

100 YEARS OF EILEEN HECKART

by Beth Kattelman,

Presented at Bexley Public Library, March 28, 2019

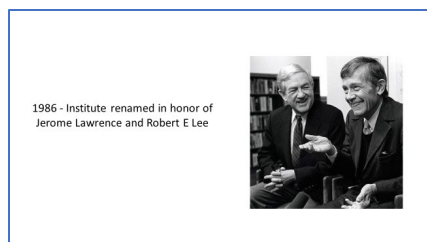
I am Beth Kattelman, I serve as the Curator of Theatre at Ohio State's Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute. Thank you for inviting me to speak about Eileen Heckart, one of my personal favorites. But first I'd like to tell you a little bit about OSU's Theatre Research Institute.

[SLIDE – TRI MAME SIGN]



The Institute is one of the University Library's special collections. We acquire, preserve and make accessible materials documenting the performing arts for the purposes of scholarship, education and enjoyment. Founded in 1951 as The Ohio State University Theatre Collection, the original Theatre Research Institute collection consisted of a microfilm archive of theatre history of the Western world put together by Dr. John McDowell, the Institute's founding director. Eventually the Institute began collecting original materials such as personal papers, costume, scene and lighting designs, technical theatre documentation; costumes; models of stage sets; photographs; posters; artwork; dance notation; video and sound recordings; realia and so much more, making this special collection an extraordinary resource for researchers, students, and life-long learners.

[SLIDE – PHOTO OF LAWRENCE AND LEE]



In 1876 the Institute was renamed in honor of Ohio-born playwrights Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. Lawrence was a graduate of Ohio State and Lee attended Ohio Wesleyan University.

[SLIDE – POSTERS]



Lawrence and Lee, of course, are the playwrights who wrote many well-known plays including: *THE NIGHT THOREAU SPENT IN JAIL*, *INHERIT THE WIND* and *AUNTIE MAME*, among others.

[SLIDE – READING ROOM]



In 2009 the Institute moved to a space in the newly-renovated Thompson Main Library, a space which we now share with the Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection and the Hilandar Medieval Manuscripts Library. This is our shared reading room. This is where you can look at the materials held by the Institute. The materials are available for anyone to look at, as long as you're willing to follow the security measures we

have in place. If you'd like for info about how to schedule a visit, please see me after. I'd love to help you with that.

[SLIDE – COLLECTIONS]



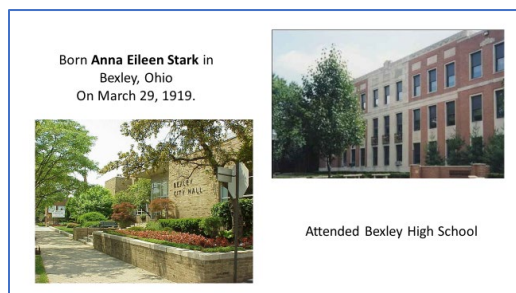
We now hold many wonderful collections related to the performing arts. In addition to the papers of Lawrence and Lee, we also hold the Twyla Tharp Papers, The Sidney Kingsley Papers, the Charles H. McCaghy Burlesque Collection, The Toni-Leslie James Papers, The Harold Eisenstein Papers and scores of others. And, of course, we hold the Eileen Heckart Papers, which is the wonderful subject that brings me here today.

[SLIDE – EILEEN HECKART]



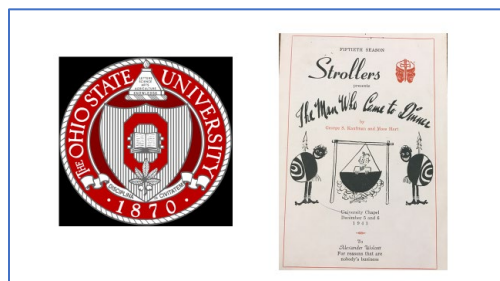
Eileen was born right here in Bexley, Ohio to the unmarried Esther Stark on March 29, 1919. Her birth name was Anna Eileen Start, but while still a child, she was legally adopted by her maternal grandmother's second husband, J. W. Heckart, thus gaining the surname by which we know her today.

[SLIDE – BEXLEY]



Heckart attended Bexley High School, graduating in 1937. She then attended The Ohio State University, graduating with a Bachelor's in Education in 1942. She met her husband John Yankee while at Ohio State and the two married in 1942. They would go on to have three boys, Mark, Philip and Luke and would remain married until John's death in 1997 – 55 years! A pretty impressive feat, especially for someone in the entertainment industry.

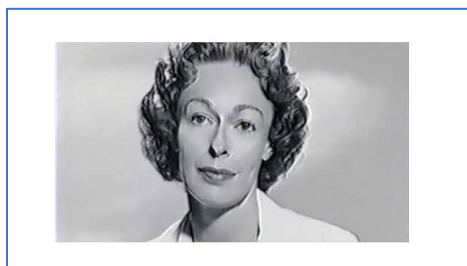
[SLIDE – STROLLERS]



While at Ohio State she became active an active member of the Strollers Dramatic Club, performing in several productions and garnering great reviews. Recognizing her talent, her advisors suggested that she pursue a career in acting, so after graduation she and John moved to Connecticut and she began to look for acting work in New York City. She got some work in summer stock and took classes at the American Theatre Wing. In 1945 she got a job as the understudy to Audrey Christie in the Broadway production of "The Voice of the Turtle" (1945).

Heckart was known for her deep throaty voice. Although she was a chain smoker, she claims that the trait was a result of her contracting whooping cough during her college years in Columbus. And just so you get a little example of this, I'm going to play you a clip of Eileen discussing her time as an understudy on "Voice of the Turtle." It's a lovely anecdote from the earliest days of her career, and you get an idea of how she sounds.

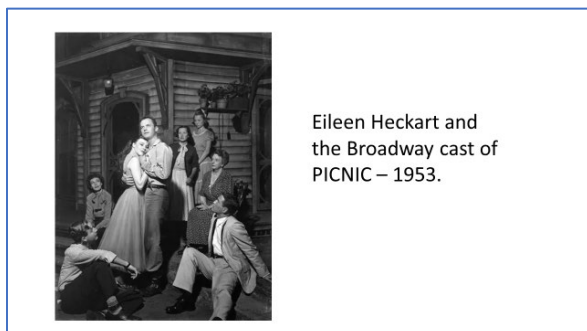
[SLIDE – PLAY YOUTUBE CLIP]



Now you've heard what folks meant when they described Heckart's voice as "smoky."

After "Voice of the Turtle," Heckart continued to work regularly on Broadway in relatively unsuccessful plays such as *The Traitor* and *Hilda Crane*. Then in 1953 her break came and she finally gained wide attention for her role as schoolteacher Rosemary Sydney in the original cast of William Inge's play *Picnic* on Broadway.

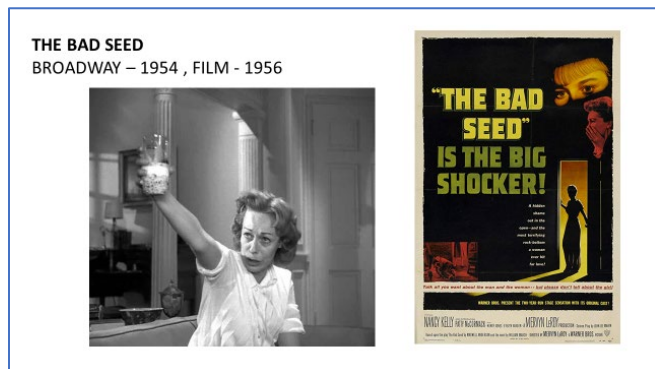
[SLIDE- PICNIC]



Picnic was Paul Newman's Broadway debut. you can see him here in this photo. And, of course, there's Eileen.

She followed up her success in *Picnic* with a role in Maxwell Anderson's *The Bad Seed*, the following year.

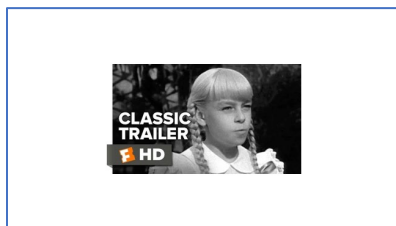
[SLIDE – BAD SEED]



The *Bad Seed* is a psychological thriller centered around a diabolical little girl, played by Patty McCormack. It was a major success on Broadway and most of the original cast members subsequently appeared in the 1956 film, including Heckart. In the film she played a brash, hard-drinking woman whose husband is killed by the evil little “bad seed.” Heckart was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Actress in a Supporting Role for the film, and she won a Golden Globe.

I want to play part of the trailer for you because it’s so much fun and because you get to see a little bit of Heckart in her Golden-Globe winning role.

[SLIDE – PLAY TRAILER]



In addition to her success in *The Bad Seed*, 1956 was an important year for Heckart in many other ways.

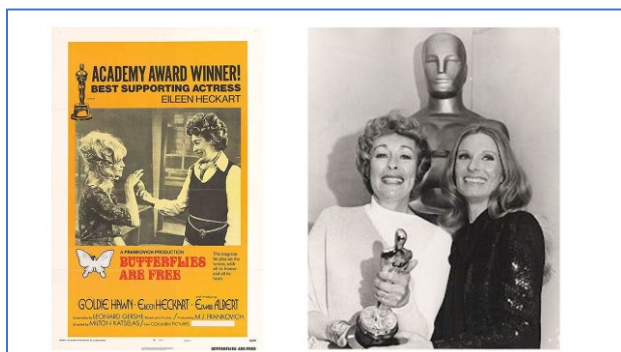
[SLIDE – BUS STOP ETC.]



It was that year that her film career really took off, with appearances in *Miracle in the Rain* with Jane Wyman, *Somebody up There Likes Me*, with Paul Newman and *Bus Stop* with Marilyn Monroe.

Throughout the rest of the 1950s and through the 60s Heckart worked steadily, taking on many roles in popular television series including Alfred Hitchcock Presents, Dr. Kildare, The Fugitive, and Gunsmoke.

[SLIDE – BUTTERFLIES ARE FREE]



In 1969 Heckart earned the role for which she would become most acclaimed. That year she played the overprotective mother of a blind adult son in the Broadway production of Leonard Gershe's comedy *Butterflies are Free*. The show ran for three years at the Booth Theatre and Heckart was nominated for a Tony Award. In 1972 Heckart played the same role in the film version starring Goldie Hawn and Edward Albert, and won an Academy Award for her efforts. And here she with Cloris Leachman who presented her with the Oscar that evening.

One interesting anecdote is that upon entering the auditorium as a nominee on Oscar night Heckart said, “I just hope they pan the camera on me once. I paid a lot of money for this dress, and I want my mother in Columbus, Ohio to be able to see it.”

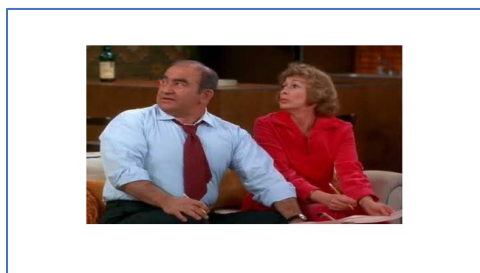
[SLIDE – TV SERIES]



Throughout the 70s and 80s Heckart continued to maintain a furious working schedule, making more than 80 appearances on television and also returning occasionally to work in film and on Broadway. She was a reoccurring character in the Mary Tyler Moore show, appearing as Mary’s Aunt Flo, and she also played reoccurring characters on several other series and was a regular on many, including OUT OF THE BLUE, TRAUMA CENTER, ANNIE MCGUIRE, THE 5 MRS BUCHANANS, and MURDER ONE.

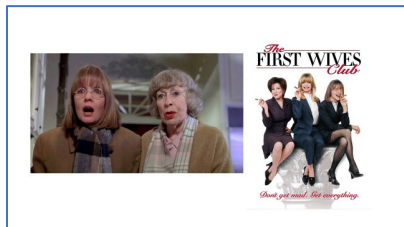
I want to play you a little clip so you get to see Heckart in one of her iconic tv roles.

[SLIDE – AUNT FLO]



In 1996 Heckart returned to film to play Diane Keaton’s mother in The First Wives Club.

[SLIDE – FIRST WIVES]

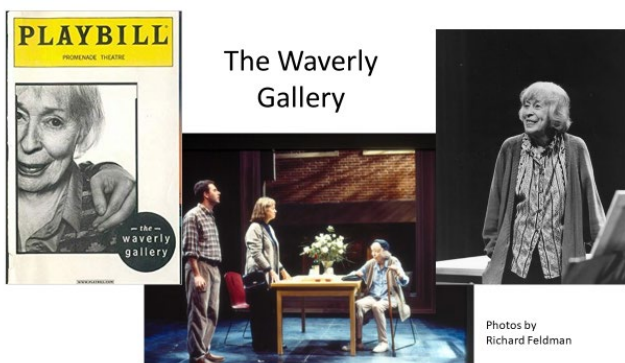


It was to be her last film role.

[SLIDE – WAVERLY GALLERY]

Her last stage appearance was in Kenneth Lonergan’s “The Waverly Gallery,”

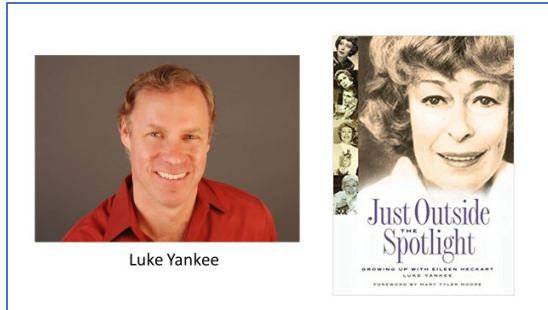
[SLIDE – WAVERLY GALLERY]



where she played a woman with Alzheimer’s who is fighting to hold on to her faculties and to the gallery she owns. The play premiered at the Williamstown Theatre Festival and then transferred to the Off Broadway Promenade Theatre in March of 2000, and it closed on May 21, 2000.

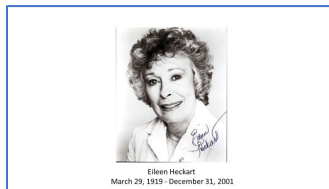
That same year Heckart was awarded a Tony Award for her lifetime of achievement in the theatre. It was none too soon as Heckart passed away the following year on December 31, 2001 at 82 years of age.

[SLIDE – LUKE YANKEE]



In 2006 Heckart’s son, Luke Yankee, who is also a playwright, director and actor, published a memoir about Eileen entitled *Just Outside the Spotlight: Growing Up with Eileen Heckart*. And we at the Ohio State Theatre Research Institute are still in touch with Luke and he periodically visits. He’ll be delighted to hear about this presentation.

[SLIDE – EILEEN HECKART]



Eileen Heckart’s illustrious career spanned almost 60 years. As a result of her amazing talent, she took home numerous awards including a Tony, an Academy Award, an Obie, a Golden Globe, and several Emmys. Although known for portraying a host of eccentric characters, she was not so herself. As she once noted, “I am not one bit an eccentric. I am always on time. I know my lines.” Heckart was a consummate professional with loads of talent and a lot of grit. And to think it all started here in Bexley a century ago tomorrow, which would have been Heckart’s 100th birthday. So I’d like to say, Happy Birthday Eileen. Thanks for leaving such a wonderful body of work for us to still study and enjoy. From Bexley, to Broadway, to the big and small screens, you did it all with grace and flair.

And now, I’d like to invite you to come up and take a look at a few items that I’ve brought from the Theatre Research Institute that document Heckart’s career including:

SOME POSTERS & PUBLICITY SHOTS & PROGRAMS

PHOTOS FROM THE BAD SEED

A PROGRAM FROM THE ACADEMY AWARDS

A PROGRAM FROM THE EMMYS

The shooting script for BUTTERFLIES ARE FREE

The script for THE BAD SEED

The teleplay for the Mary's Aunt Returns episode of the Mary Tyler Moore Show

A letter to Eileen signed by Gregory Peck and Natalie Wood

A note card signed by Mr. Rogers

A few items from Eileen's days at Ohio State