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The World of Ruth Draper: A Portrait of an Actress

Dorothy Warren

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The World of Ruth Draper: A Portrait of an Actress captures the life of the internationally acclaimed monologist and the familial, social, and theatrical worlds in which she lived from the late nineteenth century to the mid-1950s. Dorothy Warren draws on correspondence with family and friends, theatrical reviews, personal interviews, and her own long relationship with Ruth Draper in crafting this biography.

Born in New York City in 1884, Ruth Draper began giving monologues at private parties and schools at the age of twenty-six and made her professional debut in 1920 at London's Æolian Hall. In charting the course of Draper's impressive career, Warren follows her performances on stages around the world, including private recitals for Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, and the royal families of Britain, Spain, and Belgium. Warren also devotes a significant discussion to Draper's relationship with Lauro de Bosis, the Italian poet and political activist whose 1931 disappearance while dropping anti-Fascist pamphlets over Rome remains unexplained. Draper's long stage reign ended when she died in her sleep following a performance in New York City in December 1956.

Ruth Draper's specialty was the monologue, a dramatic composition for a single performer evoking other characters upon the stage. She had in her repertoire sixty dramatic sketches featuring fifty-two characters whom she performed, as well as 316 others whom she evoked during the course of the sketches. Some of her better-known sketches were "Opening the Bazaar," "Vive La France—1940," "The Scottish Immigrant," "The Actress," and "In County Kerry."

Draper's unique quality was her ability to project an illusion, to evoke upon the stage the characters with whom she conversed and interacted. Lynn Fontanne said of this faculty of Draper's: "There is the flavor of parlor magic in it—something of conjuring." Bernard Levin, writing in the Times of London on April 4, 1988, recalls Draper's talent for evocation as "truly hallucinating" and adds, "Before the curtain came down, real hallucination had set in and we could see on the stage a crowd of people who were not there!" Eleonora Duse declared, "Ruth Draper is theater."

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