

Will Geer

Essay By Evan Finch

It had been, perhaps, the longest day of Will Geer's forty-nine years. Subpoenaed to appear before the Eighty-second Congress's House Un-American Activities Committee, he had dutifully gathered his wife and family, made the long trek to Washington, and settled in for a grueling afternoon of accusations and character assassination. The hearing had dragged on torturously, and Geer steeled himself as yet another inquisitor leaned into a microphone. "Do you," droned Republican Harold Velde of Illinois, "consider yourself to be a patriotic citizen?" Cameras whirred and flashbulbs popped as the question hung in the courtroom air, heavy with implication.

"I do indeed, sir," Geer replied. "I love America." He shifted his long frame restlessly and paused for the briefest of moments before continuing on. "I love it enough to want to make it better."

Will Geer, an actor and political activist from Frankfort, Indiana, was a deeply caring man whose social conscience grew as his acting took him from provincial road shows to the pinnacle of Broadway success. By the time he achieved widespread fame as Grandpa Zebulon Walton on television's *The Waltons*, Geer had spent nearly half a century campaigning (onstage and off) for such issues as pacifism, civil rights, and labor organization. He remained true to those convictions until his death in 1978—even when doing so meant the sacrifice of his very livelihood.

"I'm a lifelong agitator, a radical," Geer once reflected. "A rebel is just against things for rebellion's sake. By radical I mean someone who goes to the roots."

Geer's own roots—familial, if not political—extended deep into Indiana soil. His father, Roy, came from a long line of Clinton County farmers. His mother, Katherine, was a public school teacher whose own family had lived in Frankfort for decades. On 9 March 1902, their first son was born. William Aughe Ghere (who simplified the spelling of his surname in the mid-1920s to make it easier for the printers of theatrical programs) would spend his early years in a succession of homes along Frankfort's North Clay Street.

When not hiking in Frankfort's woods or fishing in its many streams, Geer was developing his cultural interests with Frankfort schoolteacher Flora Muller. "She would bring us down to [James Whitcomb] Riley's over on Lockerbie and he'd recite a few of his poems for us," Geer told an interviewer in 1977. "Once I decided to be brave and join in so I stood up and did 'Out To Old Aunt Mary's' and I guess you could call that my debut."

Muller also helped Geer develop his memory, which would eventually become one of the actor's greatest assets. Asked to memorize Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and recite it before his classmates, Geer failed to do either successfully. Muller kept him after

school and ordered him to give the address again-correctly-the following morning. Geer did so. "I would never have gone ahead if she hadn't made me go back the next day," Geer later told a childhood friend. "I knew then that I could go on and be an actor."

From an early age Geer's thespian talents had been fostered by his mother, who would playact with her son while reading aloud to him in the evenings. Soon Geer was staging dramas of his own. Along the banks of Prairie Creek, he performed one-man shows, recruiting neighborhood friends as stagehands. In empty garages he presented impromptu carnivals for the town's smaller children. And on Frankfort's many railroad tracks, he reenacted the struggles of imperiled silent movie actresses, rolling from the rails moments before the trains would thunder by. "The girls would go, 'Oh, Will Geer is dead,' and the neighbors would notify my mother," Geer recalled years later.

Geer's mother had other worries. Now the parents of three children (a younger brother and sister had been added in 1903 and 1905), she and Roy were struggling to make ends meet. Though Geer's father experimented with a succession of jobs-postal clerk, bookkeeper, and shoe salesman among them-he never seemed to stay with one position for long. He was often absent from his young family, and one day in 1911 he left them altogether.

Faced with raising a family herself, Katherine moved her brood north to Chicago, in search of more lucrative teaching jobs. Geer soon entered Waller High School, where he made his first stage appearance, in George Bernard Shaw's *You Never Can Tell*.

When the family returned to Indiana in 1919, Geer was influenced by another Frankfort educator, Katherine Howard, who directed the boy in two more plays at Frankfort High School. Geer also took an interest in speech and recitation, winning the school's annual Sallie May Byers Elocution Contest his senior year. "Katherine Howard gave me a sense of imagination and excitement," he reflected in 1950, "and Flora Muller gave me an empathy of the people."

Following his graduation, Geer again left Frankfort, this time for the University of Chicago. An enthusiastic gardener from an early age, he entered the school on a horticultural scholarship. Before long, however, his theatrical aspirations began to overtake his botanical ones. In 1923, rather than report to a summer job in Yellowstone Park, he signed on with the Stuart Walker Stock Company. Walker-a figure of some prominence in 1920s theater-had recently moved from New York City to Indiana, and his company's alumni would eventually include such luminaries as Spencer Tracy, Ruth Gordon, and Basil Rathbone. It was at Indianapolis's Murat Theatre that the lanky young Geer made his first professional billed stage appearance, in Edward Sheldon's play *Peter Ibbetson*.

It was in these college years, when Geer was exposed to many new ideas, that his social consciousness began to take shape. A 1924 discussion with attorney Clarence Darrow made a particular impression on him. The liberal lawyer had come to Chicago to defend U of C graduate students Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, then on trial for a

notorious thrill killing. In the course of preparing his case, Darrow spoke with many of the college's students, Geer included. "He wanted our opinions on all sorts of philosophy," Geer remembered, wryly admitting that "We didn't know anything, but it did start me thinking."

In his junior and senior years, Geer acted in and directed a number of plays for the university's Dramatic Association. After graduating in 1924, the footloose young actor found work with a succession of theatrical companies-including an Ohio River showboat, stock companies in Boston and Nebraska, and Chicago's nascent Goodman Theatre. By 1927 his skills had matured enough to earn him a recommendation to renowned stage actress Minnie Maddern Fiske, who was impressed enough to include Geer in her production of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The show toured the country (playing Indianapolis's English Theater in February 1928) for several months before landing on Broadway for a three-week run.

Geer's work with Mrs. Fiske significantly advanced both his career and his consciousness. A stern taskmistress who insisted on fluent improvisational skills, the actress was also a diehard activist for animal rights and other causes. In the course of her troupe's provincial tours, she would make frequent stops at union halls to take part in fund-raising "cause parties." Geer and other actors began performing at occasional strike benefits, as Mrs. Fiske looked on with a "benevolent interest."

The young actor's politicization would be made complete by the Great Depression. Professional theater, caught between a crippled economy and an advancing film industry, had fallen on extremely hard times. As Geer said later, things changed so quickly that "my head spun. All of a sudden we were out of work. The long lines in New York were for hand outs, not theatre tickets." Finding employment as a ship steward, he headed west to Southern California. Though he arrived looking for film work, Geer encountered an atmosphere rife with political turmoil, centering largely on the union organization of maritime and agricultural workers. Already sympathetic to labor's cause, the idealistic young actor soon became familiar with American Communism.

With the seeming failure of the nation's existing government, much of the populace took an interest in political alternatives. The American Communist Party, begun in 1919, emerged from the depression as the country's strongest and most influential radical movement. As such, it advocated replacement, rather than repair, of the struggling capitalist system. It also spoke out strongly for progressive causes-socioeconomic equality and pacifism among them. Whether Geer ever became a party member is doubtful ("I'm not a joiner," he ventured in a 1974 interview). What is certain is that he felt many of his personal goals-principally unionism, civil rights, and world peace-coincided with those professed by the Communists. As a result, Geer would make frequent appearances at party-sanctioned fund-raisers for the next ten years.

The charismatic Geer often served as a master of ceremonies at these charity events, entertaining the crowd with Leftist songs and skits between acts. He also formed his own acting troupe in these years and traveled the state entertaining workers with

political street theater known as "agitprop" (literally, a mixture of agitation and propaganda). Theater during the depression saw a proliferation of prolabor, antidiscrimination, and antiwar plays, and Geer's acting company was one of many nationwide who regarded their art as a valuable tool for social change.

The actor's deeply held activist commitments often placed him in physical danger. On Memorial Day in 1933, he attended a San Diego peace demonstration that turned into a full-scale riot when disrupted by club-swinging police. On another occasion, a Geer-directed stage production of *Till the Day I Die* (a pre-World War II anti-Nazi playlet written by Clifford Odets) raised the ire of Los Angeles Nazi sympathizers, who kidnapped Geer after a weekend performance and beat him severely enough to necessitate a brief hospital stay.

In 1935 Geer relocated from Los Angeles to the more vibrant theater scene of New York City. He worked for a time with the government-funded Federal Theatre Project, then began appearing in such socially themed Broadway productions as *Let Freedom Ring*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, and *Of Mice and Men*. In show after show, Geer garnered complimentary reviews-all the while delivering proworker, antifascist messages to capacity New York audiences.

It was the role of sharecropper Jeeter Lester in Broadway's *Tobacco Road* that expanded Geer's fame far beyond the realm of drama critics and left-wing arts patrons. Though the show carried a subtle proworker message, it had become immensely popular with a mass audience. Geer, who was the fifth actor to take the lead role, stayed with the show for 623 consecutive performances until its close on 31 May 1941.

As America regained its financial footing and entered World War II, protest theater suffered a sharp decline. Faced with a scarcity of sympathetic material and the obligation of supporting a wife (actress/singer Herta Ware, whom he had married in 1938) and family (two girls, to which a son would be added in 1950), Geer moved into the relatively apolitical-but lucrative-medium of radio drama. It wasn't long before his dry Indiana accent (once described by folksinger Woody Guthrie, a close friend of Geer's, as resembling "a stick in the fire") became familiar to a listening audience nationwide.

Meanwhile Geer continued unabated his offstage political activism. He made a brief return to Indiana in 1944, when the Victory Bandwagon (a touring revue promoting the reelection of President Franklin Roosevelt to a fourth term) made a stop at Indianapolis's Murat Temple. Featuring such stellar entertainment as Woody Guthrie, jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, and modern dancer Helen Tamaris, the show played to a packed house. Geer performed his usual emcee function, introducing acts and performing a song satirizing the Republican party (with a special verse added for local Democrat-turned-Republican Homer Capehart, then running for the U.S. Senate).

By the late 1940s Geer's reputation as a character actor had developed to the point where it could be parlayed into a thriving film career. Though he had made his cinematic debut years earlier (in 1932's *Misleading Lady*, directed by Stuart Walker), Geer now

began working in earnest. Moving his family west to Santa Monica, he appeared in nearly a dozen films over the next three years. As had been the case with Geer's stage successes, the movies in which he appeared often advocated social reform. *Broken Arrow*, for instance, was one of the first Hollywood Westerns to portray American Indians sympathetically-whereas both *Bright Victory* and *Intruder in the Dust* were ahead of their time in promoting civil rights for African Americans.

Not all of Geer's roles were chosen for their political content. He accepted a part in 1950's *To Please a Lady*, for instance, knowing the movie would be partially filmed at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The location shooting afforded Geer an opportunity to see old friends, visit family members, and even go fishing in the White River. Geer-who once boasted to an interviewer that he injected some Hoosier into whatever part he was playing-professed a desire to return to Indiana. He observed that while his father now ran an elevator at Indianapolis's Lincoln Hotel, his brother ran a truck, and his uncle Perry ran the Indianapolis Glove Company, he himself just ran "around the country."

Geer had no way of knowing it, but his days of 1950s film success were numbered. It was not quite one year after his Indianapolis visit that he received a subpoena to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. HUAC (the acronym by which the Committee became known) had been established in 1938 with a mandate to investigate "subversive" citizens and organizations. Originally, this investigation had focused on internal fascism. But with the end of World War II and the dawning of a Cold War with Russia, HUAC had begun taking a closer look at American Communism.

The mood of postwar America was conservative. Employers insisted that their workers sign loyalty oaths affirming they were not Communists. Liberal views of any kind were becoming cause for suspicion. It was in this atmosphere of national paranoia that HUAC began its investigation of the entertainment industry.

Proceeding on the assumption that Party members in Hollywood were attempting to insert Communist propaganda into movies, HUAC initiated a series of public hearings. Those subpoenaed to appear were questioned about their political beliefs, past and present. The committee encouraged witnesses to disavow Communism (and liberalism in general) and to name names of any acquaintances thought to be party members.

Ten early witnesses before HUAC had declined to cooperate, claiming freedom of speech under the United States Constitution's First Amendment. Cited with contempt by the House, the so-called Hollywood Ten were subsequently indicted by a grand jury and sent to prison. Later witnesses-including Geer, who appeared before the committee on 11 April 1951-understandably chose to stand on their Fifth Amendment rights of freedom against self-incrimination.

Refusing to "name names" or to confirm or deny his past membership in the Communist Party, the unrepentant Geer had harsh words for HUAC. "I believe that [the Communist party is] being persecuted," he told the assembled Representatives, "Like the Mormons, the Jews, the Quakers, the Masons. . . . Even radical Republicans in Lincoln's day."

"The word 'Communist' is an emotional, hysterical word," he said, "like the word 'witch' in Salem." Though some onlookers were amused by his irreverence, the committee was not. Neither was the cautious motion-picture industry, whose studio heads had avoided public controversy by forming a secret pact, agreeing not to hire anyone appearing on a "blacklist" of uncooperative HUAC witnesses. Geer and his fellow witnesses had committed no crimes and stood no trial. Nonetheless, they would be severely punished in succeeding years, as they were denied opportunities to earn a living in Hollywood.

Preparing for the worst, the Geers returned to California, sold their Santa Monica property, and bought a parcel of inexpensive land in Topanga Canyon, a rustic area in northwest Los Angeles County. Over the next decade, Geer would appear in only one film (*Salt of the Earth*, a 1954 independent film produced largely by blacklistedees). He fell back on his horticultural skills, establishing a small nursery where he sold vegetables and did occasional landscaping.

With no other stage available to him, Geer carved his own out of the Topanga Canyon hillside. The theater began holding weekend performances, and soon became a sanity-saving forum for Geer and other blacklisted actors, many of who craved an audience almost as much as they did an income. In 1974 Geer christened the stage the Theatricum Botanicum after a volume by seventeenth-century herbalist John Parkinson.

Geer's personal life, too, suffered a blow when he and his wife were divorced in 1954. Thankfully, his career rebounded when John Houseman gave him a chance in New York. Houseman and Geer had become friendly years earlier while working together on Broadway. Now directing a production of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Houseman offered Geer the role of Sicinius.

It was, to say the least, a controversial casting. Though not as firm as Hollywood's blacklist, a similar "graylist" was being observed in the theater. Both director and actor were forced to weather a storm of right-wing protest, but Geer's casting stood. Soon after, Houseman was recruited as director of the American Shakespeare Theater in Stratford, Connecticut. Geer followed close behind, staying with the company for five full seasons and even helping to landscape the theater's grounds. Settling comfortably in Stratford, he was soon running his own Folksay Theater in New York's Greenwich Village. Within a few years, he had clawed his way back onto Broadway stages. Still, the Hollywood blacklist held firm.

That particular barrier fell in 1962, when director Otto Preminger cast Geer in *Advise and Consent*. In a 1978 interview with journalist Gregory Catsos, Geer quoted Preminger as saying, "I have two parts-one is the majority leader in the Senate. I cannot give you that-Hedda Hopper would kill me. The other is the minority leader-you are perfect for that role. Your hair is too long, you have gravy spots on your vest, and you talk all the time." With his acceptance, Geer became one of the first blacklisted actors to return to the silver screen.

From 1962 on, Geer seldom lacked for work. Though he had become grayer and heavier, audiences would recognize him in such films as *Seconds*, *In Cold Blood*, *Jeremiah Johnson* and many others. He continued to enjoy success on the stage, appearing in salutes to Mark Twain, Robert Frost, and Walt Whitman. Television provided Geer with yet another show business medium to conquer, and he became a guest star on *The Bold Ones*, *Mission: Impossible*, *Bonanza*, and other popular programs before settling in as a cultural icon on CBS's *The Waltons* in 1972. "If you live long enough," he was fond of saying, "everything good will happen to you-even a television series." Indeed, almost everything did seem to have happened for Geer. He had appeared in every major form of twentieth-century American theater. He had supported many of the greatest actors of both this and the last century. He had been honored with a 1974 Emmy for Best Supporting Actor. He had also returned to his beloved Topanga Canyon, where he, Herta, and their children enjoyed a reconciliation as they improved and expanded their family theater.

Geer would also enjoy a reunion of sorts with his hometown, returning for a "Will Geer Days" celebration in June 1976. He had visited sporadically over the years, presenting a high school convocation in 1965 and attending his class's fiftieth reunion in 1969. This time, he performed at Frankfort's Red Barn Theatre, visited with friends at Wesley Manor retirement home, recited Shakespeare, read poetry, and reminisced publicly about his younger days.

Judging from an interview shortly afterward, Geer may have been surprised at the warmth of his hometown reception. Hoosiers "allow people to be different," he mused, adding, "They may not be liberals, but they are willing to accept variety."

In his later years, Geer continued working for peace and human rights and helped to support such new causes as solar energy and rights for senior citizens. In 1977 he was summoned to appear before another House of Representatives special committee. This time, however, he was being asked to testify against mandatory retirement age policies. In an ironic reversal of his circumstances twenty-six years before, Geer enjoyed near-reverential treatment from the assembled representatives and was hailed by Committee Chairperson Claude Pepper as a "great American." Sadly, this was to be one of the last in the series of noble causes to which Geer had dedicated his life. On 22 April 1978, the actor passed away from a respiratory ailment.

"For well over half a century," Geer once said, "I have never gone a day without getting acquainted with some other person, and in all those times I've only had my face slapped once and been called a few names." It had been written in 1939 that the genial actor's assembled friends could fill New York's Manhattan Center. Forty years later, they had no trouble packing Geer's Theatricum Botanicum for a funeral celebration. Surrounded by the scent of flowers and a lush growth of Shakespearean herbs, a throng of visitors paid tribute to their longtime friend.

Crowds have continued to gather each summer at the Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum, since the Geer family has extended Will's tradition of presenting Shakespeare plays,

folksinging, acting lessons-even cause benefits. And it is on those sunny afternoons, when music and laughter are carried through the theater's gardens on warm, gentle breezes, that Will Geer's spirit still presides-alive and well.

The Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum is located at 1419 North Topanga Canyon Boulevard, Topanga, CA 90290. For further information, call the Theatricum Box Office at (310) 455-2322.

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