

Bloomington playwright Rachel Crothers once toast of Broadway



Bloomington-born playwright Rachel Crothers was photographed with her dog.

Tomorrow, Monday, December 12, will mark the 133rd anniversary of the birth of Rachel Crothers (1878-1958), the single most important female dramatist of early 20th century American theater.

Over a nearly four-decade span, the Bloomington-born and Bloomington-raised Crothers had 24 full-length productions on the New York stage, most of which enjoyed critical and popular success. Her plays—moralistic yet sophisticated, mannerly yet candid, lighthearted yet quietly serious—included “The Three of Us” (1906), “A Man’s World” (1910), “Mary the Third” (1923) and “As Husbands Go” (1931). “She was as skillful as she was prolific; when she was at her best she was the season’s toast,” noted The New York Times.

Crothers was the youngest of eight children born to Drs. Eli K. and Marie Louise de Pew Crothers. The fact that Marie is generally recognized as Bloomington’s first female physician loomed large for her daughter, given that many of Rachel’s plays focus on the role of modern women amid the social tumult of a rapidly changing society.

From an early age, Rachel Crothers demonstrated a remarkable precociousness when it came to matters literary. At the age of 12, to cite one example, she wrote the elaborately titled “Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining or The Ruined Merchant,” a five-act play performed at a friend’s house before an invitation-only audience. “It was all about a very beautiful young girl whose father had lost all his money,” Crothers recalled years later.

She attended elocution school in Boston, Mass., and after earning her certificate in 1892, returned to Bloomington to teach that same subject from her parent’s home at 414 East Jefferson St. Crothers also attended and graduated from Illinois State Normal University, and was an active member of the Bloomington Dramatic Club, where she performed with fellow eastside sophisticates such as Sophronia Funk, Emma Hodge and Spencer Ewing.

In 1896 or 1897, she left Bloomington for the bright lights of New York City and its theater scene, eventually finding success as an actor and then writer and director. At a time when farce and melodrama dominated the stage, noted one essay on Crothers, she instead favored the interplay of ideas, realistic characters, natural dialogue and commonplace settings, all of which presaged “the emergence of the modern American drama.” Within a decade she was the nation’s foremost female playwright, a position she kept until unseated by Lillian Hellman.

Crothers, who never married, was an extraordinarily independent and self-assured woman, remarkable for her time—and ours as well! She served as her own manager and agent, and even produced some of her own plays, most of which revolved around the tension arising from a woman’s search for independence in a masculine world. “If you want to see the sign of the times . . . watch women,” Crothers said in 1912. “Their evolution is the most important thing in modern life.” Several of her plays, for instance, confronted the “dual moral standard” that allowed men to engage in promiscuous behavior without grievous societal repercussions. “What is unpardonable in our present attitude is that without accepting these things openly we condone the man’s offense and taboo the woman,” she said.

Along those lines, Crothers addressed the more open sexuality of the Jazz Age flapper, and the consequences (mostly troubling, she believed) wrought by this newfound independence. Even so, she never stooped to moralizing, acknowledging the impossibility of proscribing simple solutions to something as unknowably complex as relations—lustful or otherwise—between the sexes. “Her truths were described as ‘homey,’ but they were nonetheless truths, certainly not saccharine, and were presented with a directness and sense of humor that impressed even the most cynical theatergoer,” noted *The New York Times* upon her death.

Crothers made the inevitable trek to Hollywood, working under producer Samuel M. Goldwyn, though her stay was a short one. “Hollywood’s pious notion is that producer and director must come before the story, with every right to pull it to pieces and destroy it,” she openly complained in 1935. Even so, a fair number of her plays were successfully

adapted to the silver screen, including “Susan and God” (1940) starring Joan Crawford, Fredric March and Rita Hayworth.

Rachel Crothers passed away on July 5, 1958, at the age of 79. “The world has had its ups and downs, its panics, wars, depressions, prosperities, hysterias,” eulogized The Pantagraph, “but through it all there was Rachel Crothers always with a new play, with a new idea, a new plot to take the public’s fancy.”