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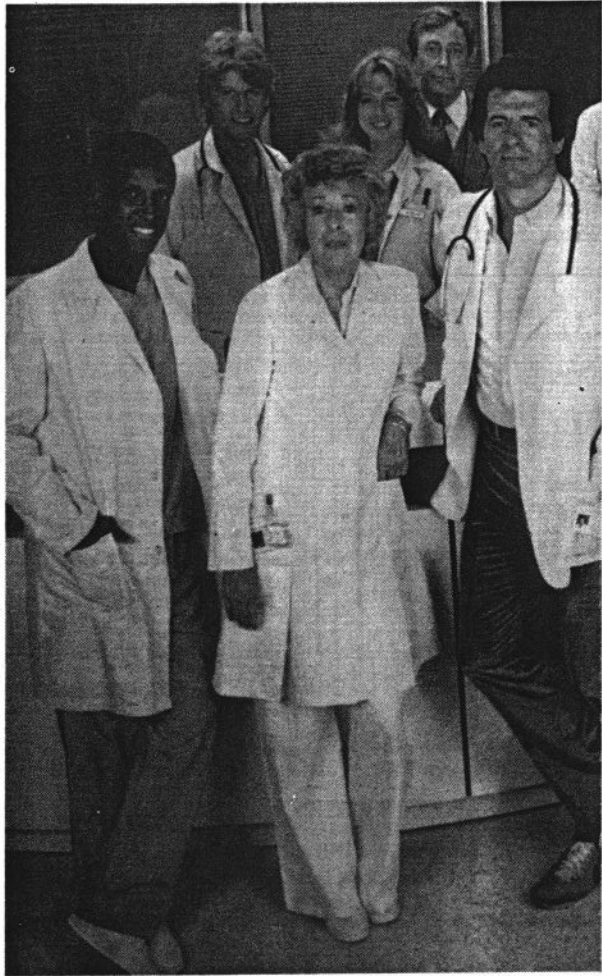
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'Liz 'n' Dick Show'  
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## EILEEN HECKART OSCARS AND EMMYS AND WAIVER

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# The Prize Career of

# Eileen Heckart

BY T. H. McCULLOH

**H**er friends call her "Hecky." The nickname fits. It's a name for a buddy, a friend, and it's spoken with respect. Eileen Heckart is one of those actresses who knows her business and sticks to it. In town for her running role as Nurse Decker on television's *Trauma Center*, she developed a case of cabin fever; with husband Jack Yankee and sons Mark, Philip and Luke on the other side of the continent she found herself with little to occupy her time except her video nursing duties.

"Really, that's why I'm doing the plays. I mean, the television show does not challenge me that much; they haven't given me that much to do." The plays she refers to are this year's set of short pieces from the Back Alley Theatre's playwrights' unit. Whereas last year's production, *24 Hours*, consisted of one very short playlet for each hour of the day, *Hot and Cold* (opening at the Back Alley this weekend) has one play for each month in the year. Heckart appears in three of the plays. "That's as much as I could handle but they're all different ladies, and that's fun."

Is it easy to get an Emmy and Oscar-winning actress to appear in Equity-waiver? No. Just ask her. The Back Alley's Allan Miller, appearing in a *Trauma Center* episode, mentioned his theatre's playwrights' group during a break one day. "I was interested," says the actress, "because if we don't start with the material we have nothing to begin with."

Miller's timing is impeccable.

"Maybe you could do something for us sometime," he said.

"What about now?" Heckart tossed back. "I'm here now."

*Hot and Cold* is her first waiver experience. "I think it is. It's funny, I never even thought about it. The minute you walk in they say, 'Well, you're paid 50 dollars and you get two free tickets.' And you think, 'Really? Out of six weeks' work? I mean, 50 dollars doesn't even cover your gasoline. But you never ask the question when you go in. If you're going to do it, *do it!* I can remember as a kid, playing stock in Erie, Pennsylvania, and I was the leading woman for the company and I was paid five dollars a week, supplied my own costumes, and they gave us a place to live. But, you know, you do it."

**G**olden memories of stock bring back a world unknown to young actors today. "The first time I played in Milwaukee for 'Teek' [Morton] da Costa, I was playing a Mexican maid. Can you imagine that? As Mickey Rooney as I am? Well, the wigs didn't come, so every night Teek squirted my whole head with sewing machine oil and he and two other guys shampooed it at the end of the evening. My lovely landlady couldn't understand all the black no matter how they shampooed me. I leaked over the pillow for days.

"A lot of us started out there. It was wonderful, fun and free, and we did all those *silly* things. It was where you learned all about yourself. I feel so sorry about young people today, television being the biggest medium.

You don't hear a response from an audience. You don't learn anything about yourself by being on the tube. You have to *know* yourself before you get on there. That's why there are so many flashes in the pan. They don't know. And they get a great big series and they go kinda crazy because they think they're much more important than they are.

"There's nothing wrong with that except when a series ends that has been very successful and they can't get arrested. They don't know why, because they've done nothing to learn their craft in between. I remember years ago doing *Dr. Kildare* and, *boy*, that young man Richard Chamberlain! The days he didn't work he came in, and he came to your dressing room and sat there between shots and he'd ask questions. And the *chutzpah* of him, to go to London and study and do a *Hamlet!* And he had wonderful notices. That's a caring person who does that."

It was the training that used to be important. The tools of the trade. Heckart learned those tools, cornerstones of a solid, lasting career. "You don't sing and you don't dance, but even if you're not good at it, you still take the training so that you can at least sell a number or 'get away' with something, say 'how do I cheat and do it?' It's the only thing that builds security, the study and the working. There are so many good people out here. But they just get bound up and think, 'Oh, I'm just fine, everybody likes me and I get 5,000 letters a week. Bully for me.'"

'You stretch yourself. You just can't sit in your bedroom and be an actress. You've got to get up and do it. Doing it for yourself is not going to prove anything'

**S**tarting as a poppy in kindergarten, she heard the applause and "that ruins you for life." Through college and a grunt job as a Max Factor demonstrator to New York and the terrifying ordeal of breaking in, "it was everybody's else's story, really. We didn't have anything. There was so little off- or off-off-Broadway in those days. You had the Cherry Lane and the Blackfriars' Guild, where I went. The Equity Library Theatre hadn't started yet."

When it did, shortly after that, an ELT production of *Holiday* was responsible for one of her first real jobs. "Raymond Massey and Elliott Nugent came to see it and told Alfred de Liagre and I got the understudy job in *Voice of the Turtle*. I was so scared when he told me, I wanted it so desperately I nearly died inside. He said the salary was 75 dollars. When I listen to young people today—well, it was nine years before I got *Picnic* but, you know, I worked all that time. I did everything. I worked the sewing machine treadle for Gertrude Berg on *The Goldbergs*. The kids today want everything instantly without regard for working for it and learning what it's about. I'm not saying that as a blanket statement, but it's an awful lot of them, a big percentage."

Doing a television series and appearing in *Hot and Cold* makes a rather tight schedule. Eileen Heckart is used to the schedule. She doesn't like time off. "If I'm working—and I was lucky enough to have six hits on Broadway that ran well over a year [including *Picnic*, *The Bad Seed* and *Butterflies are Free*—and it was real nice, I was real lucky and everything—but I'd be so tired and Jack and I would go someplace and I'd sleep for two days. I'd say, 'I don't care about acting yet.'"

"Well, I'd go on. I'd have to go to a college or something; I've done quite a bit of that and it's very stimulating for me. And I do things like *The Physicists* and, I think one of the best things I've ever done, I did *Mother Courage* out here at UCLA maybe 25 years ago. I wasn't ready for it then. It was okay. Well, I did it again five years ago. And I did it! And I was glad I did it. Yeah, I was pleased. You stretch yourself. You just can't sit by yourself in your bedroom and be an actress. You've got to get up and do it. Doing it for yourself is not going to prove anything."

**T**he proof is in the dedication. "After a while you don't know how to do anything else. For people to set time limits or something, that's up to the individual. Because it's such a life of



*'So many people think God will answer your prayers. Well, God doesn't always think that's right for you. You made the wrong choice, boy'*

*'You have to know yourself before you get on [the tube]. That's why there are so many flashes in the pan. They don't know. They get a great big series and they go kinda crazy because they think they're much more important than they are'*

rejection. You turn around and you have an audition and you're too tall for radio; there's always a reason why you didn't get the job. I don't know that I could have taken that much rejection that long. I can walk into offices today in New York and see somebody out there waiting to see a secretary that I saw 30 years ago. That to me is depressing.

"Whatever your philosophy is, you should be determined to be the best at it. You have to set your goals and your sights on something, for yourself. You try it and maybe it doesn't work for you. So many people think God will answer your prayers. Well, God doesn't always think that's right for you. You made the wrong choice, boy.

"It took me nine years to get a *Picnic*. Josh [director Logan] said to me, sitting in my dressing room at half-hour, 'It's going to change your life.' I didn't see how. Well, suddenly there was a table at Sardi's and everybody knows you. You're a respected member of the community. I went from *Picnic* to *The Bad Seed*, *The Bad Seed* to *View from the Bridge*, *Dark at the Top of the Stairs*—it opens up wonderful parts you didn't have access to before. Really, films didn't do that for me."

Her films run the gamut from *Miracle in the Rain* and *Bus Stop* to *No Way to Treat a Lady* and *Butterflies are Free*, which garnered her the Oscar. "Everybody says it's so wonderful to win an Academy Award. I can't say it meant anything to me. It didn't mean better parts or better money. It does for some people; it didn't for me. Immediately afterward it brought me a picture with Jan Troell, and I was very anxious to work with him, but it didn't mean that much, really.

"It was quite surprising I won the Academy Award; you almost have to be a member of the community to an extent. Also, it was a comedy part and those aren't the parts that get it. You have to be an alcoholic or a prostitute to really luck into these

things. I think it had an awful lot to do with longevity, somebody who has performed well over a great number of years. I feel that way about the many Emmy nominations. Your name is there and you say, 'Oh, I know that person. I'll vote for that person.'"

It's believed that Jimmy Stewart got his Oscar for *Philadelphia Story* because he didn't win the year before with *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. "And Bette Davis didn't win for *Dark Victory*; she won it for something the next year. Listen, we even gave one to Liz when she got her tracheotomy. I mean, you want to talk about how we vote? I voted for her. It's like that was a sick lady, right? Give it to her."

The awards have piled up alongside Eileen Heckart's mountainous career. "I guess I have about 16 awards and three doctorates or something. At one point I had them on a little thing in the hall and as you went down to the kitchen you saw them. Well, they were very old hat, so I put them all in the attic. I found out the boys were using two for bookends and another one they were throwing darts at. So then, I guess it was when I got the Emmy or something, I said to Jack, 'I'm going to get those awards out.' He said, 'Oh, my God! I'll have to build you a "gauche corner."' So he did."

After all the Broadway and motion picture hits, she still is a bit floored by the power of television. "It means nothing that I spent 35 years on Broadway. Kids still say, 'Weren't you Mary Tyler Moore's Aunt Flo?' Oh, boy, that's it. That's all." No, that's not all. Young people who haven't done their homework may only remember Eileen Heckart as MTM's Aunt Flo, but their vision is hampered by the quick cuts of today's media flash in the pans. Eileen Heckart has etched for herself a place in the memories of all who love theatre, a place full of the respect she has earned and the friendship which is her gift. Hecky did it. ☆