

# Anne Bancroft

BY JAMES A. BAGGETT

“At one time,” says Anne Bancroft, removing her sunglasses and placing them on top of her head, “I wanted to call myself Bette Rogers.”

Why Bette Rogers?

“I wanted to be a combination of Bette Davis and Ginger Rogers,” she explains. “Another time I wanted to call myself Ruby Pepper, just because I thought it was a great name and I felt sort of trappy at the time.”

Seated on a sofa in a suite at West Hollywood’s exclusive Bel Age Hotel, wearing a long white knit blazer, matching slacks, and a light blue blouse, Anne looks anything but trappy now. Though she is 57 and her dark hair is streaked with grey, Anne more closely resembles the seductive Mrs. Robinson she played in Mike Nichols’s *The Graduate* (1967) than the fiery mother she recently played in Sidney Lumet’s *Garbo Talks* (1984).

Born Anna Maria Louise Italiano in the Bronx, New York, she is the second of three daughters. Anne has never lost sight of her humble roots. “My father was a pattern maker and my mother was a switchboard operator at Macy’s,” she

says. A born show-off, she admits she wanted to perform from the time she could talk. “I took anybody for an audience,” she explains. “I would go down to the corner and sing and dance for the WPA workers. Oh, God, I was just so noisy.”

By the time she was 19, she had signed her first movie contract, but the studio controlled her early career. After choosing the name Anne Bancroft from a list submitted to her by Darryl F. Zanuck (then head of production at Fox), she was forced into taking roles in such forgettable pictures as *The Girl in the Black Stockings* and *Gorilla at Large*. Lonely, insecure, and frightened, she made the further mistake of suddenly marrying Marty May, a Texas businessman. The marriage ended three years later.

Feeling like a failure, she returned to New York in search of the important roles she yearned for on Broadway. She received a Tony Award for her Broadway debut as the kooky Gittel Mosca in 1958 opposite Henry Fonda in *Two for the Seesaw*. Two years later, while she was onstage as Helen Keller’s teacher Annie Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker* (for





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which she won a second Tony), Anne was introduced to her devoted husband of 24 years, filmmaker Mel Brooks, then a struggling comedy writer. They have a 16-year-old son, Max.

One of the world's most respected and versatile actresses, having played the range from Golda Meir on Broadway in *Golda* to a sex goddess in her husband's *Silent Movie*, Anne has since proven herself in almost every arena of show business. She won an Academy Award for the 1962 film *The Miracle Worker*, and has been nominated four more times, most recently for her roles in *The Turning Point* and *Agnes of God*. She won an Emmy for her 1970 television special, *Annie, the Woman in the Life of Men*, a variety show of songs and sketches—and she's even worked behind the camera as writer and director of the 1979 movie *Fatso*.

Most recently seen in the feature films *'night Mother* and *84 Charing Cross Road*, the aristocratic Bancroft is at once charming and intimidating. With her still-heavy New York accent, she speaks in breathy, quick sentences.

**James Baggett:** What was it that attracted you to the role of Arnold's mother in *Torch Song Trilogy*?

**Anne Bancroft:** You know, when Harvey and I were in *Garbo Talks* together and he said he wanted me to play the mother, I thought he was absolutely crazy. Of course, I didn't tell him that. When he finally sent me the script, I was not that attracted to it. I thought that the times have changed so much since the script was written—the liberation, the wonderful times when gay liberation was first coming out. It was a different time. I felt it was difficult to read the script knowing what the times are now. I told him that, and he told me that he was going to change the year so that it happened back in the 1970s before AIDS had gone on such a rampage. Once he said that, I read the script again and, after some rewrites, we arrived at my liking it.

**Did you do any research into the psychological side of being parent of a gay person?**

I think my imagination is very full.

I'm well equipped with a good imagination. However, I never really thought of it as being a different problem than any mother might have with a child that disappoints her in her desires for that child. Mothers have dreams for their children and their children hardly ever reach those dreams. Very rarely do children actually become what their mothers want them to. Also, I think in this movie there is another aspect of the mother releasing the son and the son wanting to be released from the mother. You know, that good ol' breaking away. Here he is in his thirties, and he hasn't broken away from his mother yet—nor she from him.

**Did you create a past for her?**

Oh, yeah. Did you know that she was a schoolteacher? There is a line in it now where Harvey asks her what she's going to do because her husband has died. And she says, "Well, I think I'll teach out the rest of the term." So you know from that that she is a schoolteacher, and therefore that she has had a certain amount of education.

**Didn't you teach for awhile?**

No.

**I thought you taught Yma Sumac how to speak English.**

You're absolutely right! You see, you forget these things, so you have to dig into yourself. But it's true. I did. Please let me tell you that I *tried* to teach her English. I didn't, but I tried. I could speak a little bit of French and a little bit of Italian. And now, I can speak a little bit of Yiddish!

**How would you describe your relationship with Harvey?**

You know, playing Harvey's mother, I sort of kept myself a little bit aloof from him because there are portions of him, I think, that don't want to face the relationship he has with his mother. In fact, when his mother came on the set, I started talking to him later on about it and he said, "I don't want to talk about it!" He did not want to talk about his mother and the way I felt about it. So, I didn't do an awful lot of that serious kind of talking to him. We played a great deal. He's the most playful person I have ever met in my entire life! He's more playful

than a two-year-old. He's marvelous. He's great fun.

**While you were doing this role in *Torch Song*, did you gain any insights into feelings that you didn't expect?**

I felt so many of the feelings that *she* was feeling, so many of the frustrations and disappointments and sorrows and all those things were in me which I never thought I would feel. I felt terribly upset about his constantly talking about [homosexuality] all the time. You know, never letting up, never letting anybody breathe—nothing but homosexuality! It's like you put a bandage on a sore and he'd keep ripping it off. And that's painful.

**Do you ever find yourself acting like your own mother?**

More and more. My mother is still alive and still vital. But, also, let me tell you that in the last few years, I have come to admire my mother very much—more so than I did when I was young. I truly admire this woman. I understand her a lot more, too. I admire her vitality, her will and her determination. I appreciate those wonderful life-giving qualities in her.

**Do you want to talk about the impact AIDS has had on you personally?**

Have you read *And the Band Played On*? It's a fabulous book. I read the book in two days straight. I was going on vacation and I started reading it on the plane. Then I got sick while I was on vacation and I just read right through it. And I loved it, because I knew nothing before that. Because I have a young son, I thought it would be very important to learn about it. After I read it, I called my son's school because I thought there must be some kind of education. And what better place than in the schools? But I wanted the parents to be educated first, so that when the kids brought home the information the mothers and fathers wouldn't get scared to death. So I got in touch with a friend of mine who I knew was involved in a couple of organizations and he helped me get the right films and get to the right people. My whole experience with AIDS was how to educate myself, how to educate my family, and how to educate young

Michael Paris/Sygma 1988



Anne Bancroft with little Arnold

people. It was all sort of intellectual. Then I learned that this very man who helped me has AIDS. Then it became something much more than intellectual. It became something emotional that I had to deal with. I feel it is just so devastating because it's, like, if only the information had gotten out sooner, maybe he could have....

**It's very hard to articulate your feelings about something like this.**

Well, I'm not really articulating all of it. There are a lot more of my feelings about it that I have not even analyzed yet. But I do feel, mainly, that it's a terrible, terrible waste and that it didn't really have to happen in such an immense way. I think if we had faced it sooner and had a tactic...we should have been educated about AIDS long, long ago.

**Do you think that the stigma of being gay in Hollywood has been magnified by AIDS?**

I never thought there was a stigma in show business about homosexuals. I thought it was a great place to go and be in if you were a homosexual, because we sort of embraced homosexuals. So, I never thought there was a stigma at all.

**What have you learned from playing the mother of a gay person?**

You know, I could give advice from now until doomsday, but I don't think anyone would take it. Of course, it's very easy to talk when you're not the one in pain. But I think their non-acceptance of their child is so complicated and adds so much to their child's unhappiness. If there's anything they can do—I don't know, go to a priest, go to an analyst, do something to help yourself so that you don't add to your child's unhappiness. I think that isolation is a terrible thing. I learned that when I was in *The Miracle Worker*, when I was learning about the deaf and blind, and how isolated they felt. The major thing that one had to do

then was to help them into society. And that's the sort of thing with gay people—they are set apart by society, only because they fear them. What they fear, I don't quite know. But we've got to integrate everybody.

**At this stage of your career, what is it that you look for in a role?**

I really think that now what I look for is to play the thousands and thousands—or maybe hundreds and hundreds—of people that are inside of me, that I haven't had a chance to play yet. Someone just mentioned to me that I've never played a loser. Well, that never entered my mind, but I think I would like to do that—like a drunk for instance. That would be interesting.

**What's the biggest misconception about Anne Bancroft?**

I haven't the faintest idea. There's actually one thing, yes. People don't know that my major career started in comedy, which was *Two for the Seesaw* in 1958. That was truly my debut.

**What kind of a child were you?**

Adorable.

**Which of your roles are you most proud of?**

I don't know. I really liked them all or else I wouldn't have done them. There is some work that I'm not as proud of as other work. I'm very proud of *The Graduate*, because that was something that I had to see quite differently than the way the director [Mike Nichols] wanted it. And I had to come up with what he wanted. Thank God, he came up with it in rehearsal and not while we were shooting. But he gave me a completely different character than the one that I had thought of. So, I was very proud of myself that I came up with it as quickly as I did. I had to get in touch with so much anger and real coldness which I was not in touch with at the time.

**Are there things you do for yourself to help you maintain perspective on how you want to live your life?**

Honest to God, if you just live your life, you are constantly reminded of who you are and what your inadequacies are. You know, all you have to do is look in the mirror and you know you are not at all who these people would like you to be. □