

Julia Marlowe

Actress

1865-1950

by John Arthur Horner

Julia Marlowe, famous actress of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was born in England's Lake District on August 17, 1865, as Sarah Frances (Fanny) Frost.

Accused of putting out his neighbor's eye during a horse race, her father fled to America. His wife and children followed, and they bought a large farm in Johnson County, Kansas.

In Lexington, Kansas, he ran a general store and made shoes, and his wife ran a millinery shop. Soon the family moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where Fanny's mother managed a boarding house. The future actress probably attended Benton School.

Moving to Ohio, Fanny's parents divorced and her mother remarried. Fanny fell in love with acting, and her mother bought a copy of Shakespeare, thus beginning the daughter's lifelong love of those plays. At 13 she played a sailor in a touring production of *H.M.S. Pinafore*, receiving room and board and \$7 a week. In a few years, performing as Frances Brough (her father's American alias), she earned \$25 a week doing walk-on parts.

By 1883 she played major supporting roles and had performed in Kansas City at the new Gillis Theatre. Moving to New York to study acting, she worked three years improving her voice. During this period she became Julia Marlowe.

Longing for Shakespearean leads, but unable to secure theatrical backing, Julia got her mother to lend her \$1300 to start a touring company. Their first production was in New London, Connecticut. Julia performed Parthenia in *Ingomar the Barbarian*. Her company still had enough money to do one performance in New York, which elicited raves from the critics. With new backers she performed Juliet in New York and took her company on tour. Success allowed her to assume leadership of the company of famous Polish actress Madame Modjeska. (Marlowe's business manager was Augustus Thomas, future playwright and former Kansas City journalist.) She inherited Modjeska's leading man, Robert Taber. They were married from 1894 to 1900.



Marlowe did not necessarily find financial success and artistic fulfillment in the same play. While touring Shakespeare throughout America and Europe, she performed and directed *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, achieving financial independence. With fiscal stability, she contracted with actor E. H. Sothern in 1904 to produce and star in three Shakespearean plays each year. In 1911 the two married. For years, Kansas Citians saw Marlowe and Sothern perform Shakespeare during their annual visits to the city.

The couple retired in 1924, and Sothern died in 1933. Julia Marlowe then lived in seclusion in New York, dying on November 12, 1950.

Sources

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