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Leading Ladies - Gertrude Macy and Katherine Cornell

For anyone who cares about how American theatre and music and dance evolved, who considers it a rare treasure to be close to the source of artistic creation and artistic success, *Palisades*, a cul-de-sac on the Hudson, has certainly emerged as a place to be.

In 1928, Gertrude Macy was a graduate of Bryn Mawr with a degree in physics, a fine business mind and a strong emotion for the theatre. She had summered, during her growing up years, in Santa Barbara and had met Susie Hyde there. Susie Hyde was, in the late 20s, working as secretary to Katherine Cornell. "I asked her about her job and she said she didn't need to know shorthand, she answered invitations and kept up correspondence. I thought that sounded like a nice job and with interesting people so when Susie went off into publishing and since the Mc Clintic's knew I was eager for the job, I became secretary to Katherine Cornell. I never dreamt that would lead to the next 35 years of my own life in the Theatre, since I, too, knew very little of the skills required for even a secretarial post." As with most things she had done, Gert Macy's sense of organization made her successful at that job and eventually she became Katherine Cornell's producer. They were friends from the beginning. It was such a close and special relationship that it isn't possible to tell the story of one without the story of the other.

LEADING LADY is not only the biography of Katherine Cornell but a chronicle of Gert Macy as well. "I tried to keep myself low key while writing the biography," says Miss Macy, "but how low key can one be when one has done everything from buying the family cars to producing Miss Cornell's plays?" Miss Macy doesn't mind being revealed to her neighbors and her own career is inspirational to people with generalist talents in a specialized world. Little by little, Gert Macy began to take on the responsibilities of all Katherine Cornell's activities, supervising not only the function of her households, but the management of her assets as well. It was not a one-sided association by any means: when Gert was about to produce *I am a Camera*, Miss Cornell insisted on investing in that since she didn't want there to be a Macy production on the boards without some Cornell

money in it . Gert Macy led Miss Cornell through many different places. Katherine Cornell, in turn, led Gert Macy to Sneden's Landing and to us. Miss Cornell had rented the Log Cabin for 25 winters and, when she decided to build the famous house on the river, she chose Eric Gugler as the architect and bought the land from the Tonetti family. Anne Tonetti before her death, left instructions that Gert Macy was to be given a reasonable price for land on the Palisades if she wanted to buy here. She did and, in fact , her house - - called Rive Gauche and also designed by Eric Gugler - - was built before Katherine Cornell's . Gert Macy has lived here for 30 years.

Peter Rock, the Cornell house named for the durability of Katherine Cornell's father Peter and the majestic Palisades , was begun with a barn purchased on Long Island, taken apart and reconstructed in the center of Katherine Cornell's land . It grew - - it took years - - it was chisled out of the rock because Eric Gugler would not "dynamite a big hole and then fill it in with house. Instead, he insisted that the Palisades rock be drilled out a little bit at a time, just enough to fit each angle, each level, each corner of the house as it was needed. The rock had to be forced to accommodate the house - - not the other way around."*

When Miss Cornell moved out of the house, after Guthrie Mc Clintic's death, she didn't want any of the files that had been stored in Peter Rock and told Gert Macy to take them. Eventually they will probably go to the Lincoln Center Library of the Performing Arts for the Theatre Collection.

After Katherine Cornell died, several publishers approached Miss Macy to write the biography. "I t told them I couldn't write and they said 'Oh, don't worry about that, you just talk into a tape recorder and we'll find a ghostwriter. 'Well, I was rather snobbish about that and said I'd find my own. I first asked Thornton Wilder who said he couldn't do anything if it didn't emanate from within himself. Finally I found Tad Mosel and went to the publisher who accepted him on my recommendation."

LEADING LADY took three years to write, mostly from Gert Macy's files and recollections. It tells not only the career of a fine actress, but the story of the American theatre over 40 years or more. Gert Macy gives us timeless insights and inspirations in addition to having given her own notable successes as a producer in her life.

She says she's retired now and wouldn't do anything more in the theatre anyway because it's so absurdly expensive. It cost \$30,000 to produce *I am a Camera* in 1951 and, by comparison, *Ballroom* cost \$2,000,000 and received not nearly as favorable notices as Gert's production of *I am a Camera*."

It was inevitable that a biography of Katherine Cornell would be written but it was chance that Gertrude Macy should have found herself here and in a career leading to that biography.

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**LEADING LADY* p. 499.