

Leading Lady

By Alison McGaughey '99

Helen Wagner '38 marks a milestone in her distinguished acting career

In April, Monmouth College alumna Helen Wagner celebrated her 50th year of appearing as Nancy Hughes McClosky on the CBS daytime drama *As the World Turns*. She continues to hold the distinction, according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, of having the longest-running role of any television actor, ever.

Wagner, a native of Lubbock, Texas, graduated from Monmouth College in 1938, and went on to appear on Broadway in the Sigmund Romberg/Oscar Hammerstein musical *Sunny River* and in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* She has acted in a variety of dramatic television roles, and in 1956 appeared in the first episode of *As the World Turns*. Fifty years later, Wagner, the sole original cast member, continues to work, appearing on *ATWT* approximately three times per month. She lives north of New York City with her husband, Broadway producer Robert Willey.

In 1990, Wagner chaired a national committee that raised more than \$1 million to build Monmouth's state-of-the-art Wells Theater. On opening night, she reprised her role as Eleanor in *The Lion In Winter* in a production directed by her husband.

Recently, *Monmouth Magazine* had a chance to speak with the accomplished actress and ask about her Monmouth memories, as well some insights into her path to success—a path that once led her to be noticed by legendary lyricist Oscar Hammerstein, and that might have led her into a different type of “opera” than that of the daytime soap.

Monmouth Magazine: *After playing the role of Nancy Hughes McClosky for 50 years, you must know her character inside and out. How are you like her—or unlike her—in real life?*

Helen Wagner: When I first started, Nancy was “mother.” She was in charge of things. She told people what to do and how to do it. And she never left home. In no way am I like Nancy. My husband and I always have tickets to opera or Broadway plays; we go into town [New York City] and have dinner with friends. Going into New York City is something Nancy never would've done. She wouldn't even go to Chicago, which is near where she lives.

MM: *When you were growing up in Texas, how did*

As the beloved Nancy Hughes, Helen Wagner delivered the first line on the debut episode of *As the World Turns* on April 2, 1956—
“Good morning, dear, what would you like for breakfast?”

you hear about Monmouth College? What led you to choose Monmouth for your education?

HW: My mother was born and raised in Monmouth. She and my father both went to Monmouth. My mother went on to teach there afterwards in the history and mathematics departments. Also, my sister and her husband graduated the year before I did. So... it was all in the family.

We went back [to Monmouth] every year to visit family. It was like home. It was just automatic that I would go [to the college]. My mother and father both believed that going away was better than staying and going to college in Texas—that going away [from home] was part of the learning process.

MM: What was your educational experience like at Monmouth?

HW: I thoroughly enjoyed the whole thing. I got my degrees from the Conservatory: a bachelor of music in voice and piano, and at the same time a bachelor of arts in dramatics and speech. I studied speech with Sylvester Toussaint and drama with Ruth Williams. I got my voice and piano training from “Riggsy,” [Edna Browning Riggs, associate professor of music] and Glenn Shaver. I was so busy I didn’t have time for anything else but working—going to The Little Theatre, going to the Conservatory and practicing.

MM: What was life on campus like during the 1930s?

HW: I lived in the freshman dormitory [Sunnyside] the first year, and then after that in the big one, McMichael. I used to go—always—to the dances on Saturday nights upstairs at Wallace Hall. That’s what everybody did. We danced to the radio, or it might have been phonographs, maybe. There were students from all over the world, because of Monmouth being a United Presbyterian college with missions around the world.

MM: When you were a student, did you know you wanted to become a professional actress?

HW: No, I had no idea. But Riggsy took me with her to New York for a month-long master class with Abram Chasins, the pianist and composer. And after that I decided I was going to New York—I was going to go to Julliard, and I was going to be a concert singer and opera star.

When I graduated I did go to New York. I took the exam at Julliard, and I passed everything with flying colors except the voice component. They said I was too young, that my voice needed to develop more. But I had made such good grades in theory that I was offered a job teaching the



The seemingly ageless Helen Wagner arrives on the red carpet at this year’s Daytime Emmy® Awards. Two years ago, the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences presented her with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

ory at Julliard. I didn’t take it, but Mr. Chasins got me a voice teacher, he took me on as a piano student and I studied privately from then on.

MM: Once you had begun to act and sing professionally, did you feel that your college experience had adequately prepared you for your career?

HW: Monmouth prepared me for it entirely. In 1941, I got a chance to sing at the St. Louis Municipal Opera. I had a speaking part in a [Sigmund Romberg/Oscar Hammerstein musical] show called *Sunny River*. Oscar Hammerstein came up to me one day and said, “Where did you learn to read lines?” He was impressed with me. I said, “Well, I just graduated from Monmouth College.” And he laughed and said, “Well, if we take this to Broadway, there’ll be a part for you.”

My theater background was excellent training for being on television. As *the World Turns* started out as a live show. When you’re live, you have to be ready—you have to get yourself out of whatever you get into. For example, one day we were shooting in the Hughes kitchen, and it was supposed to be foggy and rainy outside. All of a sudden, in a very important part of the scene, fog began to come in under the set. They had to raise the

camera angles so you couldn’t see... You just had to pretend it wasn’t happening.

MM: *ATWT* debuted in 1956. Aside from no longer being live, how were the early days of working in television different from today?

HW: It was the first half-hour show [rather than the usual 15-minute length]. Commercials back then were only one minute long, so you had to be able to move your cameras and booms from one set to another in that minute. The writer, Irna Phillips, wrote about people and their relationships to each other. She didn’t write heroes and villains. It was...everyday life, people, their relationships.

It has changed just as life on the streets has changed. For instance we [Nancy and on-screen husband Chris] couldn’t even sleep in the same bed until the ’60s.

When it was a live half-hour show, we did nine run-throughs beforehand. Now, after the whole thing is staged scene-by-scene in a rehearsal room, we go through it on the set for the camera and sound people, then have one dress rehearsal, and then tape it. Sometimes you have to stop and start over again. I liked it live, because it was closer to being on stage. On the other hand, we have much more complicatedly-written scenes now, so I suppose it would be hard to do it live.

MM: What’s the trick to memorizing all the lines of dialogue?

HW: It’s just...habit. I’ll be 88 soon and my memory is beginning to fail me a bit, but the only thing I don’t have trouble with at all is my lines. I remember them perfectly every time. But don’t ask me the next day what I said. I’m already learning the lines for the next day.

MM: Looking back after 50 years of appearing on the show, would you change anything about your career?

HW: It [the show] has been my life. I’ve never been sorry that I didn’t go on to doing opera. I didn’t have the voice. On the stage, I could be a leading lady. But in opera, I couldn’t play a leading lady because they were always sopranos and I was a mezzo. I’ve always been very happy with what happened.

MM: What advice would you give to Monmouth theater students who want to act professionally?

HW: Keep trying. And read everything they possibly can about history. Learn to speak the language as well as possible. You have to be understood. That’s one of the things that I got out of the speech department: to speak clearly. I’ve always been very healthy. I’ve worked very hard, and...I just stay young. ■