

A Biography of Harold Chapin

By Maya Cantu

A writer of “wit, gaiety and skillful craftsmanship,”¹ the Brooklyn-born British playwright Harold Chapin (1886-1915) wrote ten one-act plays and four complete, full-length works before falling as a WWI soldier at the age of twenty-nine. With Chapin’s tragic early death, the British and American theater lost an already assured comic talent. Revolving around the whims and wits of candid female characters, Chapin’s philosophical comedies of manners brim with “imagination and sympathy,”² sparkling dialogue, and a sense of humor at once sharp-edged and fanciful.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, on February 15, 1886, Harold and his sister Elsie were raised by a remarkable, iconoclastic mother: the American-born actress, playwright, and feminist activist Alice Chapin (who, in 1909, spent four months in prison after pouring acid into anti-suffrage ballot boxes). When Harold was two years old, Alice scandalously divorced his father Harry Clarke, and expatriated with her son to London, where she nurtured the theatrical talents of her children. Playing young Marcus to his mother’s Volunna, Harold made his stage debut at the age of seven in *Coriolanus* at the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford-on-Avon. While permitted to appear in plays during “special holiday weeks,” Harold received his education at the Norwich Grammar School and graduated from University College School in 1902.

Upon graduation, Chapin devoted himself to the London theatre, where he proved himself versatile as an actor, stage manager, and producer. In 1908, Chapin joined Charles Frohman’s management team at the Duke of York’s Theatre, where he originated roles in plays by J.M. Barrie (*What Every Woman Knows*, 1908) and John Galsworthy (*Strife*, 1909). In June of 1910, Chapin married Calypso Valetta, who also acted in



Portrait of Harold Chapin, from *Soldier and Dramatist*.

the Frohman company and was especially noted for her performances in the plays of George Bernard Shaw. Their son, Harold Jr. (nicknamed “Vallie”), was born the next year in Scotland. Here, Harold served as a producer at the Glasgow Repertory Theatre, where both he and Calypso also performed.

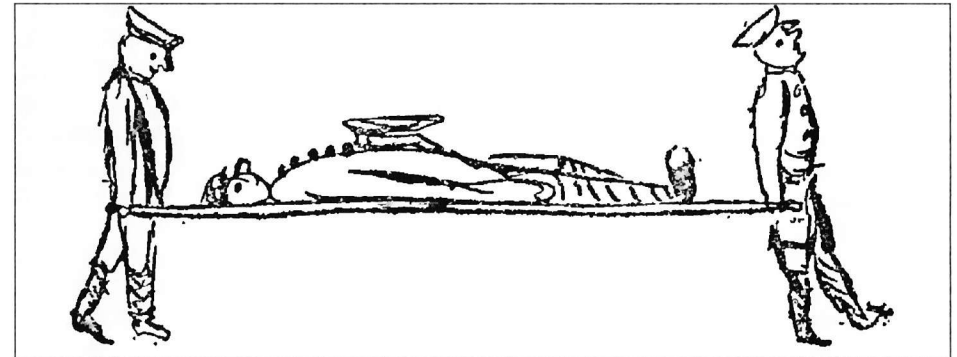
Starting with his debut one-act play, 1910’s *Augustus in Search of a Father*, Chapin gained prominence as a dramatist. Chapin also started a lasting association with the actor-manager Harley Granville-Barker, whom he joined as stage manager at the Savoy Theatre. Like both Shaw and Granville-Barker, Chapin “desired to use the theatre to stimulate the desire for social reform,” according to historian John Simkin. In one-act comedies like *The Autocrat of the Coffee Stall* and *Muddle Annie* (1910), Chapin humorously portrayed the realities of working-class London life, while his short dramas included *The Dumb and the Blind* (1911) and *It’s the Poor That Elps the Poor* (1913). Critics regarded these

short plays as “models of the Cockney sketch, alive with authentic dialogue and tender compassion.”³

While praised for his short plays, Chapin most excelled with his full-length comedies of manners, distinguished by their “originality and deft technical skill,”⁴ as well as by their bold and candid female protagonists. In *The Marriage of Columbine* (1910), *Elaine* (1912), *Art and Opportunity* (1912), and *The New Morality* (written c. 1911-1912), Chapin channeled the modern, independent figure of “the New Woman” through “delicious ladies” that are “seductive and contradictory and childish and cunning” (as described by J.M. Barrie). Crackling with “fireworks of wit,”⁵ *Art and Opportunity* was written for the West End actress-manager Marie Tempest, who starred as Pauline Cheverell, an “adventuress” who exposes Edwardian hypocrisies about money and marriage. Tempest, who later called *Art and Opportunity* “the most brilliant comedy I have produced,” scored a great

the playwright enlisted in Great Britain’s Royal Army Medical Corps. Working first as a cook, and then as a nurse and stretcher-bearer, Chapin was killed in an act of heroism on the front, on September 26th, 1915 at the Battle of Loos. Attempting to rescue an injured man from the trenches, Chapin was shot in the foot and then suffered a mortal head wound. “Full of ideas of all shapes and sizes” at the time of his death (according to one letter written to Calypso), Chapin left behind one unfinished, full-length comedy: *The Well-Made Dress Coat*, adapted from an Austrian farce. The tragedy also shelved plans for the Charles Frohman, Inc.’s Broadway production of a “new comedy” by Chapin, to star Marie Tempest. Announced in July 1915, this play was presumably *The New Morality*.

Chapin’s early death devastated a wide circle of family, friends, and colleagues, while contributing to his posthumous fame. Harold Fisher, a fellow soldier, wrote of Chapin: “Truly he did his duty, if ever man



A sketch by Harold Chapin, included in one of his letters home to his son, illustrating his work as a nurse and stretcher-bearer in the British Army during World War I. From *Soldier and Dramatist*.

success in the play at London’s Duke of York’s Theatre.

The onset of World War I put an untimely halt to Chapin’s playwriting career, just as his plays started to earn transatlantic success. In 1914—the same year that *The Marriage of Columbine* and *The Dumb and the Blind* introduced Chapin to New York audiences—

did. I shall always remember him as the most cheerful man I ever met, even in the most adverse circumstances.” The London theater community, too, lamented his death with a December 1915 memorial performance at the Queens’s Theater, where the bill of four short plays by Chapin included *The Philosopher of Butterbiggins*. As directed by

Harold's sister, Elsie Chapin, *The Philosopher of Butterbiggins* eventually made its way in 1919 to New York's Provincetown Playhouse (with Edna St. Vincent Millay among the cast). The next year, *The New Morality* finally arrived on stage, due to the efforts of the newly revived Play Actors. A London stage society with which Chapin had been closely associated, the Play Actors had gone dark for several years during the war. With the Play Actors, *The New Morality* earned praise as a "remarkable comedy... For intellectual foolery, *The New Morality* has no equal in present-day work."⁶ In 1921, the play also debuted on Broadway, as produced by and starring Grace George.

These theatrical premieres followed the 1916 publication of Chapin's wartime letters, collected under the title *Soldier and Dramatist*. Written variously to his wife, mother, and four-year old Vallie, Chapin's letters in *Soldier and Dramatist* inspired wide acclaim for their humor and "gallant pathos,"⁷ as well as sharp observations of wartime hardships and soldiers' lives. Dated April 15th, 1915, one letter to Calypso reads:

You ask what is the most striking feature of the (French) country under war. It is eas to answer: its peacefulness... One takes for granted trenches, horse lines, ruined villages, great and small guns, khaki and grey dead, barbed wire, smoke and noise... You must convince yourself that there are skylarks above the sand dunes near Ostend, just as there used to be, pigeons in ruined Louvain, early butterflies in the air among the bullets, crows and

rooks around Ypres, violets in the ruins of Givenchy, primroses at La Bassée and so on. Nature carries on business as usual.

While Chapin's poignant short dramas and collected letters in *Soldier and Dramatist* also await rediscovery, the playwright left behind his most vibrant legacy with his effervescent yet substantial comedies of manners. Saluting the "abounding vitality" of Chapin's talent, critic William Archer memorialized him as a playwright "of unusual power and sympathy and of great promise." Likewise, the London theatre critic Bennitt Gardiner, in a 1957 article for *The Stage*, called the little-known Chapin "one of the first comic dramatists of quality to work in our (London) theatre after Oscar Wilde," and praised the playwright's contributions to "an unbroken tradition of satiric high comedy" stretching back to the Restoration. Dexterously blending British and American theatrical traditions—sprinkling teatime artifice with Yankee candor—Chapin's plays continue to scintillate with both mirth and matter.

Dr. Maya Cantu is a theater historian, scholar, and Dramaturgical Advisor for the Mint, where she has previously worked on Ferenc Molnár's Fashions for Men, John Van Druten's London Wall, and George Kelly's The Fatal Weakness and Philip Goes Forth. Maya is the author of the book, American Cinderellas on the Broadway Musical Stage: Imagining the Working Girl from Irene to Gypsy (Palgrave Macmillan, October 2015). In 2014, she received her Doctor of Fine Arts degree in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism from Yale School of Drama.

CHRISTIAN CAMPBELL (*Geoffrey Belasis*) *Reefer Madness - The Musical* LA/NY (Ovation and Drama Critics Circle Awards), *Great Expectations* (Lucille Lortel), *Tick, Tick... Boom!* (National Tour, London), *Drift* (NYMTF), *The Green Book* (59E59), *Magnetic North*, *Juno And The Paycock*, *Nagasaki Dust* FILM: *Trick, Reefer Madness-The Movie Musical*, *Casino Jack*, *Among Ravens*, *Bad Hair Day*, *Pretty Dead Girl*, *Next Time*, *An Amish Murder*, *City Boy*. TV: "True Detective," "Big Love," "The Book Of Daniel," "The \$treet," "Maxx Steel," "White Collar," "Elementary," "Haven," "Mysteries Of Laura," "Supernatural." Citizen US/CAN/UK. xiancampbell.com.

CLEMMIE EVANS (*Alice Meynell*) Clemmie is so thrilled to be part of *The New Morality* and to be making her Off-Broadway debut. A Welsh native, she has been working in New York since graduating from The American Academy of Dramatic Arts. Some role highlights include Tilly (*The Report*), Masha (*The Seagull*), Natasha (*Three Sisters*), Fluellen (*Henry V*) and Mrs. Cheveley (*An Ideal Husband*). She has performed with many companies including Punchdrunk, Manhattan Shakespeare Project, Red Monkey Theatre Group and Sink or Swim Rep and can be seen in the recently released movie "Freedom" and the current season of "Louie" on FX. Thank you so much to the three Js; Jonathan, John and Judy and to friends and family on both sides of the pond, especially M&D and DD. clemmieevans.com.

MICHAEL FREDERIC (*Col. Ivor Jones*) National Tour: *The Great Divorce* (coming to NYC at The Pearl in November). NY credits include *Bill W* and *Dr Bob* (Soho Playhouse), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gynecologic Oncology Unit at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center of New York City* (Clurman Lab), *The Eyes of Others* (New Ohio), *Summer and Smoke* (Theatre Row), and *Night Over Taos* (INTAR - directed by Estelle Parsons). Regional credits include *The God Game* (Hudson Stage Company),

August: Osage County, *The Unexpected Guest*, *Doubt* (Fulton Theatre), *Doubt* (Cleveland Play House), *The 39 Steps* (Florida Studio Theatre and Actors' Playhouse), *26 Miles* (Two River Theatre and Round House Theatre), *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *A Christmas Carol* (Public Theatre of Maine), *Watson* (Gretna Theatre), *Play by Play* (Stageworks/Hudson). TV credits include "Royal Pains" and "The Men Who Built America." MFA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. www.michaelfrederic.com.

KELLY MCCREADY (*Lesceline*) Hailing from Australia (by way of England, Cuba, Germany, Spain and Guam), Kelly moved to America in 2009 to study acting and political science at Case Western Reserve University. Her favorite roles there include Isabella/Joyce in *Top Girls*, Princess in *Love's Labour's Lost*, and Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible*. She is also an alum of the Moscow Art Theatre program and a former CRY HAVOC Company and Manhattan Theatre Club intern. She was last seen in the reading of *Liliom* at the Mint and couldn't be happier to return as a cast member.

BRENDA MEANEY (*Betty Jones*) Recent theatre credits include Tom Stoppard's *Indian Ink* (Roundabout & American Conservatory Theatre); *Venus in Fur* (ACT); *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Owners* (Yale Repertory Theatre); *And a Nightingale Sang...* (Westport Country Playhouse); *One Slight Hitch* (Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater). Foreign credits include *Basin* (Abbey Theatre Studio/Anu Productions); *The Way of the Language: Voices from the War on Terror* (Project Arts Centre, Dublin); and *Biography of Bernie Ward* (Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin). Brenda is a graduate of the Yale School of Drama. Television: "Hell on Wheels" (AMC), "Love/Hate" (Radio Teilifis Éireann).

NED NOYES (*E. Wallace Wister*) Previously with the Mint: *Love Goes to Press*, *So Help Me God!*, *The Fifth Column*. Broadway:

¹ "The Embassy: *The New Morality*," *The Stage*, June 28, 1945, pg. 5.

² "Harold Chapin, *Soldier and Dramatist*," *The New York Times*, November 12, 1916, pg. 78.

³ Bennitt Gardiner, "Why Not Revive Harold Chapin's Plays?," *The Stage*, July 4, 1957, pg. 10.

⁴ Allardyce Nicoll, *English Drama, 1900-1930: The Beginnings of the Modern Period*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973, pg. 281.

⁵ "Art and Opportunity at the Prince of Wales Theatre," *The Illustrated London News*, September 14, 1912.

⁶ Sydney W. Carroll, "The Dramatic World: *The New Morality*," *The Sunday Times*, December 5, 1920, pg. 6.

⁷ "Harold Chapin, *Soldier and Dramatist*," *The New York Times*, November 12, 1916, pg. 78.