

Remembering Tallulah, A Girl's Infatuation

By Ruth Centerville

It was Christmas Day, 1968. I was thirteen and we were at Grandma's house. After dinner, the cousins were in the living room, the adults at the kitchen table with coffee, and I overheard my modish, sexy aunt, the one I adored, say that Tallulah Bankhead, who had died just a few weeks before, had sometimes used to answer the door in the nude.

The door, not the phone.

I remember how my aunt said it, as if it were something she wouldn't have minded trying, if she'd dared, or if her husband would have allowed it, which he surely wouldn't have. There was murmuring, a general disapproval around the table. My mom, the most religious and staid of the grownups, dismissed Tallulah as a 'shameless hussy.' One of my uncles, without brains enough to disguise his admiration, called Tallulah a dame. There was silence, embarrassment, titillation in the kitchen and in the living room too, the silence allowing my aunt to continue:

"And when she'd go out, she didn't wear panties."

"Alright," my dad, said, conscious of Mom and the ride home. "That's enough."

Enough? Not for me. I strained for more but alas, the adults had moved on to safer ground and I was left with the image of Tallulah, whoever Tallulah was, answering the door sans clothing.

Tallulah Bankhead was an actress who preferred live theatre over cinema, although she was riveting (to this girl) in *Lifeboat* (1944) which I had seen more than once on the Early Show, before I knew it

was Tallulah, and before I knew how she sometimes answered the door.

Tallulah played a jaded World War 2 newspaper correspondent, adrift with some other survivors from a torpedoed ship. This was before Laura Petrie grew up to become Mary Richards and before the dazzling girl-power of *Bewitched*. Trapped in a lifeboat with a bevy of strong male characters, including Walter Slezak as the cunning Nazi U-boat skipper, Willi (his boat got sunk, too,) Tallulah stood up for herself, and it seemed, for me too. She was gorgeous, sassy, and if anybody was going to be relegated to keeping the lifeboat ship-shape while the men made the big decisions, it wasn't going to be Tallulah.

Tallulah was in another movie that played on The Early Show, *A Royal Scandal*, in the lead role as Catherine the Great, Tsaritsa of Russia. Charles Coburn played Catherine's aide, Nicolai, and there's the feisty Anne Baxter as Catherine's lady-in-waiting, her rival for the affections of Lt. Alexi Chernoff (William Eythe.)

It should have been the perfect vehicle for Tallulah. Catherine's sexual appetite was prodigious, her affairs and deviant propensities legendary, (and probably mostly fictional, or at least grossly exaggerated.) There was nothing fictional about her lovers. There was a steady stream of them, mostly all younger than her, some much younger. She was cougar to the max, and who better to play her than Tallulah.

A lady who answered the door in the nude plays Catherine the Great, what we should have got was a rollicking madcap of winks and nods, double takes and leering looks into the camera. Uh, not quite. It's a by-the-numbers comedy. Amusing enough, inoffensive, almost polite, but rarely laugh-out-loud funny and never really bawdry.

Tallulah was forty-three when she made the film, but it was a hard forty-three years, drinking and chain-smoking (a staggering seven

packs a day); still, she was beautiful in her hoop-skirts and frocks, capes and jewels.

If a movie with Tallulah as Catherine sputtered, how about going the other way, with, say, Tallulah as a nun.

It didn't happen, so far as I know, but think about it.

Tallulah as the Singing Nun, the Flying Nun, or a sister on the lam, or in the Rosalind Russell role, Mother Superior in *The Trouble with Angels* (1966.) A teenage Hayley Mills is sent off to convent school by her playboy daddy, and Hayley and her best friend cause the nuns a lot of grief. Mary and Rachel aren't bad girls, just free spirits; not free in the way Tallulah or Catherine were but too rambunctious to be caged in a staid boarding school, except, in the course of her stay there, Hayley gets the calling, and at the end of the movie and in a poignant moment, her character dedicates her life to God.

If it had been Tallulah instead of Ms. Russell, there's a very good chance the movie would have taken a different turn. Our little Hayley might have fled the convent in a cool convertible and with Mother Superior in the front passenger seat, rockin' and rollin', jabbing those radio buttons, the wind whipping her headdress.

Before Tallulah died, she did some TV with some of its biggest stars - Milton Berle, Johnny Carson, Lucy and Ricky. (Google Lucy does Tallulah for one of the most spot-on impersonations in TV land.) In 1966, Tallulah was a foil for Adam West's Batman, and is it how we're to remember a talented actress, as the campy Black Widow? Shades of Yvonne De Carlo, an internationally acclaimed Hollywood star who is remembered today as Lily Munster.

Footnote to the answering-the-door-in-the-nude thing:

From 1936 to 1940, Talullah's father was Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. Think what it would be like today, in our 24-hour scandal-as-headlines world. Call it Nudegate or Doorbellgate or just plain Tallulahgate.

My favorite Tallulah anecdote:

Tallulah was late for a house-blessing party for a Catholic friend. When she arrived, the bishop was there in all his ecclesiastical splendor, including his mitre hat, and was consecrating the house, working an incense-burner, the ones with gold chains that click when they're rocked, gently. With the smoke and aroma of the incense permeating the house and with everyone anxious for Tallulah's take on the proceedings, she didn't disappoint.

"Dahling," she said to the bishop, "I love your hat but I think your purse is on fire."