Craig Noel.

Harris played an extensive repertory with APA while also returning to England and Broadway for special engagements. Her portrayal of Eleanor of Aquitaine in James Goldman's Middle Ages comedy "The Lion in Winter" (with Robert Preston as Henry II) brought her a best actress Tony award.

Her final season with APA (and her divorce from Rabb) came in 1967. Soon after, a friend, the author Bella Spewack, called to tell her, she said, "Come over. The man you are going to marry is here."

That man was John Ehle, a North Carolina writer and activist. They met and married, settled in Winston-Salem, N.C., and raised their daughter, who became another dazzling actress, Jennifer Ehle.

"I really was going to retire for good. I had given half of my life to the theater, and now I had my first washing machine and dishwasher."

The marriage endured, if the retirement did not. John Ehle, 82, is the author of 11 novels and six nonfiction books, several of which are being republished. A lifelong North Carolinian, he has also been active in social, educational and anti-poverty projects in his home state and helped found the North Carolina School of the Arts, where he and his famous wife have both taught.

Within two years of their wedding, the Ehles were in London, where he could write - "John can take his head with him," she quipped - and she performed in Simon's "Plaza Suite." Her repertory included award-winning Broadway roles as Blanche du Bois in the 1973 "Streetcar Named Desire" and Julie Cavendish in the 1976 "The Royal Family"; a praised turn as Hesionne in a 1983 revival of Shaw's "Heartbreak House"; and a triumphant 1996 Lincoln Center revival of Edward Albee's "A Delicate Balance," among many others.

Film roles were plentiful, including an appearance with daughter Jennifer in "Sunshine" as they played older and younger versions of the same character; her cameo in "Being Julia" with Annette Bening; and her ongoing role as Peter Parker's aunt in the "Spider-Man" franchise.

"Pink Lady" director Dunlop and Harris go even further back than Ehle and Rabb - to 1956 when Dunlop first directed her in England in "The Enchanted," a play by Jean Giraudoux that required "an exquisite young lady," Dunlop said. "Rosemary had a phenomenal success with it. And I was a last-minute replacement as director because the man scheduled to do it had a bout of alcoholic depression."

Twenty years later, when Harris was firmly ensconced in the United States, she and Dunlop worked together again. He then headed the newly formed resident troupe of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the BAM Theater Company.

The qualities that have made her one of the most respected actors in the English-speaking theater - a combination of personal radiance, professionalism and versatility - define her accomplished 36-year-old daughter as well. Last year, the glowing New York theater star won her second Tony for three distinct roles in O'Brien's production of "The Coast of Utopia."

Speaking at the Radio City Music Hall ceremony, she shone with affection for the Lincoln Center ensemble of 44 (including Richard Easton, Ethan Hawke, Billy Crudup and Martha Plimpton) that had spent nine months rehearsing and unveiling Tom Stoppard's trilogy about mid-19th-century Russian intellectuals.

Harris, who spent happy periods during her long career in such repertory companies, echoed her daughter's sentiments.

"You become a team player. You become a family when you work on several different plays together like that in a company. In movies and television, that bonding never happens."

In her last year with the APA-Phoenix Repertory Company, for instance, Harris played roles in rotating repertory in Pirandello's "Right You Are If You Think You Are," Kaufman and Hart's "You Can't Take It With You" and Ibsen's "The Wild Duck," and three other plays.

But never a solo show until here and now, where, she said, "I hope the Globe audience will like the play as much as I do."

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