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## Actress-Author Devotes Herself to Making a Name for 19th-Century Writer and Feminist

By ROBERT KOEHLER

She was born Sarah Margaret Fuller. She died Sarah Margaret Fuller Marchesa D'Ossoli. During those 40 years, between 1810 and 1850, she struggled to be known simply as Margaret Fuller.

Over the past 20 years, actress-author Laurie James has struggled to make Fuller's name known at all. Indeed, one of her three volumes on Fuller is titled, "Why Margaret Fuller Ossoli Is Forgotten." Explaining this has become her self-proclaimed crusade, and she has brought it to Los Angeles with her one-woman performance, "Men, Women and Margaret Fuller," at the Burbage Theatre.

James knows well that the name *Margaret Fuller* is hardly in the pantheon of Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, Will Rogers and other American literary voices that in recent years have risen from the dead in the form of actors from Hal Holbrook to Julie Harris.

At least, not yet. Los Angeles has declared today "Margaret Fuller Day" and James' performance this afternoon will be highlighted by a city proclamation and a panel discussion of Fuller's legacy.

As James ticks off reason after reason that Fuller may be the great forgotten genius of American letters and feminism, her voice sounds bold and utterly confident.

"I like to begin with her firsts," James says, sitting on a sofa in a friend's Sherman Oaks hillside home. "She was the first American writer on women's equality. She was the first editor of the *Dial* magazine, the periodical voice of the American Transcendentalists and the model of what was to become 'the little magazine.'"

"She was the first American female foreign correspondent" for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, James says. "She was part of the first 'hippies'—the transcendentalists who founded the collectivist Brook Farm. She created the first 'rap session' for women, organized 'conversations,' as they were called, about the great ideas."

"And," James says, "she was the first woman allowed inside Harvard Library. How, I don't know." It's one of the few details of Fuller's vastly varied, tempestuous life that James can't explain. Critic Ivy Burrows has commented, "It is conceivable that James knows Margaret Fuller nearly as well as Margaret Fuller knew herself."

A New Yorker who trained as a writer at New York University's writing center and as an actress at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, James first came across Fuller in the late 1960s, during the opening phase of a revolutionary period in women's historical and literary scholarship.

"I couldn't see how to do her life as a play," she says, "but after seeing what Holbrook did with Twain, I could imagine creating a



Laurie James has brought her one-woman show, "Men, Women and Margaret Fuller," to Los Angeles.

solo performance based on her books, essays, articles and letters. The response was so strong to my first public readings in 1973 that I decided to make Margaret Fuller, besides my family, the priority in my life."

James, whose sturdy appearance and long blonde hair contrast dramatically with the prim, properly Victorian image of Fuller in numerous portrait paintings, makes it readily apparent how one could get hooked on Margaret Fuller.

A child prodigy, Fuller was educated by her Boston lawyer father "like a boy. She learned quickly, so he gave her more to learn. She read Latin at 5, read Ovid at 7 and Shakespeare at 8. But she stood out like a sore thumb around other girls, who were only interested in embroidery. Stories became her reality, not other children," James says.

"She was a profoundly divided soul, though, for while she pursued ideas, she also searched for love her whole life. She said it best when she wrote, 'Tis an evil lot to have a boy's ambition and a woman's heart.' Like all women, she couldn't attend Harvard, but she attracted the Harvard boys, who realized that her self-taught education was vastly superior to the one they were receiving at the university," James says. "They liked her a lot, but she could never win their hearts. They always married the girl with the curl," leaving her on the sidelines."

Her family's financial hardships forced Fuller into teaching, which James says she disliked. "Her dream was to write the definitive book on Goethe, which she never realized. But at the same time, she met Ralph Waldo Emerson, who asked her at 29 to edit the *Dial*, and began her 'conversations' for women."

Both projects proved crucial: The *Dial* presented transcendentalism—an American blending of Coleridge, Platonic thought and Hinduism that viewed humans and nature as unified and good, and self-generated spirituality as superior to the institutional church—within a literary context that triggered the birth of the American novel (Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" and Melville's "Moby Dick," among others).

Yet, just as she missed the seminal Seneca Conference that officially launched the American women's movement, Fuller missed Hawthorne's and Melville's achievements. "It was doubly ironic," James said, "since she had written 'Women in the 19th Century,' an extremely important book that analyzed women's history and the ways in which women could realize their self-potential. She had also raised the stakes as a strong literary critic at the *Tribune*, sometimes panning Poe, Longfellow and her own mentor, Emerson—this was an unheard-of thing for a woman to do, but it was a mark of Fuller's stature."

Fuller missed these events for something even more remarkable: As the *Tribune's* woman in Europe from 1846 to 1850, she covered the Continent, reporting on the poor and the working class and interviewing everyone from George Sand—perhaps Fuller's French counterpart—to Italian republican revolutionary, Giuseppe Mazzini. This last meeting proved fateful, as Fuller was drawn into Mazzini's cause ("we know that he loved her, but nothing ever came of it," James says), and amid the swirl of revolution sweeping across Europe in 1848, she fell in love with Giovanni Angelo Marquis Ossoli.

"They were complete opposites," James says. "He was 10 years younger than her, had none of her intellect and came from high nobility. There's no record of a marriage, but it was probably done secretly, since Margaret wasn't Catholic. She wanted to keep the Ossoli name for her child, Angelo. At the same time, rumors of Margaret's extravagant behavior and statements—that men could love men as women could love women, being single at 35, having a child out of wedlock—scandalized her so in America that Horace Greeley fired her from the *Tribune*. Then, the Italian revolution failed."

Finishing her chronicle of that revolution, Fuller opted to bring her family back to the United States, even though her aristocratic husband was disowned by his kin and was without means. On July



Margaret Fuller was an important voice in letters and feminism.

19, 1850, their ship was wrecked 50 yards off New York's Fire Island; all three drowned and Fuller's potential masterpiece was lost in the sea.

"It was an extraordinary loss, because she would have likely been a great leader for social change, from women's suffrage to abolition," James says.

As she thumbs through the pages of her volumes, James expresses some frustration that she can't fit more information about this epic life into her performance. A major event missing from the show—but one that she explores in her largest book, also titled "Men, Women and Margaret Fuller"—is how Emerson posthumously trimmed, altered and distorted Fuller's letters in the course of compiling her memoirs. "It was an act," James insists, "that harmed Fuller's image in the eyes of future biographers, who sometimes made her out to be aggressive and obnoxious."

But didn't Fuller once boast, "I know all the people worth knowing in America, and I find no intellect comparable to my own"?

"Yes, and she was probably right," James says. "I find it fascinating—and it's something I try to bring out in the show—how much she threatened men." James has dramatized the tense Fuller-Emerson relationship in her three-character play, "O Excellent Friend!" It will receive a reading at Dutton's Books in Brentwood on May 1.

"More than anything, I want to show Fuller's heart and soul and mind, and provide a role model of a strong 19th-Century woman for the young. It was one thing to talk about women making the most of their lives, but she showed by doing," James says. □

"Men, Women and Margaret Fuller" runs at 3:30 p.m. Sundays at the Burbage Theatre, 2330 Sawtelle Blvd., West Los Angeles, until May 31. Tickets: \$12. Call (213) 478-0897.

"O Excellent Friend" will be read at Dutton's Books, San Vicente Blvd., Brentwood, on May 1. Time to be announced.

Robert Koehler is a frequent contributor to *Calendar*.