



Shepperd Strudwick

Southern Gentleman

By Frances Ingram

Distinguished actor Shepperd Strudwick, Jr. was born on September 22, 1907, in Hillsboro, North Carolina. Perhaps his professional success was preordained, considering that his family tree included, six generations earlier, a French actor. Later generations, however, were more scientific-minded; his great-grandfather and grandfather were doctors and his father was the president of a cotton mill.

He was of the sixth generation of his family to live in Orange County, in which Hillsborough, North Carolina is located. The first Strudwick to come to North Carolina landed in colonial Wilmington in 1764 and was a member of the Governor's Council. His son, William Francis, was a congressman and state senator. The third generation in the state and in Orange County was Edmund Charles Fox Strudwick, a famous physician and first president of the North Carolina Medical Society. A ward at Duke Hospital is named in his honor. The fourth generation was also represented by a physician, William Samuel Strudwick. Shepperd, Sr., who was of the fifth generation, was one of the founders of the Bellevue Mill and was the builder of their family home, Tamarind. In the sixth generation were Clement, a well-known portrait painter, Edmund, III, also a portrait painter, and Shepperd, Jr.

For about five years, from the age of 12 to 17, Shepperd planned on becoming a writer. With this in mind, he entered the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, not far from his hometown of Hillsboro (now Hillsborough). He distinguished himself in different areas of university life, winning Phi Beta Kappa for scholarship, a place on the editorial staff of the college magazine, and the Golden Fleece, and D.K.E. for personal popularity.

Strudwick's mother was justly proud of her family. Two of her sons were artists, Clement and Edmund, and Shepperd's uncle was Dr. R. A. Cram, famous architect of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. His brother Edmund, also of Hillsboro, was a portrait artist of note in North Carolina. He was commissioned to paint a portrait of Eleanor Roosevelt.

At the university, Shepperd continued his literary pursuits. One day, however, he met a member of the Carolina Playmakers, and soon he had a new ambition. One of the most important college dramatic clubs in the country, the Carolina Playmakers was noteworthy for having recognized early the abilities of Paul Green, who would go on to write a Pulitzer Prize winning play, *In Abraham's Bosom*.

Turning now to the study of drama at the University of North Carolina, Strudwick became a member of the university's Carolina Playmakers, which boasts such alumni as popular bandleader and film star Kay Kyser (who remained a friend of Strudwick's later in Hollywood), TV superstar Andy Griffith, and writer George Grizzard. Another fellow alumnus was actor Sidney Blackmer who embodied a velvety, darkly handsome, disquieting, and morally ambiguous version of the Southern Gentleman type that Shepperd would play in Hollywood.

In The Carolina Playmakers' tenth season, 1927-1928, Shepperd performed in *You and I* by Philip Barry. Next, came work in two Carolina folk plays. One was a comedy called, *In Dixon's Kitchen*, and the other was *The Scuffletown Outlaws, A Tragedy of the Lowrie Gang* by William Norment Cox. This latter play was about a dramatic incident in the history of the Croatan Indians of Robeson County, North Carolina, whose forefathers are thought to have absorbed Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony. These, the earliest English settlers in America, had disappeared mysteriously from Fort Raleigh on Roanoke Island, North Carolina by 1590.

The Jitney Players, an organization that toured New England, New York, and New Jersey, was a modernized version of the strolling players of Old England. With them, Shepperd played roles in *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret* by Susanna Centlivre, and *A Trip to Scarborough, a Play with Music* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

In 1928 Shepperd Strudwick went to New York to seek his fortune. In a newspaper article dated May 17, 1929, he was asked for a brief report of his experiences in hunting for an acting job. His response: "One of the first and last things about which a Carolina Playmaker is warned, with much emphasis, is the difficulty of getting started on the professional stage; so that when I thought of going to New York it was with little hope of getting a stage job. However, I had never seen a legitimate production in New York and I determined to try to make a living in the big city, if, for no other reason, to see some varsity acting. Consequently, when I arrived in New York on the same day that I reached twenty-one years of age, I presented myself with a birthday gift of standing room at a performance of *Strange Interlude*. The next day I went to see Mr. George Denny, who smilingly advised me against the attempt to go professional and then very kindly made an appointment for me with Mr. Charles Coburn. Mr. Coburn was at that time casting for *The Yellow Jacket*. I saw him three times in the course of two weeks before I finally got my story of wanting to be an actor told. When I had finished, he looked at me quizzically and said to me in a tone strangely calm, 'Laddie, are you willing to starve to death?' I managed a ghastly grin and responded tremblingly, 'I have never tried it before, Mr. Coburn, but I suppose I can do anything I have to.'

"Then he told me he could use me in his coming production as an assistant stage manager and in a small walk-on at a salary of fifteen dollars a week. In the meantime, there being five weeks before the opening of the play, he found some messenger boy and secretarial work for me to do in his office, just to help me in the starving he had mentioned. Shortly after, Alexander Kirkland gave notice of leaving the company. I redoubled my efforts in understudy rehearsal. Mr. [J. Harry] Benrimo, the coauthor of the play, called me to him and told me he wanted Mr. and Mrs. Coburn to see me do the part the next day. I walked on the stage and did the entrance scene. That night Mr. Coburn told me he was going to give me the part, and after a week's rehearsal I went on, continuing to play it for the three and a half months thereafter that the *Jacket* continued to run. I appeared in three productions, *The Yellow Jacket*, *Falstaff*, and *Under the Gaslight*. I played seven speaking roles and a number of walk-ons: a variety of characters: an idiot, a duke, a prince, an emperor, a cloak-room boy, a wharf gamin, and a herald."

In 1931, the Little Blue and Silver Playhouse, conceived and promoted by Muriel McCormick of Chicago, opened in Palm Beach, Florida as this resort town's first legit theater. It had an audience of nationally prominent people who filled the 299 seats. The first offering was *Mr. Pim Passes By*, followed by *Outward Bound*. The cast, which also included Shepperd Strudwick, was reported to have been selected personally by Miss McCormick. The granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller, McCormick was accorded an ovation as she entered.

Both Your Houses, a play in three acts by Maxwell Anderson, opened at the Royale Theatre on April 24, 1933. Walter C. Kelly and Mary Phillips appeared with Shepperd in this production. Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *New York Times*: "Of all the theatrical attacks upon the depravity of representative government, Maxwell Anderson's *Both Your Houses* is the most stirring and direct . . . the liveliest play of The Theatre Guild season . . . There should be rejoicing around Times Square."

On January 15, 1934, Sam H. Harris presented *Biography* with Ina Claire and Shepperd at the National Theatre. In 1935 he appeared at the Civic Repertory Theatre in New York in *Let Freedom Ring* by Albert Bein. The cast included Eddie Ryan, Jr., Will Geer, Tom Ewell, and Lucille Strudwick, Shepperd's sister-in-law.

As You Like It by William Shakespeare opened on October 30, 1937 at the Ritz Theatre on West 48th Street in NYC. The cast included, in addition to Shepperd Strudwick, Hayden Rorke, Whitner (Whit) Bissell, Katherine Emery, Anne Revere and Helen Wynn, who had married Shepperd Strudwick on May 10, 1936 at the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York City. Helen Wynn, after a year of study with Alfred Adler at the University of Vienna, decided not to go in for child psychology. A job making German adaptations of Hollywood films led her to the theater. She had appeared in stock at West Falmouth, Mass., and played on tour in Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*.

In the late 1930s, Shepperd Strudwick was given prominent mention in the book *Who's Who at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*, which carried photographs and biographies of the studio's leading stars and featured players. Shepperd's classification was that of a featured player. He had been summoned from New York to Hollywood for screen tests to determine whether or not he would be used for a leading role in the upcoming filming of *Gone with the Wind*. Since he was the right type, he was given a chance to test for the role of Ashley Wilkes, the novel's noble Southern Gentleman who is the opposite of the earthy and opportunistic Rhett Butler. The role, of course, eventually went to Leslie Howard.

At MGM, Shepperd had good roles in *Fast Company* (1938), *Congo Maisie* (1940, with Ann Sothorn), *Dr. Kildare's Strange Case* (1940, with Lew Ayres and Lionel Barrymore), and a number of shorts, including a John Nesbitt *Passing Parade* short starring Shepperd as Dr. Semmelweis in *That Mothers Might Live* (1938). This production won the Academy Award for Best Short Subject. His last picture before leaving MGM was the aviation

drama *Flight Command* (1940), starring Robert Taylor, Ruth Hussey and Walter Pidgeon.

In 1941 he signed a contract with 20th Century-Fox, where he was given a new name, John Shepperd. On the New York stage he was still billed under his real name, Shepperd Strudwick.

Young, tall, brown-haired, neat looking, he gave sparkling performances in *Belle Starr* (1941), starring Gene Tierney, and *Cadet Girl* (1941), with Carole Landis and George Montgomery. He was loaned to Columbia for *The Men in Her Life*. He was one of the men in leading lady Loretta Young's life, cinematically speaking. Loretta made a profound impression on him. He talked at length about her good nature, her graciousness, and the way she had with directors.

Shepperd's best role at Fox was as the lead in *The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe* (1942), which also featured Linda Darnell, Virginia Gilmore, Jane Darwell, Mary Howard and Frank Conroy.

At this time, Shepperd and his wife Helen were living in Westwood, a residential district near Hollywood. Their home was a few blocks from the Fox Studios where he worked. He and Helen had a son, Shepperd Strudwick III.

During his spare time, the tall, handsome actor liked listening to good music, riding, swimming and playing tennis. Reading was one his delights, and two of his favorite authors were Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. His motto was: Decide what you want to do in life - then pursue that course, that objective, undeviatingly and wholeheartedly.

During World War II, he served as a naval officer for three years, two of them at sea. As with many other actors, his film career was derailed during the war years. When he returned from overseas, he briefly worked at Fox in *Strange Triangle* (1946) and *Home, Sweet, Homicide* (1946), but he went the freelance route shortly thereafter.

Not strictly a film actor, Shepperd traveled a long road in the theater. A member of the prestigious Actors Studio, his stage career was one of distinction, style, and a high standard of professionalism.

By this time he was divorced from Helen. He met actress Margaret O'Neill, who created the role of the Nurse in the Actors Studio Workshop production of Edward Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith*, and they married.

One of his most well-known film roles was in *All the King's Men* (1949), at Columbia. Playing Adam Stanton, the son of a dignified judge of the old school, he becomes a blood enemy of Southern demagogue Willie Stark (Broderick Crawford in his Oscar-winning role). With his calm and dignified air of integrity, Strudwick was the perfect actor for this role of a Southern Gentleman pushed over the edge by the sinister dealings of an unscrupulous upstart.

Among his more than forty motion picture roles, he will be remembered for the friendly priest in *Joan of Arc* (1948); the father in *The Red Pony* (1949); the presidential candidate who honors the teacher (Claudette Colbert) who strongly influenced him in *Remember the Day* (1941); Elizabeth Taylor's wealthy father in *A Place in the Sun* (1951); and Eddy Duchin's benefactor in *The Eddy Duchin Story* (1956).

In 1955 the Phoenix Theatre in New York City featured Shepperd Strudwick in the revival of George Bernard Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma*. In line with the Phoenix's no-star billing policy, the production featured (along with Shepperd) Geraldine Fitzgerald, Roddy McDowall, Betty Sinclair, and Vaughn Taylor. In 1958, Shepperd returned to North Carolina to play a stage role at the Durham Star Playhouse. The play was *Angel Street*, which had been made into the classic movie *Gaslight* (1944), starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman. Mr. Strudwick also appeared at the Myrtle Beach Playhouse in South Carolina in their production of *Shadow and Substance*.

By this time, Shepperd had remarried again. His wife, Jane Straub had two sons by a previous marriage.

The Durham (N. C.) Star Playhouse presented Joshua Logan's *Mr. Roberts* on June 23, 1959 starring Shepperd. "Shepperd Strudwick, in one of the finest performances of an inherently difficult role which this reviewer has ever seen anywhere, deserves more praise and credit than we have the space or the ability to express," was one of his reviews.

In the 1960s Shepperd starred as Trigorin in Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*; in the title role in the national company tour of Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*; Pastor Manders in Ibsen's *Ghosts*; the father in Michael Gazzo's *Night Circus*; the liberal presidential candidate in Gore Vidal's *The Best Man*; and George in Broadway's matinee company of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

In his 75 television roles, on most of the major programs of the time, he made something of a specialty of historical figures encompassing a wide range of periods and characters from King Solomon to Thomas Jefferson. But he wanted to be remembered for his Teiresias in the Omnibus production of Sophocles' Antigone.

In *A Reporter's Life*, Walter Cronkite mentioned the Sidney Lumet Players, of which Shepperd was a member. Cronkite referred to the actors, among them E. G. Marshall, Shepperd, Ray Walston, Kim Stanley, Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, feeling the pressure, "trying their hand at the new thing called television." The series was the ground breaking *You Are There*. Although he did quite a bit of television during this active period in his professional life, Shepperd preferred the stage to TV in the 1950s and '60s

In 1972 the Hillsborough native returned to North Carolina to appear in Greensboro in the part of Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. "I haven't played Willy Loman before and that's the tough part of it," he explained. "I really needed at least two months to get the part into my head. It's a very long part." At this time he was living in Peekskill, New York. He had recently finished a movie titled *Cops and Robbers* (1973), filmed on location in New York City. He explained that the film "bears a cousinship to *The French Connection*," characterizing it as "a good straight melodrama with absurd twists."

When the revised version of *Summer and Smoke* failed to catch fire in New York in 1977, Shepperd was offered a two-week engagement in *The Crucible* at the Playmakers Theater where he had started his acting career. He plays the self-righteous judge in the play.

Shepperd was married for a fourth time, in 1977, to Mary Jeffrey. This marriage would last until his death. He was appearing on television frequently at this time and was a regular on two popular soap operas, *Love of Life* and *Another World*. He would be nominated for Daytime Emmys for these two. He also appeared on *As the World Turns*. He contributed first-rate characterizations to TV, movie and stage into the '70s.

One of his last theatrical roles of note was as the ill-fated Cmdr. Lloyd Bucher in a dramatization of the USS *Pueblo* incident in which the North Koreans captured a Navy ship and held its crew hostage as pawns in a propaganda war. He was a natural for the role, thanks to his naval service in World War II.

His last appearance on film was in 1981's *Kent State*, a TV movie, and his last acting gig was on the TV series *Nurse* in the episode *On the Line* in 1982. In 1981 he was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Actor (Featured Role) for the Broadway play *To Grandmother's House We Go*. Actresses Eva Le Gallienne and Ruth Nelson also appeared in the play.

Shepperd Strudwick died of cancer on January 15, 1983. He was survived by his wife, Mary Jeffrey, and his son Shepperd, III, who has lived in Europe most of his adult life and is a child psychologist, a painter and a wood carver.

Shepperd Strudwick's funeral was held at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, on January 28, 1983. A tribute was given by Philip Zabriskie, M. Div., D. D. A Memorial service was also held on May 5, 1983 at the Hillsborough Presbyterian Church. The tribute was given by Fred S. Cates, Mayor of Hillsborough.

With his calm, dignified bearing and look of dispassionate intelligence, Sheppard Strudwick was a formidable presence on stage and screen. Added to this was an impressive, refined voice that had a distinctive rough edge to it. With an impressive array of acting skills under his full command, he became one of the most memorable featured players of the Golden Age.

Author's Note: Thanks to Anne Andrews, a relative of Shepperd Strudwick, for her information on the family and the loan of photos.

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