

MARY WICKES

“In the Draft of an Open Mind”

Inaugural Adele Chomeau Starbird Memorial Lecture

Graham Chapel, Washington University

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Introduction: Chancellor William H. Danforth

Welcome. I'm delighted to see such a wonderful turnout on a beautiful spring day, the time when color and life appear on campus. And it's fitting that we should be gathered here to remember a great woman who gave so much life and beauty to her family, to her friends, and to Washington University.

I'm happy today that we have with us many members of the Chomeau family: Adele's sister-in law, Mary, nephews, great-nephews, and spouses. I'm glad also that so many members of the Women's Society of Washington University are here.

Last August, at the age of 96, Adele Starbird left us. She left us with a vivid sense of the lasting value of a life lived to its fullest: rich in intelligence, caring, and integrity. A great lady, one of Washington University's gifted people, she left her stamp on this University and on the lives of so many people who were here. Our presence today is a witness to that fact, and the fact that she remains an inspiration to the men and women who were fortunate enough to know Dean Starbird.

Adele Starbird brings memories of quality, compassion, and tradition. She served here for 28 years, touching the lives of many because of her ability to balance good sense, compassion, and discipline. To assure her memory and her legacy for generations to come, the Women's Society of Washington University has initiated this creative way to remember Dean Starbird. I think it's a very appropriate way to do so – with an annual

lecture that will bring to campus outstanding women whose life and achievements exemplify her ideals and aspirations. I'm very grateful to the Women's Society for initiating the program in memory of one of the earliest members of that society. The initiative carries with renewed energy the original intent of the founders of the Women's Society who, 20 years ago, began to find creative ways of bringing the St. Louis community to the University and the University to the community.

On stage with me is Mrs. Sarah Wallace, President of the Women's Society, who has given great leadership to strengthening and bringing vitality to this organization. At the close of the remarks of our distinguished lecturer today, Sarah Wallace will close the ceremony and make a presentation to Mary Wickes. So at the end of the ceremony, please stay in your seats for a few minutes more.

Choosing a person to be the first Adele Starbird Lecturer was a challenge. And Mary Wickes, the choice, is just perfect. Adele Starbird would have probably chosen Mary herself. Mary was her friend – they shared much; laughed together; followed one another's life and achievements with admiration and love. Mary is, of course, an alum of Washington University herself, and one to whom Adele could point with great pride. A list of Mary's accomplishments is lengthy. We know her best in her appearance in hundreds of dramatic and musical productions, television programs, and films. Recently she gave a wonderful performance in *The Wizard of Oz* at the Fox Theater. Mary is a teacher. She has taught acting and comedy here at Washington University, and at other

places. As Artist-in-Residence here¹, she played Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the Medical Auxiliary of the UCLA Hospital, and has logged over 3,000 hours of hospital volunteer work. She is a member of other worthy organizations, and gives her time and enormous energy to good causes. She has received a lot of awards, including the Outstanding Actress Award of the Variety Club. St. Louis has honored her – the Chamber of Commerce and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, among others. Washington University gave her an honorary degree, Doctor of Arts, and she also has had an alumni citation from our institution, for her outstanding achievements and services which reflect honor on the University.²

Most importantly for me, Mary is a friend who brings into the life of those of us who know her vitality and charm, fun and intelligence, loyalty and warmth. I'm looking forward to hearing Mary today.

[applause]

¹ In 1968

² Mary Wickes received her Distinguished Alumni Citation in 1955; her honorary degree in 1969.

Mary Wickes

Thank you. Thank you Chancellor Danforth, Mrs. Wallace, members of the Washington University Women's Society, and friends. I think I ought to quit while I'm ahead!

[laughter] That was one of the loveliest introductions. Thank you.

I'm delighted to be here; thank you for having me. I'm always glad to be back in St. Louis, my home. I always feel better. I think I look better – course I know you'll be the judge of that. But it's wonderful to come back, and, as Chancellor Danforth said I was here at the Fox just recently, last December, doing *Wizard of Oz*. I've told the Chancellor this when we exchanged correspondence recently – but if any of you is thinking of playing Miss Gulch, who then becomes the Wicked Witch of the West, I have a few pointers for you. *[laughter]* I had been ill in Los Angeles for about three weeks with that virus that went around and settled in the bronchial tubes, and I was still giving a lot of *[clears her throat]* when I got here. And the Wicked Witch, every time she enters or exits, is in a cloud of smoke. So I gave a coughing-good performance, and we had a little gentleman backstage of foreign extraction – I couldn't speak his language, he couldn't understand mine -- and for the entire run I could never make him understand to point the smoke bellows at my feet and not my face. So I just want to pass that on to any of you who are thinking of playing the role.

I'm always happy to be back on the campus. I could live on or near a campus happily the rest of my life. I love libraries; I love stacks; I get very excited over microfilm of the *New York Times*. I love the look and the smell and the feel of classrooms. I love walking campuses. I loved teaching that seminar here a few years ago and getting to know the student body. I repeated it again at the College of William & Mary and it wasn't nearly as much fun. It was such fun to be here a little over a year ago and be Grand Marshal at Homecoming, again with the students. They're all wool but the buttons; I think they're great.

Of course the main reason for my being pleased to be here is to honor the memory of Dean Starbird. Dean Starbird was my friend. We were really good friends. Every time I was in St. Louis I got in touch, either by phone or we met, depending on our calendars. Very often when I was in New York or Los Angeles I'd call and we'd have a visit on the phone. Now we didn't just talk. We got down to bedrock visiting, Dean Starbird and I. We drank gallons of tea at tea time and we really visited with one another. She'd say "Now Mary, what's new in your life?" And I'd usually either come from a film or a play, or I was here to rehearse for the Muny, and I always had something to tell her that she enjoyed. And she had a wonderful sense of humor as you know.

We found out early in our acquaintance that we both loved words. She loved colorful phrases. She loved sayings, even from another generation – often from another

generation – that really hit the nail right on the head. I remember one time we were talking about someone we felt was not telling the truth. And we were talking about how uncomfortable it is to be around someone who lies. And I said “Well my grandmother always said, ‘you can watch a thief, but you can’t watch a liar’”. “Well,” Dean Starbird said, “That hits the nail right on the head – I’m going to use that.” And she did, in one of her columns. I was very flattered she quoted me. I’m sure my grandmother would have been pleased, too. I remember at that same meeting, when we were discussing sayings that said just what you wanted to say, from another generation. I told her that my grandmother told me that her mother, my great-grandmother, had a wonderful expression -- when someone left a room in a hurry, that he went out of the room so fast you could play cards on his coat-tails. *[laughter]* Dean Starbird loved that. She said, “You see that’s so of the period, when men wore coats with coat-tails.” She loved it. And she said she was going to use it. I don’t know whether she ever did; I don’t think it’s in the book.

Incidentally, if any one of you has not read *Many Strings to My Lute*, Dean Starbird’s book, the compilation of many of her columns, you’re really cheating yourself; it’s a wonderful book. You must get it; you must read it. It’s really great. She had a wonderful way of making you re-think things. You know, you had ideas that you thought were engraved in stone, you’d known them all your life; and suddenly she’d say something in a column and you’d think, “Oh how about that ... yeah, I ought to re-think that”. She had one column I thought was particularly wonderful, about the Fifth

Commandment, of the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt love thy father and thy mother.³

She writes the whole column ending with the fact that fathers and mothers must be sure that they are honorable, so that they merit the honor of their children. Come on, that's what we need nowadays; if everybody took that to heart. It's wonderful.

She also had a column that was particularly apt for me in my profession, called "Facing Failure". I think it was called "Facing Up to Failure"; I'm not sure of the exact wording.⁴

But she talks about the fact that we all know people who are prone to disaster. They're prone to failure, and you can kind of feel it coming. Someone who says I'm going to do such and such; I know it's not going to work; and you think "Well, I guess you're right."

[laughter] Dean Starbird said it was like a horse in a steeplechase who comes right up to the hurdle and refuses to jump. She says there's a saying in England that the rider must throw his heart over the hurdle, and the horse will follow. I think that's a wonderful way of describing coming up to something, a project that you're not sure of, and you throw your heart ahead of you, and it's going to work. And as she said, it's not always the horse, it's the horse and rider. If the rider has some tentative feeling about a jump, a hurdle, there'll be an unconscious movement on the reins and the horse will refuse to jump. And it's particularly apt in my profession because very often you read a play script. There's a part in it you think you're great for, and you're cast in it. Now for the next three and a half or four weeks you live for that play production. You eat, sleep, and

³ "The Fifth Commandment", in Adele Chomeau Starbird, *Many Strings to My Lute*, p.24-25.

⁴ "Failure as a Fact of Life", in Adele Chomeau Starbird, *Many Strings to My Lute*, p.88-89.

breathe it. It opens. And the critics say no thank you. And the audience stays away in droves. Well, it hasn't happened too often in my case, thank goodness, but -- it happens. Well, what are you going to do? Say that's it; no more plays; that's it; I'm through? Or make up a lot of silly excuses? It was the weather; the critic probably had a fight with his wife before he came to the theater; all these silly things? Face up to it. The play failed. You pack up your makeup kit; you go home. And with courage you wait for the next one. That was the key word that Dean Starbird used: the courage to face failure. It applies very much to my particular profession.

The last time I saw Dean Starbird, she wasn't well at all and her eyesight failed badly. But there was that same graciousness; the pleasure in having you there; the smile, talking to you. It made me think, when I was thinking about talking to you all this morning. There's a story, a true story, of a runner, a long-distance runner, who came to the Olympics when they were held in Mexico City. He came from a very small country in Africa. It was a very long cross-country race, and at the beginning of the race he injured his leg. It was taken care of and he got back into the race. He came in 18 hours after the winner had crossed the finish line. And when someone asked him why, he said, "Because my country sent me here not just to run a race but to finish it." And Dean Starbird, to my way of thinking, ran a race. She finished it with courage, with faith, and with grace. She was a real gentle-woman, and I miss her.

When she was first approached by the editor of the *Star-Times* to write a column – she wrote for the *Star-Times* first and then afterward for the *Post-Dispatch* as I’m sure you know – she thought she wanted to call the column “Jambalaya”, after that New Orleans dish with all the ingredients. They thought that way she could cover a wide aspect of things, and I thought that was a good idea. When they spoke to me about coming here today I thought, “Well, there’s so many things I want to talk about”. Everything surged. There’s so many things about the school, and about St. Louis, and about, well, everything. So I thought, well, “In the Draft of an Open Mind”, that takes care of it. All my life I have lived in the draft of an open mind, it seems to me.

I came by it honestly. My mother and father loved people. They were never happier than when the house was filled with friends and good conversation. They were interested in what people were doing and how they were doing. They were civic-minded. They got into things. And all my life I’ve liked meeting people; I was interested in what they were doing. So it didn’t seem strange to me that I have had an open mind. I’m not bragging, it just happened. And with that open mind, I find that, as with a room, nothing clears a room or a mind like a good strong draft. And I think that’s why I have so many other interests besides my profession. Now I’m very proud of my profession but I find I’m a better actress because – I thought, well, I thought I could talk to you about the fact that, as Chancellor Danforth said, I’m on these two boards out in California, both of them medical. You’d think well, television, or the motion picture academy, or some of my many unions I have to belong to. But no, they’re medical boards. I’m on the Auxiliary

of the UCLA Hospital. It's fascinating, because we are a very rich board, which is nice. And the doctors come to us when grants, research grants; money runs out; they need more money. They come to us and, at a meeting, they explain what they're doing, what their research is about, what they hope to accomplish. And it's absolutely fascinating. A few years ago, Dr. Roland Buttusville⁵ came and talked to us, and he's the man who was doing the wonderful research on liver implants. And we gave him the money to go on with the experiments he was doing, and he's now doing beautiful work implanting livers. Our last meeting, the Director of Child Development of the Hospital came to the board meeting, and wanted us to put VCR's in the patients' rooms on the pediatric floor of the hospital. Well, that's been done. Now I'm very busy trying to get films. Disney has promised to give me some of his; Hanna-Barbera; *Sesame Street* – films to show. And when you go up on that pediatric floor in the hospital, and you dodge those tricycles ridden by little patients pushing I.V. standards, and you look into a patient's room and see a sick child with the family standing by the bed -- the cobwebs go right out of your mind, believe me. There's a breeze that goes through, a draft, that ... everything else seems a little inconsequential. You kind of straighten out the fact that ... you're not too happy with the director? That maybe the script isn't exactly ... it just gets you on the right course.

⁵ The correct name is Ronald W. Busuttil, M.D., Ph.D., FACS, Professor of Surgery, Chief, Division of Liver Transplantation, and Dumont Professor of Transplantation Surgery, UCLA School of Medicine; also Director, Dumont-UCLA Transplant Center.

I'm getting my master's degree. I figured, I have my Bachelor of Arts; the University was generous enough to give me an honorary Doctor of Arts; I might as well get the one in the middle. *[laughter]* The one for the bird to sit on. So, I approached the powers that be at UCLA, the Theater Arts Department. And they said well, all right, but I couldn't take anything in which I was proficient because it would be unfair to the students. I couldn't take acting classes, for instance, and I was dying to find out how they teach acting because I've never had any formal training, you see. I learned by doing, and from wonderful living textbooks. Anyway, what I was given to study were courses like scenery design. Scenery construction. Scenery painting. The history of the architecture of the auditorium. The history of theatrical criticism. But most of all, I was in classes with undergraduates, because some of the courses were undergraduate courses, and that was wonderful, and I got to direct some of them. And I got 10 A's, 2 B's, passed my graduate French exam, and that's a remarkable feat because I hadn't had French since I was in high school. And please, I'll get the thesis written.⁶ I've got four chapters, and I've over-researched, and it's all – the thesis is on the St. Louis Municipal Opera. So that's another breeze that goes through my open mind. All those classes, all those undergraduates who are now, some of them, graduated, but we keep in touch. They're wonderful people. I just love them.

⁶ Mary Wickes did not finish her Master of Arts degree in Theater Arts at UCLA (confirmed with both the Registrar's Office and the Thesis and Dissertation Office at UCLA), but notes and drafts for the thesis reside in the Wickes Collection.

As Chancellor Danforth said, I do volunteer work at the hospital. That blows your mind, but most of all my friends, my friends who are not in my profession, I grapple them to my soul with hoops of steel, believe me. My old friends here in St. Louis, people I've known nearly all my life – those are the people that you value, that you want to get back to. Get rid of all the kind of nonsense that goes on in my profession with a lot of people. I try not to get caught up in it. But it's so wonderful to come back to bedrock values. And you know, they're more in the Midwest than they are anyplace else. I was talking to a hotel man out in California recently, and he said we can always tell when someone from the Midwest comes up to the desk. There's a different air; there's a different standard, the values. And I said you bet your boots.

When I'm working -- and as I say, I'm very proud of my profession; I'm proud of the tradition and I can't imagine doing anything else but being an actress – but when I'm working it's very concentrated and it takes your time. And usually I'm playing comedy. I like to play the other thing, too, but I'm usually playing comedy – and that's serious business. You know Edmund Gwenn, the wonderful little English actor who played Santa Claus in *The Miracle on 34th Street*? He did many wonderful performances but most people remember him for that. And Edmund Gwenn, when he was in his last illness, George Seaton -- who was a friend of mine, and he was the writer-director of *Miracle on 34th Street* – George would go out to the motion picture home to visit Mr. Gwenn, and sit by the bed, and tell him the gossip and what was going on and who was doing what picture. But he said the last time he went out he could tell it was very near

the end, and that he could tell Mr. Gwenn was suffering, and he said, “Well, Edmund, it’s hard.” And Mr. Gwenn looked up at him and in a very weak little voice said, “George, it’s not as hard as playing comedy.” *[laughter]* I think that’s such a sweet actor story; I just love it.

But you know, some actors, they lose perspective. The blinders are on and all they do, eat, sleep, and breathe, acting. And their conversation can get pretty – don’t misunderstand me, not all of them, but some of them. They do lose perspective. There’s a great story about Spencer Tracy, who got hold of a young actor who was being very intense about his career and about a certain scene and what was his motivation. Tracy stood it about as long as he could, and he took him aside and he said, “Look. Learn your lines. Don’t bump into the furniture. And remember – Shirley Temple could do it at four.” *[laughter]* Now he was being facetious, but -- and, of course, Tracy was one of the finest actors we’ve had in films and on stage; I was only privileged to do one film with him -- but he was the greatest, so you know there was more going on; there was a lot of thought went *[sic]* into those performances. But it’s so true. Let’s keep our perspective. And I want to keep all these drafts going, too, through my open mind. To paraphrase St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, he said, “Give me chastity and continence, O Lord, but not yet.” *[laughter]* And me – I want rest, retirement, quiet, O Lord, but not yet, and maybe never.

Now, another thing I wanted to talk to you about when I thought about “In the Draft of an Open Mind” – I wanted to tell you how big a role Washington University has played in my life and in my career. Really, because of the University that I went on. Because I was not one of those who at five was going to be a Bernhardt⁷ or a Duse.⁸ I wasn’t pushed into dancing school -- none of that. I’ve had many, many interests. It never occurred to me. Mother and dad were theater buffs, and I was taken to the theater as soon as I was old enough to stay awake and not need a nap for a matinee, and then to evening performances. I had strange reaction. If anything was terribly funny, or just wonderful – the leading lady wore beautiful evening clothes and the scene just went so beautifully – I would cry, which did give mother and dad a bit of a start now and then. Very often I was led up the aisle at the final curtain still sniffing and mopping my eyes. I just thought it was so great, but it never occurred to me I could be one of those magical people; I just loved going.

⁷ Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) French actress who achieved worldwide stardom in tragic roles. Born Henriette Rosine Bernard, she first took the stage in 1862 at the *Comedie Francaise* (the French National Theatre). In 1869 she gained notice in Coppee's *La Passant*, then in 1872 became France's leading actress with performances as Cordelia in *King Lear* and the Queen in Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas*. In 1879 she appeared on the London stage in Racine's *Phèdre*. Subsequently, she toured throughout Europe and the United States. Her most famous performances were in Marguerite Gautier's *Our Lady of the Camelias*, Edmund Rostand's *L'Aiglon* (as the King of Rome), Marivaux's *Lorenzaccio*, and several dramas written specifically for her by the French playwright Sardou — *Dora* (1877), *Fedora* (1882), *Theodora* (1884), *La Tosca* (1887), *Cleopatre* (1890) and *La Sorcière* (1903). She was also famous for her 1899 London performance as Hamlet. In 1893 she took control of a French theater company and renamed it Theatre Sarah Bernhardt. She was noted in her later years for her great voice, artwork and film acting.

⁸ Eleonora Duse: 19th-century Italian actress famous for her Shakespearean performances. Along with Sarah Bernhardt and Helena Modjeska, she was regarded as one of the three great classical actresses of the day.

Well, come my junior year here. I had wanted to go away to school. I was younger than most, and mother and dad prevailed upon me. They said, “You spend your freshman and sophomore year at Washington University and then you can go east.” I had been accepted at Radcliffe and I was to go. Well, came my junior year I was into everything on campus. I was in Frosh Commission⁹ and Ternion¹⁰ and Quad Club¹¹ and Thyrsus¹² and I was on the debate team. Mother used to say she’d get out my coat with the lodge buttons on it. I had all these pins down the lapel, everything I belonged to. So there was no way I wanted to leave Washington University. So in my junior year – oh, I must tell you too, another thing. Our home was in Ames Place, right down from the Beta House.¹³ And, as a matter of fact, from my bedroom, if you had good binoculars, we could see a petty girl calendar on the walls of a room in the Beta House. *[laughter]* Now we thought that was pretty racy, me and my chums.

But so many Sunday evenings during the school year, there’d be eight or nine of my friends down at the house – it got to be known as a dormitory annex. A few members of the English faculty -- I don’t know why we always selected English faculty; probably

⁹ Freshman Commission: Women’s freshman honorary society (no longer exists).

¹⁰ Ternion: Junior women’s honorary society, now known as Chimes and now a co-ed organization. The men’s counterpart to Ternion was Thurtene, also now a co-ed organization.

¹¹ Quadrangle Club: Student dramatics organization, whose main activity was a student-written and produced musical comedy, produced every spring.

¹² Thyrsus: Student dramatics organization which produced a program of one-act plays every month and a major production every spring.

because they spoke a language, I don't know [*laughter*] – but anyway, we always had them down. And mother would whip up a big batch of waffle batter and a lot of good coffee. And Clarence Ax, who was captain of the football team at that point, would bring some wonderful homemade sausage from Edwardsville, Illinois, where he lived. And we'd have the waffles and sausage and coffee, and we would settle the problems of the world. Mother and dad told me afterwards that they could hear us, and one of us would say, "Well *I* think that" so and so and so and so. And then you'd hear Dr. Jones¹⁴, or Mr. Carson,¹⁵ or one of these, saying, "Now Mary, let's think this through." And then there's this long discussion. Well -- why would I want to leave that?

So my junior year, into Washington University again went I. And I elected to take a course called English 16, which was taught by wonderful William Glasgow Bruce Carson, bless his heart. And in that course you either wrote a one-act play or you went to all the shows at the St. Louis Little Theater and reviewed them at the end of the year. Now the St. Louis Little Theater, for those of you who might not know, recent people here, was a wonderful organization which had a theater in the Artists Guild on Union Boulevard – Union Avenue, I guess it's called. And it was originated, created, by some outstanding St. Louisans, people who loved theater. They did about four or five

¹³ The campus telephone directories for Mary Wickes' first three years at Washington University (1926-27, 1927-28, and 1928-29) give her address as 6180 Pershing Avenue. The directory for 1929-30, her senior year, gives her address as 6830 Pershing Avenue. Ames Place is the name of a subdivision.

¹⁴ Richard Foster Jones, Ph.D., Professor of English

¹⁵ W.G.B. (William Glasgow Bruce) Carson, Assistant Professor of English.

productions a year. They brought on a New York, a Broadway, director, once a year, paid him his New York salary, and he directed one production. The productions were really great. Wonderful people. Dear Dr. Arthur O'Reilly was head of the stage crew. I think he supervised the building of the scenery. Mrs. O'Reilly, Jane O'Reilly, with her hat on at all times, was the mistress of properties, which meant she had to get the set dressing, the drapes, the candelabra, the furniture. Wonderful, wonderful people.

Oh, I have to digress for a minute. When I played summer stock – in summer stock and in all, most, regional theaters – they borrow furniture and they borrow props from various people in the town. You take very good care of them. You give them two complimentary tickets for the loan of whatever they loaned. Well, we were playing stock and we were doing a play. We were in a mansion of some kind; it was a tea. And so they borrowed, the prop lady, borrowed this wonderful silver tea service from someone in the town – it was in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Opening night, the girl playing the maid tripped on the entrance and the beautiful silver teapot went “whap!” down on the floor, and you heard this piercing scream from the audience. It was the owner of the tea service! *[laughter]*

Well, to get back, Mr. Carson would produce three of the one-acts written in his course the following year. They were put on in January Hall¹⁶ He invited me to be in one¹⁷.

¹⁶ At that time, January Hall housed the School of Law. Thyrsus productions were produced in the January Hall courtroom, now January Hall Room 110

Well, boy was I up there, acting away. When it was all over, he suggested I go down to an open audition at the Little Theater. Well, mother and dad took a dim view of that. They thought I was doing enough with all my activities and my courses. But anyway, I wanted to go; they said all right. I auditioned, and I got the part.

Now, there was a period at the University when I was the assistant to Ray Howes.¹⁸ Professor Howes taught journalism and public speaking. Our office was in the west end of Eads Hall. It was not an office. It was a corridor that ran north and south. There was a door outdoors on the north and a door outdoors on the south end. Mr. Howes had a plasterboard partition put up in the middle. *Student Life* was in the south end; our office was in the north end. He supervised the publishing of *Student Life*. We also created the first alumni magazine, called the *Alumni Bulletin*. It was just a four-page fold that went out – I don't remember even in an envelope, just kind of stapled shut. And I kept my feet in the waste basket all through the cold weather. Because the air came in and the snow used to come in. But we got the *Alumni Bulletin* out and we supervised *Student Life*. That was one short period of my life here on campus.

¹⁷ Mary Wickes' made her Thyrsus debut in 1929, her junior year, as Alty, an old Tennessee mountain woman, in an English 16 play titled *On Jordan's Bank*.

¹⁸ Raymond F. Howes, Instructor in English. The first issue of the *Alumni Bulletin* came out in October 1931. From ca. 1930-1934, Mary Wickes was employed by the University News Bureau.

All right. Now, I go back to Little Theater. They brought on a fine director from New York, F. Cowles Strickland, to direct a production. He cast me in the play. At the end of it he asked me if I would like to go back, in June, to the Berkshire Playhouse, which he had founded with Alexander Kirkland. It was one of the two great summer theaters in the East and he had founded it with the actor, Alexander Kirkland. June was about two months off, and would I like to do that. He said, "Now I don't know how you'll stack up with professional actors because I've only seen you with amateurs. But I think you'd probably -- and if not *[sic]*, you can go into the school that we have attached to the playhouse." Again, I took it up with mother and dad. They said, "Well, we'll have Mr. Strickland to dinner." Well, they had him to dinner, the four of us. Strick told me years later, he said, "I'd never been through anything like it. I usually interview people." *[laughter]* Uh-uh: mother and dad interviewed him. Where would I be living? What kind of people were in the company? Would I be chaperoned? What kind of clothes did I need? Finally it was decided I was to go.

Oh, before Strick left, he said, "think up a stage name."

I said, "I'm not going to change my name. What's wrong with Mary Isabella Wickenhauser?" *[laughter]*

"Well," he said, "It might not fit on the marquee." *[laughter]*

Well of course, it never occurred to me it wouldn't go on the marquee, I mean, my name. So I thought, "Well ..." . So I said okay. Well, I dilly-dallied around. It's terrible. Suppose somebody came up to you and said change your name, what would you change it to? You'd have to think. While I was thinking, I got a wire from Strick. It said it's been a month, we've had to send out the publicity. Your name is Mary Wickes for this season anyway. So it's been Mary Wickes ever since.

Now when I got to Stockbridge, Stockbridge was a lovely little town – you think I've lost track of where Washington University comes into all this, but wait *[laughter]* -- I got to Stockbridge. Stockbridge was a beautiful little town in the Berkshire Hills founded in the 1700s. The Hessians smoked their pipes on Laurel Hill overlooking the city. There was a wonderful cemetery . One of the old New England families, the Stowes, have a plot there, where everybody in the cemetery plot is buried like the spokes of a wheel, with their feet into the center, so on Judgment Day, when they stand up, they'll only see other members of their family. *[laughter]* That's a good idea, I think. The wonderful New England people, characters who'd lived there for years. When in World War II, Queen Wilhemina of the Netherlands came to the Berkshires and stayed throughout the war, for safekeeping, there was a great deal of talk among the natives as to how they were to address her. Well, in South Lee, about three miles away from Stockbridge, was Mr. Pease, and Mr. Pease owned the drugstore. And one morning, he looked up from his prescriptions, and there stood Queen Wilhemina. And he looked at her for a minute and

he said, “Morning, Queen”, and that was the end of that! *[laughter]* From then on, they knew how to address her.

Stockbridge, that whole section, was called the Salzburg of America. Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony were in Lenox and Tanglewood. Ted Shawn and his male dancing troupe were up, Jacob’s Ladder or Jacob’s Pillow¹⁹, on the way to Springfield, doing concerts all summer, and we were at the Berkshire Playhouse doing plays. At the Berkshire Playhouse, first of all, I learned backstage deportment, because the people in that company were all fine stars and featured players from New York. I learned: DON’T whistle in the dressing room. DON’T put your shoes up higher than your head – it’s a sign of a death. DON’T put a hat on a bed – sign of a death. Darndest things. Don’t ever mention that Scottish play by Shakespeare in the theater -- the play will close the next night. And, honest to goodness, actors, you can’t get them to say M-A-C-B-E-T-H. They won’t do it in a theater. *[laughter]*

Okay. I also had my first fan and my first great star in Stockbridge. The playhouse was a Stanford White building, beautiful building, at one end of Main Street, and rehearsals were at ten in the morning. Course, while you were playing one show at night you were rehearsing another in the day. So we’d go down into town before ten o’ clock and do our little shopping, then get back to the playhouse at ten o’clock, ready for rehearsal. So during the first week – I guess it was right after the opening of the first week – and I had

a rather nice little part, nothing big, but okay. And I went down to Benjamin's Drugstore to get some postcards to send back to St. Louis, to show everybody that I was an actress now. And as I left the drugstore to start back up Main Street to go to the playhouse, a very nice looking woman dropped into step beside me. And she said oh, how she'd enjoyed my performance the night before. I thanked her, and she said I reminded her of Maude Adams.²⁰ That gave me pause and I thought "mmm, well, okay..." And she said, "Now what is your background?" So I began to tell her about St. Louis and Washington University. And I'm talking, and all of a sudden I was conscious of the fact that she wasn't beside me anymore, and I turned around just in time to see her disappear into Riggs Sanitarium. [laughter] That's a sanitarium for millionaire breakdowns, so my first fan was in trouble, a little trouble. [laughter]

My first great star to work with was Ina Claire. She was summering in Stockbridge, at Frank Crowninshield's home.²¹ He was the editor of *Vanity Fair*. And with her was a very attractive gentleman with a heavy accent, sort of Viennese, or German, or something. We thought he was pretty attractive. She said she would do *Biography* when Strick asked her, at the playhouse, if this gentleman could be in it as well. So Strick

¹⁹ Jacob's Pillow is the correct name.

²⁰ Maude Adams (1872-1953) American actress who was a major star in popular theater at the turn of the twentieth century. From 1892 to 1896, she was a protegee of manager Charles Frohman and frequently co-starred with John Drew. In 1905 she starred in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and thereafter was associated with Barrie, leading to her being labeled "the Barrie heroine." She appeared as Phoebe in Barrie's *Quality Street*, Maggie in *What Every Woman Knows*, and Babbie in *The Little Minister*.

²¹ See also Joan McKinney, "Letter to 'Sam' Put Her On Broadway". *Oakland Tribune* "World of Women" section; Wednesday, April 25, 1973 - available in the Wickes Collection

agreed – anything to get the great Ina Claire. I was cast as Minnie, the German housekeeper. I phoned home. I told them I was going to work with Ina Claire, because I'd seen her at the American in *The Last of Mrs. Chaney* and she was the greatest thing since sliced bread. She was just wonderful! So we rehearsed the whole week, and we noticed that Mr. Rethbeurgh – that's how he was introduced – didn't always turn around when we'd say Mr. Rethbeurgh. We'd have to say it two or three times, and he'd finally turn around. The end of the week, it came out in the *Berkshire Eagle*, the local newspaper, that he was Prince Ferdinand von Lichtenstein!²² So I had played with royalty, as well as the great Ina Claire. And Miss Claire then wrote me a letter to Sam Harris, the great New York producer, and that helped me a great deal when I got down there.

Now, Patricia Collinge, who wrote a lot of good articles in the *New Yorker*, was in the company. And she told me that Marc Connelly was going to be directing a play in New York, and Margaret Hamilton would be in it, and she thought I'd be a great understudying Margaret.²³ And she said Mr. Connelly lived at the Gotham Hotel. Well, I took this all in, and everybody else, at the end of the season, was going down to New York. They were New York actors. They were going down to get their jobs for the fall.

²² "That Actor at Stockbridge was Ina Claire's Prince". *Berkshire Eagle*, August 21, 1934, available in the Wickes Collection. In the program for *Biography* (available in the Wickes Collection), the actor's name is given as Edward Rethbeurgh.

²³ The play was *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, by Marc Connelly. For more details, see "Mary Wickenhauser, St. Louis Actress, to Crash Broadway". *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, October 8, 1934, available in the Wickes Collection.

And they kept saying aren't you coming. And I'd think well I'm supposed to go back to St. Louis.

So I called mother and dad: "May I go down to New York? I'd like to go; everybody's going."

Mother said, "Where will you live?"

"The Allerton House". Someone had told me about the Allerton House, which was a hotel for ladies.

Mother said, "Oh"

Dad got on the phone. He said, "Your mother will be in New York to meet you. She'll get you settled."

And I said, "Yes sir." *[laughter]*

Mother came, got me settled; after about four days she left. And the next day, about four in the afternoon I got myself to the Gotham Hotel with my ten production shots from the shows I'd been in that summer and my letter from Ina Claire that said, "Dear Sam ..." addressed to Sam Harris. That didn't bother me. It had a plain envelope; I was going to show it to Marc Connelly. So I got to the Gotham, and I tipped the bell captain a quarter [laughs] and asked him if he would please tell me when Mr. Connelly came in, because I didn't know what he looked like.

So he said he would. And a little while later I sat down in the lobby and he came, said Mr. Connelly just went up to his suite. And I thought oh, I wished I could see him at the desk as he came in. But I went to the house phone and I called. I said Patricia Collinge said that you're doing a play with Margaret Hamilton, and I'd be good to understudy. He said well why don't you come up. So I went up and he was there with his assistant, Robert Ross. They were having a drink – it was the end of a day of casting, it turned out. They said would you like a drink, and I said I'd like a chocolate milk shake [laughs] So they called room service, got it up. I read the part, I was cast, and we went into rehearsal.

At the end of the first week, I was so homesick. I'd cry if I saw vegetable soup. I couldn't stand being away from home – it was the longest I'd ever been away, a whole summer. I missed my chums. I missed everybody at the house. I missed the campus.

So I went to Mr. Connelly after one rehearsal and I said, “Mr. Connelly I’m very homesick.”

And he said, “Well, I guess you’d better go home.” I think he thought I probably lived in Jersey, or White Plains, or someplace. *[laughter]*

I said, Oh, thank you.” So I went home – packed, went back, came back here, re-registered at the University. I was going to get a masters in poli sci. Saw all my friends, whoo-ee, I was back.

After ten days came a wire -- and here’s where Washington University comes into the picture again – saying, “Your job is still open. Are you coming back? If so, report to the stage entrance of the Broadway Theater Monday. Marc Connelly.” Well. We called a council. We called Dr. and Mrs. Mackenzie. Now Dr. Mackenzie,²⁴ those of you who remember, was head of the English Department. Hair out to here, he would be so stylish right now, but he taught such a great Shakespeare course. Oh it stood me in good stead so many times. We went down to the Mackenzie apartment: Dr. Mackenzie, Mrs. Mackenzie, Mr. Carson, Mrs. Carson, mother, dad, and myself, with the wire from Marc Connelly. We sat down; it was discussed. And I can hear Dr. Mackenzie now saying,

²⁴ W. (William) Roy Mackenzie, Ph.D., Professor of English

[imitates a Scottish accent] “Mary ... if you don’t take advantage of this opportunity, you may regret it the rest of your life.” This was after a lot of talk.

So we decided – Okay. I went back – packed, went back , went back into rehearsal. We opened in Philadelphia. The first matinee, Margaret Hamilton had a touch of flu and couldn’t play the show. I went on. The *Variety* reviewer – that’s the Bible of show business, *Variety* – was there. He reviewed the performance, reviewed me, gave me a very good notice, and I was off and running as a New York actress.

So here I am, 17 New York plays later, 43 major films, more television than I care to go into, 200 productions in summer stock and regional theater, 15 of them at the Muny. Here I am, back, back on the campus, back here. And I want to tell you I owe Washington University so much. I really feel so close. I’ve been back so many times to do other things – MC the opening of Edison²⁵. It’s just been -- this is such a part of my life.

I’m reminded of an ancient Chinese legend, supposedly true, of a Chinese emperor who said to his court, “I want to meet the wisest man in China.” And the search went on for months. And finally they brought in this young man, and behind him an older man. He was introduced to the emperor, and the emperor was so pleased, and he said, “And who is

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this man with you?”. And the young man said, “This was my teacher.” And that’s the way I feel about Washington University. Thank you for having me. *[applause]*

Sarah Wallace - President, Women’s Society of Washington University

Thank you very much, Mary. On behalf of the Women’s Society, I just want to tell you how much we appreciate your being here today, and helping us initiate this new program. I have here a certificate which we would like to present to you, acknowledging you as our choice as the first Adele Starbird lecturer. It says:

“The Women’s Society of Washington University presents the Adele Starbird Memorial Award to Mary Wickes in recognition of her outstanding achievements and dedication to the ideals of Washington University, on the occasion of the first annual Adele Chomeau Starbird Lecture, April 12, 1988”

²⁵ Dedication of Edison Theater: October 17, 1973

Mary Wickes: And there's a wonderful engraving of Brookings. Thank you.

[applause]

[more talk – Sarah Wallace thanks the Chancellor for his support; Mary asks to become a Life Member of the Women's Society. More applause.]