

Georgia playwright Anne Nichols wrote in “the spirit of tolerance”

When Anne Nichols was born on November 26, 1891, in Dales Mill—a Wayne County town in southeast Georgia—what were the odds on her becoming a successful playwright? Again, having been born into a strict Baptist family, what were the odds on her conversion to Catholicism?

Nichols was evidently born to defy odds. At 16, she left obscure Dales Mill for Philadelphia to try acting and writing for the theater. Her first role was as a member of the chorus of a Biblical play, *The Shepherd King*. She went on from there to write vaudeville skits and to appear in early films, such as *The Immortal Alamo* (1911) and *In the Hot Lands* (1911). In 1915, Nichols married producer-actor Henry Duffy, an Irish Catholic. It was while married to Duffy that Anne Nichols wrote the three-act play, *Abie's Irish Rose*, which constitutes her claim to fame. Produced by Oliver Morosco in San Francisco and Los Angeles, the play proved popular, a fact which encouraged Nichols in her desire to take it to Broadway.



Rita H. DeLorme

When Morosco would not agree to producing *Abie's Irish Rose* in New York, reasoning that Broadway audiences were too sophisticated for its thin plot and sentimental theme, Nichols took it there herself. Selling her home and taking out a loan, she took *Abie's Irish Rose* to New York, producing it at a time when women had only recently received the vote. Though humorist and sophisticate Robert Benchley and other New York “high brows” panned it, the play was a phenomenal success, breaking Broadway records with its long run, 2,427 performances: from May 23, 1922 until October 1, 1927.

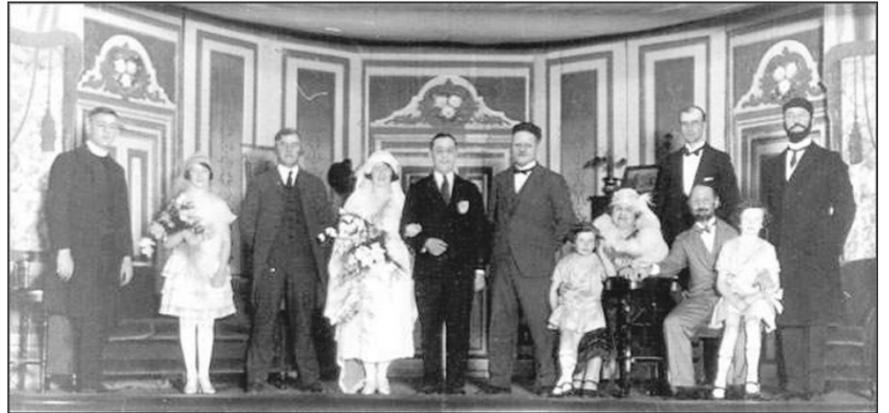
In 1928, the June 9 issue of *The Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen's Association* featured a news article from New York headed “Abie's Irish Rose Author, Georgian, Becomes Catholic.” Anne Nichols, the story

related “made her first Holy Communion, April 15, at the Madison Avenue Convent of the Sacred Heart here (NY). Her young son already had joined the Church some months before.” At the time when the story of her conversion appeared in the *Bulletin*, Nichols and her husband, Henry Duffy, had been divorced four years and he had remarried shortly afterward.

The 1928 *Bulletin* article went on to outline the plot of Anne Nichols' play, noting that “the play involves a religious theme—a romance between an Irish Catholic girl and a Jewish youth. Two of its main characters are a priest and a rabbi.” Simplistic as it may have seemed to New York critics, the play had hidden

merits. When asked about the success of *Abie's Irish Rose*, Nichols said she had “written from the heart” and that she thought the play was so popular because of its “spirit of tolerance.” Her answer made sense in a 1920s setting. At the time when its cast members were taking curtain calls every night, the play's light, easily-accessed theme seems to have provided a needed antidote for volatile issues like prohibition, evolution, and ethnicity then plaguing the country.

By the time Anne Nichols' play was breaking records, the Ku Klux Klan, already a force in Georgia, had crested the five million mark in its national membership. Americans had begun focusing on multiculturalism and the country's first immigration laws were enacted. Nichols' play depicting two successful families: one staunchly Jewish; the other,



Cast of a 1929 traveling version of *ABIE'S IRISH ROSE*.

staunchly Irish-Catholic, arrived on Broadway when the need for societal changes was becoming more obvious. In his book, *In Their Own Image: New York Jews in Jazz Age Popular Culture*, author Ted Merwin, professor of Jewish Studies and director of the Milton B. Asbell Center for Jewish Life at Dickinson College, defines the 1920s as a pivotal period for Jews. Specifically citing *Abie's Irish Rose*, Merwin observed: “Jewish theater in particular was so popular that a Broadway comedy about a Jewish family, Anne Nichols's *Abie's Irish Rose*, was not just the longest-running play of the decade, but one of the most successful Broadway plays of all time.”

Though Nichols wrote other plays as well as scripts for movie and radio versions of *Abie's Irish Rose*, she was never as successful again and was unable to recoup financially following the New York Stock Market crash that ushered in the Great Depression. Known to be “a soft touch” when she was making a fortune, Nichols donated generously to causes such as the Actors' Fund of America as well as to personal charities in which she was interested. (In 1927 she settled an endowment on destitute, eighty-eight-year-old Edward Payson Welles, considered the champion marathon walker of all times.)

On September 15, 1966, Anne Nichols suffered a heart attack and died in a New Jersey nursing home at the age of 75, one Internet source intimating that her stay at the nursing home had been underwritten by the same Actors' Fund she had earlier contributed to.

A Requiem Mass was said for Nichols at Saint Malachy's Catholic Church in New York and she was buried, like her son Henry who had died many years earlier, at Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, New York.

Nichols's greatest satisfaction may have come from the knowledge that so many people saw and loved her play and recognized its premise that, despite their differences, those of different faiths and nationalities should try to get along. Though disdained by many critics and meant for a different era, the play's message of tolerance still holds true. “Sure, we're all trying to get to the same place,” said Father Whalen, one of the characters in *Abie's Irish Rose*. By dramatizing this insight, Georgia playwright Anne Nichols made a unique contribution to the arts and to humanity—against the odds.

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Long marriages...

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their four children while Ben worked as a long-shoreman. They've made compromises through the years to bridge their differences in faith.

The Moores also read the Bible together. Sometimes, he'll read the New International Version to her, and she'll read his preferred King James Version to him.

A good marriage, “takes a lot of giving,” she said. “You can't always be right. Even sometimes if you are right, you have to give in.”

Mary Dimmick agrees. She and husband

Walter Dimmick shared the spotlight as they marked their 25th anniversary with her parents, the Trees. All are parishioners at Blessed Sacrament Church. Walter was raised Methodist but converted to Catholicism when he married Mary. Compromise has been a theme throughout their relationship. “I don't have a secret,” Mary said. “You just have to be willing to put in 100 percent of yourself.”

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“The Lord has blessed all 50 years of our marriage. We once heard that if you pray the Rosary every day for a year, you will never want to stop. We believe that's true. In later years, attending more weekday Masses, praying the Rosary together each night and adding Eucharistic Adoration have blessed our lives together even more. Bible studies, reading Catholic publications, Disciples in Mission meetings and participation in RCIA continue to enrich our spiritual journey together. It's wonderful to be Catholic!”

—Paul and Beverly Rosenthal
Augusta