

“Ruth Draper: Complete Recorded Monologues--Ruth Draper” (1954-1956)

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Essay by Charles Busch (guest post)*



Ruth Draper

When I was a theater major in college, I read an interview with the great Lily Tomlin, in which she mentioned the influence the celebrated monologist Ruth Draper had had on her work as a solo performer. This prompted a rare trip to the University Library, where I was delighted to find the complete set of Caedmon records on which Ruth Draper performs her monologues. I was dazzled by the wit, poignancy and technical virtuosity of each of her character sketches.

While Draper’s world of spoiled society matrons may be foreign to our contemporary frame of reference, her affection and insight into the foolishness and vulnerability of humanity is timeless. I learned through her work that specificity of time and place doesn’t negate universal truths; it heightens them. Ruth Draper’s skill as an actor/playwright allowed her to create characters who at times speak in a variety of foreign languages. Even on a recording, without the benefit of facial expression, the listener has no trouble following the emotional rollercoaster of the scene. Each character sketch is a complete play with a dramatic arc. While they may be monologues with a single character speaking, one of the miracles of Draper’s art is that the people she’s relating to, who are never seen or heard, are also vividly captured. She can create a frenetic scene filled with incident and populated with a dozen figures, and we are able to view all of this clearly through the eyes of her one speaking character. It’s a brilliant feat of theatrical legerdemain.

Ruth Draper hailed from the highest reaches of New York aristocracy. As a young woman, she first performed her monologues as after dinner-party entertainments. It was the encouragement of a family friend, the novelist Henry James, that gave her the courage to become a professional entertainer. After seeing her perform at a private soiree, James advised her, “My dear child, you have woven your own little Persian carpet. Stand on it!”

Her entire repertoire was set fairly early in her career. She toured extensively over the next 40 years and resisted all entreaties to record or film her performances. It wasn’t until 1954, two years before she died, that she finally agreed to go into a recording studio. Her performances of

long-standing pieces such as “*Three Women and Mr. Clifford*,” “*Doctors and Diets*,” “*The Actress*” and “*A Church in Italy*” display a remarkable freshness and spontaneity. George Bernard Shaw once said of Draper, “That’s not acting, that’s life!”

Death ultimately claimed Ruth Draper in a manner that is the dream of all performers. A few nights after opening a new engagement on Broadway, her first in quite a few years, she returned home and went to bed. She died in her sleep, content with the knowledge that her comeback had been a triumphant success. How pleased she would be to know that the recent recordings she had done under duress would forever be available as an inspiration to future generations of writers and performers.

Charles Busch is an acclaimed performer and playwright and one of the acknowledged Kings of Drag. His show “The Tale of the Allergist’s Wife” ran on Broadway in 2000.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.