

Eminent 2019 Speech

By Lara Chamberlain

(Written from the point of view of George Antheil)

From the moment I met you, Hedy Lamarr, I knew instantly that the word “actress” was far from describing your genuine persona. I remember we sat down in a quaint, chill room, sunlight cascading through the snow-covered tree branches just beyond the open window. My prior intent had been to meet with you to help with your acting, but it was as if whatever was inside you was fighting to get out-- fighting to emerge from some forgotten repository left ignored at the back of your mind. I saw so distinctly, as our conversation progressed, the raw potential you held delicately within the labyrinthine walls of your brain. My focus had already shifted dramatically, and now I was increasingly entranced by every word that escaped your blush lips, afraid of missing even the smallest of details that might lead me nearer to the core of your spirit.

As I came to know you, you spoke to me of your childhood in Austria. You told stories of nostalgia about long walks with your father in which he would nourish this technological side of your brain that was clearly uncommon in so young a girl. Meanwhile, your mother introduced you to the arts, and there blossomed your pure passion for acting. I saw so clearly the twinkle in your brilliant green eyes when you spoke of your early years in the theatre and small film productions; your love for the stage was indubitable. Though I realized here that the desire to live your dream of becoming an actress came at the cost of another. Your scientific prowess was set aside, placed at the back of your mind, and forgotten.

As we began to work together, you told me of the last miserable year of your first marriage, and how a verbally abusive husband had pushed you towards the cliff of your limits. The separation had felt as though, after four years of gasping desperately for air in a drowning world, you could again breathe easily. Here, your passions took over, and in an act of spontaneity and hope, that cliff of your limits suddenly became a diving board for the future. In a leap of faith, you moved to Hollywood with a spirited attitude and a fresh view on life.

At the time of our partnership, your fame was at its highest. The name “Lamarr” was making its mark on the world. It was here you were dubbed “one of Hollywood’s most gorgeous leading ladies” by the public. However, I saw the pain it caused you to know that what you were viewed as was only a pretty face on an actress’s body. I recall you coming to me one day with dismal tears populating your eyes, expressing indignantly your belief that society was in a place where women could not be taken seriously. I reassured you, reminding you of the power you possessed to affect people, just as you had done to me.

Our work was progressing. Day after day, you sat hunched over at your desk, scribbling ideas in black ink on crumpled pieces of paper. One day, it hit you. You had been experimenting, convinced there was a way for you to be of some help in the war. A sudden excited whisper of, “George”, turned out to be the beginning of our greatest project. You were the one with the idea to change radio frequencies to block enemy ships from jamming torpedo guidance signals; all I did was create the model you needed to begin your work. From there, it was as if you were again a five-year-old girl, tinkering with the inner-workings of your beloved music box. Only this time, you were creating something far greater. Neither of us had any idea that your invention of “frequency hopping” was laying down the base for technological advancements that would later shift the entire direction of the world.

The truth is, Hedy, you would have been remembered for your excellence whether your latter career had taken place or not. But that just wasn't enough for you. Throughout your careers, your life, you strived not for fame, nor wealth; you did not live in vanity, nor complacence, during your peak as a film-star. No, my Hedy, you lived for your passions -- for your raw, honest, beautiful passions. Thank goodness you decided to share them with the world.