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RICHARD THE ACTOR His stage would be the world, his drama become tragedy. But once, he and the girl he pursued were only bit players in amateur productions. By Scott Meredith



In the winter of 1937-1938, a sharp-featured, aggressive, extremely ambitious young man in his middle twenties appeared in three theatrical productions presented by the Community Players of Whittier, Calif. He was not a professional actor; he was, in fact, a brand-new attorney, recently graduated from Duke University's law school, and he admitted to intimates that a main reason for joining the little theater group was to meet people and perhaps pick up some "added contacts." He soon acquired a second reason: he became romantically interested in another member of the group, Thelma Catherine Ryan, a pretty schoolteacher who nearly everybody called Pat.

The young man wasn't much of an actor, and he was still unproven as a lawyer, so other Community Players weren't quick to predict fame or fortune for him. That included Pat Ryan, who turned him down when he asked for a date shortly after they were introduced. Nevertheless, before many years had passed, the young lawyer-actor—Richard Milhous Nixon—became one of the most famous men in the world. And the Pat who at first spurned him, eventually married him.

Richard and Pat Nixon never became entertainment celebrities, of course. Even so, their theatrical history is worth exploring because it does hold a certain strange fascination—if only because it's such a weird feeling to look back now at the old programs and reviews and see those familiar names appearing in such unexpected, inconsequential places.

Richard Nixon was not totally inexperienced as an actor when he showed up one evening at the Sunday School building of St. Mathias Church in Whittier, where the Community Players held their rehearsals. At Whittier College, the small Quaker institution he had attended, the social and amateur-theatrical life was dominated by a group called the Franklins. Nearly all the Franklins were members of rich and influential California families, and Nixon was in no way a part of this group; his father ran a general store and gas station in Whittier. So Nixon helped organize a rival club called the Orthogonians—the word is a Greek composite and its approximate meaning is "square shooters"—and co-authored, directed and played the lead in the group's first show, a thriller called *The Trysting Place*. He also appeared in a play called *Bird in Hand*, in which he impressed his fellow performers by his ability to weep onstage and on cue. His principal coach at the college was Dr. Albert Upton, a professor of English (continued)

Sixteenth Season

Third Production

*Whittier Community
Players*

Present

"THE DARK TOWER"

*By Alexander Woollcott and
George S. Kaufman*

WOMAN'S CLUB HOUSE

Thursday and Friday

February 17 and 18, 1938

Cast of Characters

(In order of their appearance)

- Hattie Mrs. Don Cole
- Martha Temple..... Elizabeth Cloes
- Ben Weston..... Grant Garman
- Damon Wells..... Winn Zeller
- Daphne Martin..... Patricia Ryan
- Jessica Wells..... Dorothea Bell
- Barry Jones..... Richard Nixon
- Dr. Kendall..... Chas. Coffee
- Stanley Vance..... Donald Scheid

RICHARD THE ACTOR

continued

and Drama. Years later, in 1952, Dr. Upton watched Nixon burst into tears on television when he was charged with having accepted private and questionable political contributions. As he watched all this on TV, Professor Upton told friends: "I taught him how to cry. He tried conscientiously at rehearsals, and he'd get a pretty good lump in his throat, but that was all. But at performances, tears just ran right out of his eyes." Then, without stating whether he was referring to Whittier College plays or the television event, Upton remarked, "Beautifully done, those tears."

Pat Ryan had also had some prior acting experience—though her experience had been in movies. As a student at the University of Southern California, she spent most of her spare time appearing in a long string of films. Most of these appearances were as an extra, for which she was paid \$7 a day, but she did once receive \$25 for speaking one line in a film called *Becky Sharp*—a scene that ended up on the cutting room floor. Several years later, she settled in Whittier to teach commercial subjects in the town's high school. And when a student, Elizabeth Cloes, asked her to try out for a part in a Community Players production, she consented.

Pat later told reporters that Dick Nixon entered the Community Players strictly because of her own presence in the group. "A friend of Dick's," she said, "told him that there'd be a 'glamorous schoolteacher' in one of the productions, and he came down to have a look." This was a flash of egotism on Pat's part, harmless but simply not true. When Nixon joined the Community Players, Pat Ryan wasn't even in the group; the first production in which he appeared played from December 8–10, 1937, and the first production in which Pat appeared ran on February 17 and 18, 1938.

In Whittier, Nixon worked for the oldest law firm in town, where his most-junior status drew him such assignments as dusting and varnishing the shelves of the law library and handling most of the firm's divorce cases. He was particularly unhappy with the divorce cases, finding himself unable to keep from reddening visibly when he discussed intimate details of adultery with female clients.

A former president

Nixon's first role with the Community Players—a bit part—was in a political comedy-drama called *First Lady*, by George S. Kaufman and Katharine Dayton. *First Lady* is the story of the granddaughter of a former president, and her desire to see her husband become the next president. Many be-

lieved the character was based on Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, a Washington celebrity who would many years later become friendly with a president named Nixon.

His next role was somewhat larger, though still not a leading part. In *The Dark Tower* he was cast as playwright Barry Jones, described in the stage directions as "a faintly collegiate, eager, blushing youth of twenty-four."

In *The Dark Tower*, Nixon got to romance with, dance with, and even sing "Stormy Weather" with Pat Ryan, since this was the play for which Elizabeth Cloes had asked the young schoolteacher to audition. Miss Cloes had thought of Pat when the director mentioned that she needed a pretty, young woman for the role of Daphne Martin, described in the stage directions as "a tall, dark, sullen beauty of twenty, wearing a dress of great chic and an air of permanent resentment." Pat was 24, but she was given the part at once.

It wasn't a bad part, either. In her role as Daphne Martin, Pat cursed, or almost cursed, to the retreating back of the male lead. Daphne says, "The son-of-a- —," forming the final word with her lips, and she disparaged Nixon, or at least the character played by Nixon—something she never again did in public. For in the play, Daphne (Pat) spends time with Barry (Nixon) only to use

him. And in her final line she dismisses him with a whispered aside to her true love: "Listen—as soon as he's tucked in his crib I'll call you up."

Onstage, Pat spent a lot of time with Nixon, and even more time with him at rehearsals, because she kept blowing her lines. Her biggest problem was with that song, "Stormy Weather," which she was to sing while Nixon accompanied her on the piano. She froze every time she started to sing; the director finally solved the problem by allowing her to speak the words. Offstage, Pat tried to spend as little time as possible with Nixon, an attitude he worked to alter. For though Nixon had not joined the group because Pat Ryan was in it, she became his prime reason for hanging around.

Nixon had met Pat the moment she arrived at the Sunday School building. Miss Cloes still recalls vividly that Nixon had stared at the young schoolteacher with sudden, sharp interest. Nixon wasn't much of a ladies' man—up to that point in his life, he'd had dates only with the daughter of Whittier's police chief, a girl shunned by more nervous young men, and with a girl or two he'd met at dances at Duke. But he had managed to arrange to take Pat and Elizabeth Cloes home that evening. He had also told Pat, that same evening, that he intended to marry her one day. "I thought he was nuts or something," Pat told a

reporter years afterward. "I couldn't imagine anyone saying anything like that so suddenly."

But Nixon persisted, even though Pat continued to outmaneuver and try to discourage him. He continued to drive the two women to and from rehearsals, always trying to get Pat to sit next to him, and he continued doing it even though Pat always managed to place Miss Cloes between them. "Why don't you sit next to him?" Miss Cloes said one day. "You can see he wants you to sit next to him." Pat's reply was simple. "I don't *want* to sit next to him," she said. Still Nixon persisted. He was no dancer, but he went dancing with Pat and other young people. He was no ice-skater, but he went ice-skating with Pat and others, even though, Pat recalled later, "he almost broke his head a couple of times." He even drove Pat out to meet other young men for dates, and then stayed around and drove her home afterwards. And as the world knows, his persistence finally paid off.

Dynamic manner

Persistence finally paid off, too, for Richard the Actor. His third and final appearance on any Whittier stage was in *Night of January 16th* by Ayn Rand, later the author of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, and here he played one of the leads, the prosecuting attor-

ney Flint. "Mr. Nixon," the review in the *Whittier News* said, "was especially good and his courtroom manner dynamic. His final argument was powerful. He is himself an attorney in real life." But the reviewer concluded that the actor who played the defense attorney, Charles Terrell, "was more impressive." But still, second best wasn't bad.

Night of January 16th is the story of a girl accused of murdering her financier lover. The play has gone through many metamorphoses over the years. There were changes each time it opened somewhere new, usually made by the play's producers but sometimes made by the author. For this reason, it's impossible to determine how much the 1938 Whittier version of *Night of January 16th* differed from the authorized version Miss Rand finally allowed to be published in 1968. It's likely that the prosecuting attorney's closing speech in the 1968 script is substantially the same as it was when Richard Nixon delivered it 30 years earlier. One passage from that speech carries its own special irony now:

"Simple virtue is more powerful than arrogance. Let your verdict tell us that none shall raise his head too high in defiance of our common standards." **End**

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