

Helen Gahagan Douglas: Off

By ENID NEMY

She was once called one of "the 10 most beautiful women in America," but that beauty has always been incidental to her.

Helen Gahagan Douglas has spent a good part of her life involved in social and economic problems and now, at 70, she is further convinced that women can, and should play a greater role in the issues of the day. Her own particular interest these days is disarmament.

"There is a psychosis now that only arms can save us," she said, her vivid blue eyes momentarily clouded with dismay.

Mrs. Douglas, no longer an



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actress, singer or Congresswoman, still exudes her special brand of intensity and warmth. Her caring has led to a career in lecturing, to active participation in Democratic party campaigns (the latest in Vermont) and to the ever present subject of the "arms race." It is the thread in her fabric of conversation.

"Women's movements are not sufficiently preoccupied with the peace issue," she said in a recent interview. "I don't know what it would take to arouse women. Why don't they take this issue and make it theirs? None of the other things we all want will happen until we get this straight."

The blue eyes turn pensive. "I've certainly always been for women's liberation," she said. "There are indisputable goals of equal opportunity and pay, but I think there are peripheral undertakings that are frivolous. I don't think women will get anywhere by just demanding. One way to get attention is to work at grass roots level until we have sufficient strength so we must be consulted."

Basic Changes?

She brushes impatiently at the lint of the past, including the Senatorial campaign that ended her own political career two decades ago.

"I don't know whether there are any basic changes," she says of President Nixon, who defeated her in a bitterly fought California race in 1950.

"The quality of the last campaign reminded me . . . techniques were used that were used before . . . one can frown on the techniques but they work in many instances.

"What is disheartening and self-defeating are campaigns waged in a way to avoid issues, to annihilate the opponent," she continued. "If fear is the basis on which they ask us for votes, it creates an atmosphere where



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people can't think and that in itself is self-defeating. The issues are so great that candidates should take every opportunity to elucidate them. The alienation of the voter from the representative is very great and very serious."

She never ran again for public office after the 1950 defeat, "because of the family." The family is husband Melvyn Douglas, the actor, a daughter, son and stepson. The intervening years have also added six grandchildren.

"In this family, they never say they don't want you to do anything, but I felt then it was time for the children to waste their mother's time . . . not to have to see their mother by appointment."

She did, however, return to the stage, acting with the

Stage but Not Silent

late Basil Rathbone in adaptations of short stories by de Maupassant and Chekhov, giving concerts and poetry readings ("I'm a devoted admirer of Emily Dickinson") and finally lectures.

"I wound up speaking almost wholly at colleges and universities," she said.

"I was a 'my thing' girl," she said, recalling her youth. "I never looked around to see what the world was like. There was no solid ground under my feet."

The solid ground came in two stages. The first took root on a trip through California after her marriage in 1931 ("I fell in love immediately after we met.") The couple ran into migratory workers searching for jobs after the economic collapse of 1929.

Studying Problems

It was after this that she began studying economic and social problems and organizing relief campaigns, all done while pursuing an active stage career.

Several years later, she visited Germany as part of a concert tour.

"I could feel the strain everywhere," she said. "I saw what was going on. I was vulnerable when I came back . . . I was involved."

Her first taste of politics came in 1940 when she was an alternate from California to the Democratic national convention in Chicago. She was then elected a committee-woman from her adopted state and, with labor support, became a candidate for Congress in 1944. She won that election and survived the Republican landslide of 1946 to win re-election. Her decision to run for the Senate in 1950 pitted her against Richard M. Nixon, a young lawyer.

Mrs. Douglas was born in New Jersey and raised in Brooklyn.

Her father, a staunch Republican headed the Gahagan Dredging Company, a contracting concern that pre-

pared the foundations of Kennedy International Airport and a number of other major projects.

Educated at private schools, she spent a year at Barnard College before taking a role in a semiprofessional theater production. Despite some parental misgivings ("I was chaperoned practically all the time until I was married") she went on to Broadway to become a David Belasco star. At 27, she decided to change careers, studied singing and went on the concert stage.

Mrs. Douglas is no longer center stage. It doesn't matter. Like everyone associated with the theater, she is well aware of the importance of the people in the wings.



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