



# KISSING THE JOY

the autobiography of

Rosalinde Fuller, OBE

Edited, with an introduction and notes, by

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## Illustrations

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RF as the bride-of-today in *What's in a Name?* photographed by Campbell Studios in 1920

Cynthia photographed by Francis Bruguière. (Gelatin silver print; 23.8 x 18.9 cm. Image courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles)

Nude group: RF with (presumably) Paul Osborn and Florence, photographed by Francis Bruguière in 1932. (Image copyright Sather Bruguière, supplied by the George Eastman Museum.)

RF as Jill-all-Alone, with Nigger, in *Merrie England*, 1934

The slave-girl revolts: RF in *Chu Chin Chow*, 1940

RF as Kate with Jean Forbes-Robertson as her sister Helen in *Berkeley Square*, 1941. Photograph by Angus McBean, courtesy of Harvard Theatre Collection.

'Call me Peter!' RF as Kate with André van Gyseghem as Peter in *Berkeley Square*, 1941. Photograph by Angus McBean, courtesy of Harvard Theatre Collection.

A publicity photograph for RF's Australian tour

RF bathing, date not known

## Introduction

Rosalinde Fuller was an English actress whose career took off with a bang when she played Ophelia to John Barrymore's Hamlet on Broadway in 1922. Five years later she moved back to the UK where she performed until the mid-1970s. In all, she acted in more than 130 plays and shows (including revivals) and nine films, plus about a dozen radio and tv plays. From the mid-1950s onwards she gave countless solo performances of short stories that she had adapted for the stage. In 1964 alone, she gave five performances a week during an eight-month world tour under the auspices of the British Council. In the 1966 New Year honours, she was awarded the OBE for a lifetime of services to the theatre.

Rosalinde wrote her autobiography in the 1970s and sought to get it published, but it was turned down on both sides of the Atlantic on the grounds that for British readers there was too much about Americans and for Americans too much about the Brits. The truth of the matter was probably that it was too explicit, for Rosalinde had many lovers, many of whom were still alive in the 1970s; had they known that they were named, some of them – or their immediate family – might have objected to publication. Sir Norman Angell, for instance, had made arrangements for his papers to go to an American university library after his death; before they were sent off, his secretary destroyed most of Rosalinde's letters to him, along with letters from Arthur Dakyns (who had tried to get her to marry him) that she had passed on to Angell. Today, with the passage of time and greater acceptance of women's sexuality, I feel it can be published without a qualm.

Carol Odell sent me a copy of Rosalinde's typescript when I was writing the life of Walter Fuller (Rosalinde's brother), and it proved a useful source of information. A few pages were missing; I found copies of all but a page-and-a-half from chapter 1 in Princeton University Art Museum. Rosalinde's friend Nina Howell Starr had been seeking an

American publisher for her, and after Rosalinde's death, she gave her collection of memorabilia, including the autobiography, to the Museum. Learning of this, the executor of Rosalind's estate, Conrad Dehn, requested the return of the manuscript. That copy can no longer be found. (I gratefully acknowledge here the help I received from Professor Peter Bunnell and Princeton University Art Museum.)

For all its disarming frankness, there are some things that Rosalinde does not mention, starting with her birth name and date. She makes no secret of being born on February 16th, but she carefully avoids naming the year, which was 1892. This is because, when she moved back to England at the end of 1927 and re-launched her career, she dropped nine years off her age. London theatre reviewers, unaware of her five years on Broadway, hailed the arrival of this 'young beginner': at the age of thirty-six, she was passing for twenty-seven, and carried it off. Opening chapter 24, she writes that 1962 was an especially important year for her – but she doesn't mention that it was the year she turned 70. By then, she was wearing plenty of make-up with heavy black lines around her eyes so that no one noticed the wrinkles. Two years later, she set out on an gruelling eight-month round-the-world tour. She acted like – let me rephrase that: she behaved as though she really was only 63, and bathed in each new ocean that she reached (with or without a bikini).

She was christened Ivy Rosalind (without the final 'e') and her family called her Ivy until she was twenty-one, when she decided that she preferred Rosalind. At this point, she was touring the United States, singing folksongs with her sisters. Did she feel that *Rosalind* (with its Shakespearean echoes) fitted better alongside her sister's names, Dorothy and Cynthia, both 'sweetly old-fashioned names' to American ears? Or had she noticed that the word Americans most readily associate with 'ivy' is *poison*? At any rate, *Rosalind* was highly unusual at that time. (In a sample of 78,755 girls born in the United States between 1891 and 1900, 5565 were called *Mary* and 40 were called *Ivy* – but there were no *Rosalinds* at all.)

She added a final ‘e’ some years later. The story goes that in 1919 a numerologist told her that she would never be a success on the stage unless there was one more letter in her name. Shortly after that, she landed her first role in the United States, in a show rather appropriately called, *What’s in a Name?* At first ‘Rosalinde’ was just her stage name; then she came to use it in everyday life.

We all construct our identity, some more consciously than others, and actors more conscientiously than anyone else. Some people re-write their past to fit their chosen identity, but not Rosalinde. Having read several hundred Fuller family letters, I can confirm that what she writes is largely corroborated by other sources. There may be omissions – as with the year of her birth – but she does not mis-represent things. Recounting her stormy relationship with Arthur Dakyns, she introduces him by quoting a letter dating from May 1916 in which he acknowledges that he has not written to her for ‘some time’. She does not let on that he had proposed to her almost exactly six years before, and she had not heard from him for five years. (His artless proposal is reproduced on page 56 of *Walter Fuller*.)

She could not mention everything that had happened in her life; much compression was called for. So she chose not to mention that in 1910, for instance, at the time when Dakyns proposed, she was living with Dorothy in London and demonstrating with the Suffragettes. That Christmas, her eldest sister, Oriska, reported to her future husband that Rosalinde had come home suffering from ‘Suffrage madness’, guilty of ‘many wicked, naughty things’ in town. She was already breaking the mould at the age of 18.

She is also modest. When she tells how The Fuller Sisters sang ‘The Five Souls’ by W. N. Ewer to music adapted from Beethoven, she does not mention that it was she who did the adapting. Nor does she tell us about the two dozen or so radio plays that she acted in during the 1930s, or her part in the first ever live television play broadcast by the BBC. This is probably because much of her pleasure as an actress came from the relationship she established with the audience, her ability to seduce them (just as she seduced so many men).

From this point of view, acting for radio and TV is sterile.

Talking of sterility, Rosalinde must have realized, early in her sex life, that the chances of her falling pregnant were negligible. It soon formed part of her philosophy:

I don't think that creating another life is really the fulfilment of oneself. That can only come through the expression, the communication of oneself to another, maybe to many others.

To be a tuning fork that sets the whole orchestra playing in harmony.

Making love without the risk of motherhood liberated her, just as the arrival of the contraceptive pill liberated many women fifty years later, and made her a pioneer in the field of women's sexual freedom. It also gave her a stereotype image of the actress who slept with whomever she chose. This did not bother her in the least: 'I have made out a set of values for myself and am only sensitive or interested in criticism of my work.'

Consciously drawing up that set of values in her twenties shaped her personality, and she seems to have changed little in the ensuing fifty years. This was apparent to all who met her. 'You have evidently charmed Father Time,' observed Stark Young, seeing her again in New York after an interval of thirty years. Joseph Chelton said much the same: 'I first met you when I was twenty-four [and she was forty]; I have nearly doubled that, and yet I feel myself still a lover of the same woman and it is as fresh as though it had just begun.'

\* \* \*

In preparing this book for publication, I have chosen the title; the typescript was not titled, but I believe that Rosalinde called it 'Subject to Love'. I could have called it 'One Hectic Spark', after Rosalinde's depiction of herself on the stage at the Folies-Bergère: 'there was always one hectic spark darting mysteriously about by itself, and that was me.' However, she refers so often to Blake's claim that 'He who kisses the joy as it flies / Lives in eternity's sun rise,' and so clearly lived by it, that it seemed self-evident to call it *Kissing the Joy*. I have checked the spelling of proper names (whenever possible), revised the punctuation, and cut out a

few repetitions. Otherwise, it is substantially as Rosalinde wrote it.

I have added some biographical notes at the end, indicated by an asterisk in the text. They concern people important to the story; notes identifying everyone that Rosalinde mentions would be almost as long as the autobiography itself.

Mauborget, March 2016

## Sources

G. Peter Winnington, *Walter Fuller: the Man Who Had Ideas*. Letterworth Press, 2014.

In my biography of Rosalinde's brother Walter, the interested reader will find a more detailed account of the Fuller family and Rosalinde's early years; the sisters' tours in the United States, singing folksongs under Walter's direction; and a brief assessment of echoes of Rosalinde in Scott Fitzgerald's fiction. Given Name Frequency Project, <http://www.galbithink.org/names/us200.htm>.