

IN MEMORIAM



Remembering Fran Bennett

Antonio Ocampo-Guzman

Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA



Introduction

After a performance of Shakespeare's *King Lear* at Wellesley College in 1999, which was a Company of Women production, I went backstage to greet my teacher, Kristin Linklater, who had performed the title role. I was surprised when I was greeted with exuberant warmth by Fran Bennett, who had performed the role of Gloucester. I was taken aback: I had heard about Fran ever since coming to Shakespeare & Company in 1993 and had admired her Gloucester's intensity. I did not expect her to know my name, nor to greet me in such a generous and warmhearted manner. That was the beginning of a friendship that I cherished over the years.

And yet, I never knew much about Fran's life and story. I knew that she had been part of the first group of teachers that Kristin Linklater trained in 1966 and that she worked for many years at the Guthrie Theatre and at the California Institute of the Arts. And my curiosity led me to conduct an interview, spending two long afternoons in Fran's home in Silver Lake, Los Angeles, CA in 2019. My admiration grew to levels approaching awe. It is now a great honor to write this in memoriam, which is largely based on those interviews. I have asked several other individuals, who were deeply impacted by Fran to join me in their tributes: Toussaint Jeanlouis, Debra Hale, Lisa Wolpe, Paula Langton, and Melinda Lopez.

About Fran Bennett

The Early Years

Fran told me that she was born in Malvern, Arkansas, in the "Deep South." Fran's mother, Virginia Smith Bennett, was a teacher. Her father, Isom Bennett, was a lay minister. Fran was the oldest of three daughters. There was a mulberry tree in the backyard, which she populated with imaginary friends, unaware that there was something called "theatre." Her

family was religious, and movies were not allowed until she was a teenager. Church and music were most definitely allowed, so Fran was set to be a minister: ministry signified a way to make a living. After the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) burned their house in Malvern, the family decided to leave Arkansas and relocate to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Fran told me that when she was thrown out of the window of the burning house she was laughing, not crying.

Fran swore she would never go back to her childhood hometown, but she did many years later to commemorate a church window that she endowed in the memory of her mother, who died when Fran was just a teenager. The city's mayor declared August 7 2005 "Fran Bennett Day." The governor of Arkansas proclaimed Fran Bennett as an "Arkansas Traveler," a nationally acknowledged distinction of merit. Fran was inducted into the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame, joining the ranks of previously inducted fellow "Arkansas Travelers" Maya Angelou and Bill Clinton. That is pedigree.

In Milwaukee, Fran attended Lincoln High School. There was still no theater, but there were plenty of opportunities for public speaking. She saw her first play in Milwaukee, an all-white production of *As You Like It*, starring Katherine Hepburn. She was hooked. Fran was the first Black person to enroll as a drama major at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She earned a Bachelor of Science, studying theatre, dance, and sociology. She also earned an MA and credit toward a PhD. At college, Fran did try out for theatre and was cast as a maid, but the NAACP¹ local chapter got involved, and she left the production, turning instead to directing. She was one of two students invited to direct in the main theatre. She first directed an all-white production of Sartre's *No Exit*. Then she directed *The No 'Count Boy* by Paul Green.

The white acting teacher told her she would have no career as an actor because there were no parts for Black actors. (As a side note, Lorraine Hansberry was at Madison around the same time as Fran.) Fran was determined to show that the acting teacher was wrong. "I'm going to do what I can do." She did it all: costumes, tech production, stage building, dance troupe, all on top of her course work. A book that made an impression on Fran during her years in Madison was *Voice Science* by Lyman Spicer Judson and Andrew Thomas Weaver, which Fran read for her persuasive speech course. She won an Oration Scholarship from the Black Elks. Her subject was the Black man and Hitler. She wore mostly blue jeans.

Beginning Her Professional Life

After graduation and following her mother's advice ("theatre is an unknown; teaching can be a good fallback plan"), Fran subbed for a sabbatical leave at Fisk University in Nashville, TN for one-year. She taught acting, voice and speech, and technical theatre, and she directed and wrote. There were racial segregation laws in Tennessee at the time, and during an incident on a bus, Fran got off the bus rather than moving to the back. Eventually, she moved to New York City and auditioned for the American Theatre Wing Professional School, and she also attended the Paul Mannes Acting Studio. During her training, she worked with José Limón, Osceola Adams Archer, Ossie Davis, Sidney Poitier, and Lloyd Richards.

In her early years in New York City, she acted in Broadway productions of *Mandingo* with Franchot Tone and Dennis Hopper and *The Cantilevered Terrace* with Mildred Dunnock. She was performed Off-Broadway in the musical *Ballad for Bimshire* with Ossie

Davis and in the original production of Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, directed by Michael Kahn. Her New York credit also include *Mahlia*, directed by Gerald Freedman, and *A Land Beyond the River* by Lofton Mitchell. Fran performed in *Finian's Rainbow* and *Pal Joey*, as well as in *Here Today* with Tallulah Bankhead, who took her under her wing. In 1962, "Miss B," as Tallulah was called, introduced Fran, her young protégé, to Johnny Carson's on *The Tonight Show*, where Miss B sang a medley of Langston Hughes' songs. Singing was nothing new to Fran; she performed regularly as a blues/jazz singer in the clubs around Greenwich Village, while pursuing her New York acting career. During this time, Fran did a season on the TV soap opera *The Guiding Light* and worked in the Hayes registry for Actors, a telephone service, disguising her voice.

Fran's significant impact on the NYC scene can be surmised by this announcement in the *New York Times* in April, 1957:

The Off-Broadway Association will meet at 7:30 o'clock tonight in the Actors Playhouse, 100 Seventh Avenue South. The Group, which consists of neighborhood producers, will weigh the lack of simultaneous coverage by critics, price scales, and general business. After the session, Lofton Mitchell, Fran Bennett and Langston Hughes will express views on the Negro performer's place in the Off-Broadway theatre. This portion of the meeting, which starts at 9:00 p.m., is open to the public.²

Fran helped with the backers auditions for Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, but she did not get cast in the Broadway production. As the story goes, Fran in the part of Beneatha (in tandem with Claudia McNeil playing their powerful mother, Lena—the matriarch of the family) was too much for the unknown leading man, Sidney Poitier. *Raisin* is, after all, Walter Lee's story. Diana Sands got the role, and Fran suffered what was called at the time a "hysterical coma."³ She was accepted into Bellevue Hospital. Eventually, she recovered, but swore that "this will never happen to me again, and it's between me and me."

Linklater and the Guthrie

In 1965, Fran saw an advertisement in the *New York Times* "News from the Rialto" section, and it featured Peter Zysler, from the Minnesota Theatre Company (later known as the Guthrie Theater), and a woman named Kristin Linklater, who were looking for actors to be trained as voice teachers. Fran knew Peter from Minneapolis; she had performed there in the company's first season in 1963. They had both noticed that American actors needed better voice training. Fran was late in getting her materials ready for the submission deadline, but she sent a telegram: "You really want to see me; it's important that you see me." She wanted something other than performing maid roles on TV, and knew she could be an extraordinary teacher.

Her audition and interview with Kristin Linklater were held in a studio near Carnegie Hall, and it was a tense experience. Fran performed Shakespeare's Sonnet 29, "When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes." Linklater casually said, "I guess you can be a part of the group," but Fran demanded a definitive answer then and there, even though she was the first person to be interviewed. That was the beginning of a remarkable friendship between Fran and Kristin that lasted over 50 years. The training was fully funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, offering participants a living wage for one year. Twelve actors were selected;

eight completed the year, which included hours of voice training with Linklater, movement work with BH Barry, Alexander Technique with Judy Liebowitz, and anatomy lessons with Dr. Wilbur Gold. Most evenings, they would go see plays. Fran's acting agent was furious.

Fran shared with me that through Kristin's work, something different got inside of her, into her soul

I was half living until then. My eyes, my ears got sharper. An aliveness inside. It's about the work, not about KL [Kristin Linklater]. It touched my core in an underneath sort of way. In the beginning, I mouthed Kristin's words for years, I repeated it for years. Now, I teach what I think the student needs.

Life in Los Angeles

At the end of the year, Fran was offered a job at the Guthrie Theater, and she spent the next 12 years working, acting, and teaching in Minneapolis. Fran was part of the Guthrie's first national tour, and they took *The House of Atreus* and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* to Broadway and the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. During these years, Fran deepened her interest in movement and dance. Financed by the Rockefeller Foundation, Fran spent some time in London, working along Litz Pisk at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and with Trish Arnold. The story goes that Vanessa Redgrave modeled her dancing in the movie of *Isadora* (based on Isadora Duncan) on Fran's body. Fran was in London when Kristin Linklater first met Tina Packer in New York, and the first iteration of Shakespeare & Company developed. A few years later, Kristin asked Fran to cover her classes at a Shakespeare & Company workshop. Fran later joined Kristin in establishing the Company of Women, along with Carol Gilligan. She also supported Kristin's teaching at the first conference organized by the Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA), which was held at the Guthrie in Minneapolis. Fran was instrumental in starting the conversation about cultural and ethnical diversity in voice and speech training, and Fran was named Distinguished Lifetime Member of VASTA in 2009.

Los Angeles

In 1979, Fran was offered a job teaching at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). She thought it was time to work with younger people, and she loved the warm weather (no snow) and accepted. Originally, it was agreed that she would be in Los Angeles for 6–8 months out of the year; but a new dean came to the school, and Fran decided to stay in Los Angeles permanently. At CalArts, Fran served as Head of Acting and as Director of Performance. She oversaw auditions, acceptances, financial aid, season planning, and casting. She also taught voice; the most important lesson for her was to help actors release physical tension and to avoid too much muscling. "Breath is thought," she would say. She aimed to integrate voice, movement, and acting as a life class, looking at the whole person, the whole body.

In LA, her acting career blossomed, and it defied being categorized. Since moving to Los Angeles in 1979, and while teaching full-time, Fran guest starred in numerous TV shows and movies of the week, as well as film and theater in Los Angeles. She won Drama-Logue Awards⁴ for the last two shows at South Coast Repertory. Fran was a founding member of the Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company (LAWSC), and she received the first AEA/

SAG/AFTRA Diversity Honor Award in 2004. She is also the recipient of the Watts Village Theater Company's 2008 Blazing the Trail Award for her dedication to diversity within the field of arts education, theater, film, and television. Playwright's Arena honored her in 2009 for Outstanding Contribution to the Los Angeles Theater Community.

Reflecting

I asked Fran if she recalled any fascinating mistakes as a teacher. She shared that sometimes she went too far, too fast. That sometimes her students were not ready to acknowledge what they were feeling. "Voice is very personal." Fran told me that as "a college student, I was hiding; I wasn't able to do what I wanted to do because of my color. If this is the world, I can do what I can do. I was collapsing in the middle, to look less tall. I didn't want to always have high status as an officious woman."

Fran retired from CalArts in 2016 and spent the last years of her life as busy as ever: acting in a myriad of plays, TV shows, teaching, supporting the Kristin Linklater Voice Center in Orkney, Scotland, and teaching and coaching privately.

I asked Fran what she called herself. Though she was born during a time in which the term "negro" was employed, she eventually called herself Black. Later on, she used the term African American, but then realized that August Wilson was right: these terms were given by others, who were usually white. All race conversations are a vestige of slavery. Ultimately, she called herself a Woman of Color.

From Toussaint Jeanlouis

What I learned from Fran Bennett has never been forgotten or missed. It is always with me. Walking into the classroom of this tall Black woman was a gift from the universe. She taught me how to support my voice, lend my voice to create change, and make an impact. I gained the power to colorfully express myself with all the complexities of a full human being. Dear Fran gave me so much more than just vocal training for the stage. It was for life. "Whatever you ate or drank last night, if you're breathing correctly, I can smell it." The way she cared made me feel safe and at home. Hearing and feeling the way she used her voice with such confidence and skill gave me the impression that I too could own my voice and my destiny. She will continue to resonate in all those who were in her presence. Thank you, Fran Bennett. I am forever grateful.⁵

From Debra Hale

Fran Bennett had a gift for celebrating the human being beneath the student, in a tough but kind and compassionate way. She was a powerhouse in the classroom—passionate, imaginative, and bold in acting as well as rigorous in vocal technique. I apprenticed with her 29 years ago as a step toward Designation from Kristin Linklater. I observed and noted Fran's BFA and MFA voice classes for a year at California Institute of the Arts. I studied with her privately to strengthen my own voice and began to learn how to teach this extensive body of work to others.

In my journals, I found charts of time spent on homework from tutorials, descriptions of class sequences, and rehearsal exercises. (The quips about sound coming from women's erogenous zones were from assistant directing her production of Dario Fo's *Orgasmo Adulto Escapes from the Zoo*). I remember vividly her leading an exercise called "thrashing about" in which the player had to run, jump, crawl, somersault, and constantly be in motion while speaking dialogue. The actress became physically alive in a scene she had previously been acting "from the neck up" and had broken her habitual way of speaking into something much more breath-full, varied, and spontaneous. Fran devised detailed and different ways of rehearsing with each person exploring language, imagery, and even drilling speech in uninhibited ways.

Fran had her work cut out for her in our individual sessions, but she was undaunted. She urged me to put stickies around my house: on the fridge, bathroom mirror, my closet, and my cereal bowl. These directives were constant reminders: "Release your jaw, breathe!" and "Relax your tongue out on the wet part of your lower lip." I kept my tongue out on that lip for hours while taking care of my toddler, who enjoyed imitating me. Over time, the tongue relaxed, leaving more space in my mouth for breath and vibration. Fran once said, "You must write a letter entitled 'My Friend, my Jaw.'" I was reluctant, seeing my jaw only as the enemy, but that missive actually helped me coax the muscle rather than force it.

As we finished our time together Fran surprised me with a party to honor my next step in the journey. It was a thoughtful, moving gesture that drove home to me Fran's generosity both as a teacher and a friend. She helped me find my voice, as I now help others find theirs. Rest in Peace, Fran, for the multitudes of voices you have released and sent soaring.⁶

From Lisa Wolpe

The first time I experienced Fran Bennett, she was at Shakespeare & Company teaching me to "catch snowflakes on my tongue." I was 19, and her voice rang out like a Tibetan gong. With the bearing of a Greek god, she was lording it over our Linklater voice class, throwing lightning bolts of terror and enjoyment with apparent glee. I was moved by her eloquence, her laughter, and her expansive spirit.

Later, in Kristin Linklater's ground-breaking "Company of Women," we rehearsed Shakespeare deeply with women from all over the world. We gathered in the evenings after rehearsals to drink and talk and sing and dance and write. There, surrounded by strong, intelligent, and passionate women, Fran felt at home and relaxed in a setting where she felt central and beloved.

I moved to Los Angeles in the late 1980s, and Fran and I became closer friends. Along with Natsuko Ohama, Merry Conway, and a wonderful group of actors and guest artists, we created the work of the Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company together for over 20 years.

We often enjoyed delightful evenings at Fran's home, watching the moon rise over the silver lake, drinking champagne, making meals, and planning shows. We loved listening to her stories, her teaching and auditioning triumphs and challenges, and her hopes and dreams for herself and for her students and friends. We loved celebrating life with her, as she carried on late into the night at our cast parties, kicking up her long legs, delighting her admirers, throwing her head back and laughing at the stars.

Sometimes she held court in a castle with a moat. She ran the drawbridge up and down at will. Sometimes she was a pirate ship with a black flag flying proudly at her topmast. Sometimes she was a Hollywood celebrity with a bright “DAHling” for the world and an intimate chuckle for her true mates. She lived her own best life and made no apologies for her choices.

Fran played the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Morocco in *Merchant*, Oberon in *Midsummer*, the Duke in *Measure*, and both Dukes in *As You Like It*. She played *Othello* for us twice, brilliantly, once with Leigh Curran, and once with me as Iago. It was a joy to watch her onstage, to work with her, to be uplifted, and to feel glad that there was a woman like Fran Bennett lighting up the world. She was astonishing, a powerhouse. She will not be forgotten.⁷

From Paula Langton

In the Company of Women, I am playing Edgar to Fran’s Gloucester. We were two Leos sharing August birthdays. (We love a party.) The most memorable party was the Lobster Feast! To watch Fran enjoy a lobster was a lesson in how to live and die. Such *relish*! Fran takes matters into her own hands. She takes her time. She breaks through that hard exterior to get to the tender part on the inside. No matter the mess, she knows you have got to be willing to do difficult work to earn the best bits. Nothing is wasted; she savors every morsel and spits out what she does not want. She will speak about it with the same relish years later, and in retelling it, she appears to enjoy that meal all over again. It is emblematic of the way Fran lives her life.

Fran is actively engaged. She remains in conversation. She is attentive to the seismic shifts happening in the world and knows there is much work to be done. She is a full participant. I notice a more contemplative side of Fran over the last year or so. She is quieter, listening more deeply. Her thoughts—breaths—slower. There is still the impulse to rise above—to ascend—the familiar levity, ready smile and robust laugh, but I sense a greater gravitas now. It is hard earned. She is still—charge—brave. I have witnessed her drop into this place before, but she seems to live here more often and more comfortably now. I hear more urgency and weight in her voice and in her words. I want to hold onto everything she says, to make sure I do not miss the message.

Fran takes on her death like she lives her life and like she eats her lobster—bravely. She moves quickly through the tough bits. She finds ways to let us in: conscious, aware, purposeful, curious, and satisfied. Celebratory. Joyful. She seems to *relish* it.

“I had a good run.” she says.

“I’ll be joining Kristin up on the roof.”

“I’m going HOME. I’m just not there yet.”

“And wasn’t that lobster good!?” she keeps saying.

She promises to look after us: “I’ll be that spot in the corner. Look for me.”

“Tell everyone, I love you all!”

I imagine death like another birth. When people go, they can enter us—if we make room for them. I am making room for you, Fran. Still listening.⁸

From Melinda Lopez

These are my lessons from Fran:

Fran was my first acting teacher. I brought in Juliet's monologue, 'Tell me not Friar that thou hearest of this,' threatening suicide, all hair and fury, shoulders hunched, and throat constricted. Fran's first note was "You're hardly giving the poor girl a chance." Lesson one: *Start at the beginning: have hope: do one thing at a time: listen.*

I worked with Fran a half dozen years later with The Company of Women (COW). We had to share accommodations at the University of Maine, where COW was in residence, and Fran chose me as a bunkmate because I seemed quiet and did not stay up late. Fran's side of the room was always meticulous. I tried to keep my disarray in check, because I did not want her to change her mind and find another "roomie." One afternoon during a voice class, Fran and I partnered for a massage. I was working on her shoulders, rubbing her back and neck. The teacher instructed us to move north, and when I touched Fran's head, she snapped, "Don't touch the hair. Never touch the hair." Lesson two: *Never touch a Black woman's hair.*

A few years later, we were rehearsing Lear. I was Edmund to her Gloucester. (Oh, that glorious Gloucester, partnered to Kristin's Lear. Oh, heartbreak.) I came into the rehearsal, maybe forgetting her teaching, maybe too eager to prove myself, maybe cocky, all of 28 years old. And Fran stopped the rehearsal and said, "Gloucester isn't stupid." Lesson three: *Always make your scene partner look better than you. Put your attention on lifting them up.*

At nearly 90, Fran could fold her body, rest her head on her thighs, and roll down her spine with the flexibility of a dancer, all grace and regal poise. But when she laughed, she was loud, showed all her teeth, and she filled the room with joy and sound. For someone who valued her privacy so much, she always seemed to be surrounded by a circle of folk.⁹ She talked about her girlhood in Malvern, Alabama, working with her mother taking in laundry. And she talked about getting out of Malvern and refusing to do laundry again. Fran talked about when she got her home in Silver Lake there was still a law on the books that barred African Americans from living in the community.

Lesson four: *You are not your circumstances. Care for and nurture yourself. Resist what must be resisted.*

Fran walked in grace. She was singular. She was a master teacher and a generous and tender friend. I carry her lessons and so many more that she embodied. I try to share them with my students. But I am not done learning. Who will teach us now?¹⁰

Notes

1. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is a civil rights organization in the United States.
2. For the *New York Times* archives from 1851–1980, see <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html>
3. The concept of "hysteria" is no longer in use in the modern mental health profession.
4. These became the Back Stage Garland Awards.
5. Toussaint Jeanlouis is an actor, director, musician, dancer, writer, and teacher, who studied with Fran Bennett at CalArts. He currently lives in Brooklyn, New York.
6. Debra Hale, Associate Professor of Theatre at Florida State University, is a Designated Linklater Voice Teacher and an acclaimed voice and dialect director. She studied with Fran Bennett at CalArts.

7. Lisa Wolpe is an acclaimed actor and director, who founded and ran the all-female, multi-cultural Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company from 1993–2016 and produced, directed, and performed in many iconic all-female productions.
8. Paula Langton is Professor Emerita of Boston University and a Designated Linklater Teacher. She worked with Fran Bennett in the Company of Women, and at the Linklater Voice Center in Scotland.
9. "Folx" means "folks"—as defined by the Merriam-Webster, the term "folx" is "used especially to explicitly signal the inclusion of groups commonly marginalized."
10. Melinda Lopez is an award-winning playwright, actor, and educator. She is based in Boston, MA, where she is an Artistic Associate at the Huntington Theatre and a Professor of the Practice at Northeastern University.

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Notes on contributor



Antonio Ocampo-Guzman is an actor, director, and teacher based in Boston, where he is the Chair of the Department of Theatre at Northeastern University. He is the President-Elect of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA). A Designated Linklater Voice Teacher, he has adapted the practice into Spanish and is as a consultant for the CEUVOZ, a center for voice studies in Mexico City. He has an MFA in directing and a graduate diploma in voice from York University, Toronto.