A tribute to Claribel Baird Halstead, 1903-2003

Claribel Buford Baird Halstead, a distinguished actress, professor emerita, and director at the University of Michigan since the 1930s, died April 4, 2003, of pneumonia at the age of 99.

Biron on December 9, 1903, Claribel earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1925 from the Oklahoma College for Women in her hometown of Chickasha, Oklahoma. She earned a Master of Arts in Speech from the University of Michigan in 1936. Claribel returned to OCW to teach speech and theatre from 1927-47. During that time, she would meet and become lifelong friends with longtime local Ann Arbor actress Phyllis Wright, who portrays Aunt Clara in this production of The Nutcracker. Wright's relationship with Claribel went back some 70 years to when Phyllis was one of Baird's students at OCW. "I wanted to act," said Wright, "and I had to choose between Northwestern and OCW as the place I'd go to school. I chose OCW, and because of Claribel I never regretted it."

During her career at the Oklahoma College for Women, Claribel came to Michigan for the 1937-1947 summer sessions as a Visiting Lecturer and Guest Director for Michigan Repertory Players. Almost immediately, the University began courting her to come to Michigan. "My appointment has a humorous side. I had first been offered an assistant professorship, but Vl Wond [UM Professor of Speech and Director of Play Production, 1928-1956] urged me to wait for associate rank. I asked what difference it made. He thought a moment and said, 'It's a tenured position; you can't be fired, well, I suppose you could be if you were caught in adultery on the corner of State and William!' I didn't expect to be in that position, but I took his advice and waited."

In 1948 she moved to Ann Arbor as an Associate Professor following the death of her first husband Bernard Baird. "I recall getting off the train on a February day at what is now the Gandy Dancer in my high heels and stepping into snow knee-deep. I thought 'What have I done!', and wished for Oklahoma and home. Once in the classroom I was happy," Claribel earned her full professorship in 1961, and was a driving force in the Theatre Department until her retirement in 1974. She directed more than 40 productions for the University Players and Michigan Repertory while teaching courses in Acting, Characterization in Shakespeare, Greek Drama (a course she initiated), and the Interpretation of Modern Poetry.

In 1952, Baird married U-M drama professor William Halstead (1906-1982), who two years later became chairman of theatre, a post he held until his retirement in 1975. During that period and afterward, the couple became living legends in the educational theatre in this nation. "in recognition of continuous and outstandingly meritorious service to the educational theatre in this nation."

Claribel served three terms as chair of the Board of Governors of the Michigan League, eight years on the Board of Governors of the American Educational Theatre Association, and seven years on the board of the University Drama Season. She was elected to the College of Fellows of the American Theatre Association in 1979 "in recognition of continuous and outstandingly meritorious service to the educational theatre in this nation."

Claribel’s remembrance on Sunday April 27, 2003. He spoke movingly to the family, friends, and former students in attendance about her great influence on numerous generations. This production of The Nutcracker is given in her memory on the eve of what would have been her 100th birthday. Happy Birthday Claribel, your presence in our theatres as teacher, friend, audience member, and artist will long be felt and remembered.

Erik Fredricksen, Chair of the Department of Theatre and Drama, led a memorial in Claribel’s remembrance on Sunday April 27, 2003. He spoke movingly to the family, friends, and former students in attendance about her great influence on numerous generations. This production of The Nutcracker is given in her memory on the eve of what would have been her 100th birthday. Happy Birthday Claribel, your presence in our theatres as teacher, friend, audience member, and artist will long be felt and remembered.