

Shane Breynard review of Desley Deacon, *Judith Anderson: Australian Star, First Lady of the American Stage*

(Melbourne: Kerr Publishing, 2019), 520 pp., PB \$59.99, ISBN 9781875703067

It is a privilege to read a biography in which one realises that the author's own story will offer a very special appreciation of the life being studied. Desley Deacon's energetic and detailed exploration of the life of Adelaide-born stage and film actor Judith Anderson (1897–1992) rewards its readers in just this way.

Deacon's biography, beautifully presented by Kerr Publishing, extends the author's already considerable contribution to Australian history. Determinedly interdisciplinary, it furthers scholarship in the fields of gender studies, particularly of Australian women and work in the early twentieth century; transnational networks of culture and industry, including the anglophone theatre and film networks of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries; and biography itself, as Deacon excavates a life's narrative from the shadow of the celebrity persona that had come to define her subject.

The author's interest in Anderson appears to have begun to firm in 2006 in a paper on the Australian theatrical manager J. C. Williamson and the world theatrical market, delivered at the Australian Modernities International Conference at the University of Queensland.¹ This was followed in 2007 by an article in which she recognised Anderson as an exemplar of the mobility that the study of elocution promised to young Australian women through the acquisition of 'World English'.² Deacon invoked Anderson's career again the following year in her presidential address to the Australian Historical Association when she spoke of 'mind maps and theatrical circuits in Australian transnational history'.³ In 2009, at a symposium held on her retirement from The Australian National University (ANU), Deacon presented 'a wonderful illustrated lecture ... entitled "Judith Anderson in Forties Hollywood: From Rebecca to Pursued"'.⁴

1 Desley Deacon, 'From Sydney to Hollywood: JCW Stock Companies and the World Theatrical Market' in *Australian Modernities: Vernacular Performers and Consumers* (Brisbane: University of Queensland, 2006).

2 Desley Deacon, 'World English?: How an Australian Invented "Good American Speech"' in *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity: Essays on the History of Sound*, ed. Desley Deacon and Joy Damousi (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2007), 73–82, doi.org/10.22459/TLAM.11.2007.06.

3 Desley Deacon, 'Location! Location! Location! Mind Maps and Theatrical Circuits in Australian Transnational History: Presidential Address, July 2008', *History Australia* 5, no. 3 (2008): 81.1–81.18.

4 School of History, Australian National University, 'Honouring the Career of Professor Desley Deacon', 2009, accessed 20 July 2020, history.cass.anu.edu.au/news/honouring-career-professor-desley-deacon.

In addition to engaging Deacon's core academic interests, Anderson's life also reflects aspects of her biographer's own transnational experience. As with Anderson's theatrical career, Deacon's academic career followed and strengthened cultural and professional pathways between Australia and North America. After completing undergraduate (literature) and postgraduate (sociology) studies in Australia, Deacon rose to work in senior roles at the University of Texas, returning to ANU in 1999. As head of the School of History in 2008 she oversaw the establishment of the National Centre for Biography, publisher of the *Australian Journal of Biography and History*.

Deacon draws on Anderson's personal and family papers, including an unpublished memoir, correspondence, press commentary, and theatrical and film records, to describe the enterprise and reflect on the personal experience of her subject. Anderson is portrayed as a determined, creative and adaptable dramatic actor, whose deeply expressive voice and keenly focused physical and intellectual energy brought new dimensions to the stage and screen roles she played. Deacon writes with remarkable clarity and insight of Anderson's indefatigable, lifelong dedication to joining the circles of actors, directors and theatre producers that would allow her to pursue her dramatic interests and career.

Anderson's personal life was marked by the presence of her supportive and resourceful mother Jessie (née Saltmarsh) who was a trained nurse and, like her daughter, loved to perform for gatherings of family and friends. By the time of Judith's birth in 1897, her father, James, had gambled away the sizeable fortune he had made from the sale of a silver mine at Broken Hill and had taken to drink. James's 'drunken rages' (p. 6) came to terrify the family and Jessie sued for separation. James left the family when Judith, then Fanny (Frances) Anderson, was six years old, and she never saw him again.

Deacon recounts that Jessie was 'for all intents and purposes a widow from 1903' (p. 9). She leased a grocery store, which the family lived behind, in Adelaide's well-to-do suburb of Rose Park. From here Fanny and her brother, Frank, delivered groceries in a 'spring-cart with a beloved pony named Dolly' (p. 11). Deacon paints Fanny as an enthusiastic and energetic child who, in her own words, recalled, 'boys existed for only one purpose: to compete with, and to win from. I out-shouted, outran, outfought them all ... I was a tom-boy. I was known – and gloried in the name – as Outlaw Fan from the Anderson Gang' (p. 11).

Anderson recalled her childhood as a happy one. Although she avoided school work she revelled in dramatic performance, initially drawing energy from the praise she received from performing for family and family friends. Deacon cites Anderson's own reflection on one of the powerful moments that inspired her to pursue performance as a career. On attending a performance given by Dame Nellie Melba in Adelaide in 1908, Anderson felt for the first time 'that quite indescribable sense of miracle

that a great talent can produce. [And] ... I knew that I, too, must do something in public; that I too must try in my own way to do to people, what she, standing by a piano, was doing to me and to everyone else in that theatre' (p. 16)

Anderson's engaging sonorous voice was a natural gift, which she enthusiastically learnt to master, from about the age of 12, under the instruction of elocution tutor Mabel Kerr (née Best). Deacon observes that Anderson's embrace of this training and the awards that followed gave her transnational currency as an accomplished speaker of 'World English'. This was a critical first step toward the later theatrical success she enjoyed across the anglophone world, initially in Australia and later in the theatres of New York and film studios of Hollywood.

It is touching to read that Anderson's mother, Jessie, lived with her daughter for most of her life, supporting her emotionally, professionally and, when necessary, economically through taking on sewing work. The pair moved to Sydney in 1913 and Anderson eventually secured minor roles in travelling shows with the adored Julius Knight and, later, alongside American actors in *Turn to the Right* imported by J. & N. Tait. Anderson's work in these productions gave her the skills and the transnational connections that would help her to survive when she arrived, accompanied and aided by her mother, to pursue a stage career in North America in 1918.

Deacon's command of her material allows her to convey the complex migration and transition of these two determined, resourceful Australian women to a new country, and a not-immediately welcoming theatre culture, with deceptive ease. Anderson's angular features did not match the doe-eyed adolescent faces that dominated the American stage and screen, but suitable dramatic stage roles did eventually present themselves. By 1923 Anderson's performance in a supporting role, as an anguished daughter in the play *Peter Weston*, began to win her the critical acclaim she was seeking. Styles shift and Anderson's slim, angular physique and features came into vogue. In 1924 she appeared in *Cobra*. She played a sophisticated vamp with 'personality', enhanced in the eyes of her American critics and public by her Australian background, and established her reputation on the American theatre circuit. Within months she had achieved her long-held dream of signing with theatre producer David Belasco.

Deacon makes it clear that it was the major dramatic stage roles that Anderson craved, both for their challenge and reward. In 1928 Anderson vowed that 'after I have made much money I might give the public just one fine play' (p. 129). While she had dreamed of delivering a production of Euripides's Greek tragedy, *Medea*, since at least 1929, the production was not realised until 1947. As she had envisaged from the outset, the play was ultimately written by her poet-friend Robertson Jeffers—in a contracted form that privileged the major roles. Despite an unpromising preview

performance the play delivered the platform Anderson had hoped for; to showcase her singular, and by now feted, virtuosity in dramatic vocal and physical expression, and her emotional range. The production was a runaway success.

Deacon's research is thorough and her expressive writing, like one of Anderson's performances, is both lively and disciplined. In what is an undeniably rewarding and comprehensive biography, this reader occasionally yearned for just a little more from this eminent biographer about the emotional and sociological links between Anderson's family dynamics and her professional life. This is not to say that Deacon is not sensitive to the psychology that led Anderson, again and again, to dramatically charged roles that challenged normative gender positions. The example that perhaps achieves the fullest expression of this attraction is the powerful, tragic figure of *Medea*. Where Deacon dutifully stops her analysis at the line of evidence, I suspect that other writers may have been tempted to go further. They might have pondered, for example, the impact that the drunken rages and eventual disappearance of Anderson's father from the life of the family, and her childhood identification with the experience of her mother, may have had on Anderson's later psychology. Anderson's mother is a continual presence in the biography, and is shown to be influential in the actor's success, yet Deacon does not venture into the nuances of this mutually rewarding, no doubt complex, relationship.

Anderson returned to Australia to tour in dramatic roles twice. While she was feted each time as the Australian girl who had made it big in America, the plays in which she performed poorly matched the mood of Australian theatregoers and critics. Deacon uses a fine discernment in exploring the cultural dynamics that were at play. In 1927, in an Australia that was increasingly alarmed by the cultural influence of the American-produced movies that swamped its cinemas, the 'racy' theatre productions in which Anderson appeared, directly played to the critics' concerns who quickly and dismissively labelled them 'sex plays' (p. 113). In 1955 Anderson revived *Medea* for a tour supported by the newly minted Elizabethan Theatre Trust. Opening in Canberra's Albert Hall in October, the play was experienced by critics and public alike as an anachronism, and an inappropriate choice for the Trust's first touring production. The view was expressed that a play more like Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* that celebrated the Australian vernacular, and also opened late in 1955, would have been a more appropriate choice for the publicly supported Trust to be headlining.

Deacon is sensitive to the irony in the fact that Anderson exists most prominently in the public imagination today through her work in what was her least preferred theatrical medium, film. For many Anderson is synonymous with her portrayal of the creepy housekeeper, Mrs Danvers, in David Selznick and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940). It is perhaps in the biography's final chapter, 'Aftermath', that Deacon is most expansive as a historian of gender and culture. Here she exposes

the popular and scholarly reassessment of Anderson as the ‘archetypal Hollywood lesbian’ (p. 457), as having derived, almost entirely, from the actor’s film portrayal of Mrs Danvers.

Over 500 pages, seven ‘Acts’ and 36 chapters, Deacon has created a richly illustrated and detailed investigation of the key relationships, networks and events through which Anderson forged a career. The author deftly intersperses reflections on the dynamics of Australia’s transnational identity and the gendered professions, with which Anderson engaged, with detailed accounts of her subject’s personal and professional life, illuminated by press commentary and the personal testimony of family, friends, critics, producers, directors and fellow actors.

In one of the numerous papers that Deacon produced as she circled around Anderson’s life, either consciously or unconsciously in preparation for writing her biography, she reflects on her future task:

Familiar to us though advertising, gossip magazines, publicity releases, and from images from plays and movies, these [celebrities of stage and screen] are creatures of our imagination, irretrievably connected to our dreams and the characters they portray. Pity the poor biographer! Can we ever find that elusive ‘truth’ we seek when we take on this task?⁵

No biographer, of course, will ever succeed in revealing the ‘elusive “truth”’ of their subject. It is what they reveal in their attempt to do so that ultimately matters. It is in what they reveal of their approach and sources, of their effort to provide a context for their subject’s motivation and actions, and of their ability to delineate the actor from the act that the biographer may be judged to succeed or fail. Deacon acknowledges this truth and deftly weaves it throughout her polished biography of Judith Anderson with a deceptive ease.

5 Desley Deacon, ‘Celebrity Sexuality: Judith Anderson, Mrs Danvers, Sexuality and “Truthfulness” in Biography’, *Australian Historical Studies: Biography and Life-Writing* 43, no. 1 (2012): 45–60.

This text is taken from *Australian Journal of Biography and History*:
No. 5, 2021, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.