

THOMAS, RACHEL (1905-1995), actress

Name: Rachel Thomas
Date of birth: 1905
Date of death: 1995
Spouse: Howell John Thomas
Child: Delyth Mariel Thomas
Parent: Emily Phillips (née Thomas)
Gender: Female
Occupation: actress
Area of activity: Performing Arts
Author: Gwenno Ffrancon

Rachel Thomas was born in Gwyn Street, Alltwen, in the parish of Cilybebyll, Glamorganshire, on 10 February 1905, the only daughter of Emily Thomas (1884-1955), a maid. She was brought up by her aunt, Mary Roberts (née Thomas, 1875-1928) and her husband, David Roberts (1866-1928), tinworker and coalminer, together with their own children, Llewelyn (1897-1977?) a merchant, Richard (1899-1970) an alloy worker who became a councillor and JP in Ynys-y-mond parish, Hannah Mary (1906-1970) and David William (1914-1989), at 11 Gwyn Street, Alltwen, and from 1918 onwards at Tyle Coch farm, Ynys-y-mond. She used the surname Roberts until her marriage although she was never officially adopted by Mary and David.

She was educated at Alltwen Primary School and Ystalyfera County School, and was accepted to train as a teacher at Swansea Training College, but was not able to take up her place because of the family's straitened circumstances. Instead, she worked for a while as an uncertified teacher at Abercerdin Girls School, Gilfach Goch, and then at Rhos School, Pontardawe, having returned to Alltwen to look after Mary and David Roberts during their final illness. On 18 August 1931 she married Howell 'Hywel' John Thomas (1901-1964), a farmer's son from Crai in Breconshire, who trained as a teacher and was the first headmaster of Whitchurch School, Cardiff. They settled in Tyle Coch, Y Goedwig, Rhiwbina, in 1933 and had one daughter, Delyth Mariel (1937-2006). Rachel Thomas was a faithful member, and deacon for a time, of Minny Street Independent Chapel in Cardiff, and it was there that she first became known as a performer.

Rachel Thomas was a versatile actress who performed on the stages and screens of Wales and the world for over sixty years. Although she had been a loyal member of the Band of Hope in Alltwen, a keen competitor in local eisteddfodau in the Swansea Valley, and had performed for years in local amateur dramatic societies, she gained national attention when she read from the Bible in a service at Minny Street Chapel which was broadcast on BBC radio towards the end of 1933. As a result of this reading, which aroused curiosity amongst many of the public about the voice of this young woman from Cardiff, she was invited for an interview by **Sam Jones**, a producer with the BBC, and in 1934 she was cast in the Corporation's first Welsh-language radio comedy, *Y Practis* by Leyshon Williams, with Clydach Thomas, Haydn Davies and Gunstone Jones playing the other main parts.

During the 1930s she appeared in various stage plays, including a Welsh version of **Jack Jones's** novel, *Land of My Fathers*, directed by **Kitchener Davies**, in the National Eisteddfod at Cardiff in 1938, and she toured with the Principality Players in 1939 in an English stage version. She was also busy on the radio, for instance in *Choir Practice: A storm in a Welsh teacup* by Cliff Gordon, which was broadcast from Maida Vale in 1946, with **Ivor Novello** in the main role as the conductor of the quarrelsome choir, and a cast which also included Glynis Johns and Mervyn Johns.

In 1939 she appeared in her first film, *The Proud Valley* (Tennyson, 1939) in which she first played the role of the Welsh Mam, the self-sacrificing and stoical carer which became a symbol of the coalmining communities. This iconic portrait influenced not only later performances of similar characters, but also the way in which the motherly Welsh woman was subsequently imagined by generations of Welsh people and international audiences. She appeared in *The Proud Valley* alongside **Paul Robeson**, the singer, actor and friend of the coalmining communities of Wales.

As a result of her simple but moving portrayal in this film she was never short of work, and she appeared in similar roles, as the brave Welsh Mam, in *Blue Scar* (Jill Craigie, 1949), *David* (Paul Dickson, 1950) and *Valley of Song* (Gilbert Gunn, 1953), a film version of the radio play *Choir Practice*, this time with **Clifford Evans** as the conductor.

Although she was invited to play the part of the mother in John Ford's award-winning film *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), because of restrictions on passenger ships crossing the Atlantic due to the threat from German submarines in the early years of the Second World War she was unable to travel to America to attend the screen test.

As television became increasingly popular from the mid-1950s onwards, she began to appear regularly on the small screen in both Welsh and English productions, such as the plays *Y Dieithryn* (author **D. T. Davies**, prod. Dafydd Gruffydd, BBC, 1957), *After the Funeral* (author Alun Owen, dir. Ted Kotcheff, ITV, 1960) and *Y Darn Arian* (John Eilian's translation of a play by Arthur O. Roberts, 1961). Her first opportunity to perform in a television play had been when she appeared alongside **Stanley Baker** and Donald Houston in the live television version of *Choir Practice* (author Cliff Gordon, prod. Michael Mills) which was broadcast from Alexandra Palace, London, in 1949, but unfortunately not recorded. The small screen also afforded her the opportunity to portray Beth Morgan from Richard Llewellyn's novel when she appeared with Eynon Evans in Dafydd Gruffydd's BBC production of *How Green Was My Valley* in 1960. Sadly, this is another production of which no recording survives in the BBC archives.

Her career shows her personal tendency, partly as a result of the opportunities which came her way, to return repeatedly to particular works. She appeared in several Welsh and English versions of *Choir Practice*, and three times in *How Green Was My Valley*. Another production in which she was involved on four occasions was the play for voices by **Dylan Thomas**, *Under Milk Wood*. She took part in Douglas Cleverdon's radio productions of this play in 1954 and 1963, then in the film directed by Andrew Sinclair in 1972, and again in the radio production by George Martin, the Beatles' producer, in 1987.

Nor did she neglect the theatre during her sixty-year performing career. She appeared, for instance, in *Gaslight* under the direction of Rudolph Cartier at the English Speaking Theatre in Vienna in 1976, in *Pygmalion* at the Shaw Theatre in 1978, and in Chekhov's play, *Uncle Vanya*, at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, with John Gregson and Lana Morris in 1994.

But it was television work which mainly occupied her from 1970 through to the 1990s, partly because she was able to find regular work closer to her home in Cardiff, thanks to the strength of the BBC in television drama there. She appeared over the years in series such as *Z Cars*, *Dixon of Dock Green*, *Owen M.D.*, *Dad's Army*, and made a major contribution to the popular success of director John Hefin's bold venture, the first Welsh-language soap opera, *Pobol y Cwm* (BBC Cymru Wales, 1974-). Together with Harriet Lewis, Charles Williams, Islwyn Morris, Gillian Elisa Thomas, Lisabeth Miles, and many more, she succeeded in planting the production firmly in the hearts of the people of Wales and made it the BBC's longest-running soap opera. By introducing the character Bella Davies to the nation she gave pleasure to thousands who delighted in the bickering and sulking which went on between her and the other residents of Bryn Awelon Old People's Home. Her fruitful collaboration with John Hefin continued in the striking productions *A Bus to Bosworth* (prod./dir. John Hefin, BBC, 1976), *Off to Philadelphia in the Morning* (prod./dir. John Hefin, 1978), a screen adaptation by Elaine Morgan of **Jack Jones's** volume on **Joseph Parry**, the musician from Merthyr, and *The Life and Times of David Lloyd George* (dir. John Hefin, BBC, 1981). In this period she also returned to *How Green Was My Valley*, not as the Welsh Mam this time, but rather as a surly, snobbish housekeeper (prod. Martin Lisemore, dir. Ronald Wilson for the BBC, 1975-6).

For her enormous contribution to the arts she was awarded the OBE in 1968 and the white robes of the Gorsedd at the Cwm Rhymni National Eisteddfod in 1990, adopting the bardic name 'Rachel o'r Allt'. She received a BAFTA Cymru award for Lifetime Contribution in 1991 and was made a Fellow of the Royal College of Music and Drama in Cardiff in 1993. University of Wales Swansea offered her a Fellowship in 1995 but, following a fall at her home, she died at Cardiff Royal Infirmary on 8 February 1995 before she was able to receive that award. Her funeral was held at Minny Street Independent Chapel and then at Thornhill Crematorium on 16 February.

Author

Gwenno Ffrancon

Sources

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The Time of My Life: Rachel's Story (Red Flannel Production ar gyfer BBC Wales, 1993, producer Fran Bowyer)

Rachel Thomas: Welsh Greats (BBC Wales, February 2010, prod. Dafydd O'Connor)

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Rachel Thomas](#)

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