Dorothy Young: Drew's Angel of the Arts
Dorothy Young knew that I would first ask—like every other interviewer—about her role in 1926 as stage assistant to the great Houdini. The early-20th-century escape artist and magician's feats are familiar to most people even now, 76 years after his death. "Houdini is what most writers want to hear about," she said. "It was a wonderful time; but, remember, I only spent a year with him." True, but as the last person living who shared a stage with Houdini, she has knowledge that interviewers are curious about: She can't escape that.

Dorothy also has lived somewhat in the shade of a Drew icon—her older brother, the late Sherman Plato Young, whose aura on campus is of the nonfading Houdini type. His scholarly teaching of Greek and Latin is generally unknown; he lives in memory as the magnetic, highly successful Drew baseball coach called "Doc."

Drew's baseball field bears Doc Young's name, and a large oil painting of him is always moved into any hall where Drew's old boys convene to talk of golden days. It is casually acknowledged on such occasions that the portrait was painted nearly 30 years ago by Dorothy Young, "Doc's sister."

But Dorothy's name is emblazoned on the east wall of the University's imposing $30 million Dorothy Young Center for the Arts. After the facility opens in this winter, it is possible that Doc might be referred to as "Dorothy's brother."

**A CONVERSATION IN FOUR ACTS**

As Dorothy spoke in her sun-dappled Ocean Grove living room, it seemed as if she were outlining the plot for a Broadway musical: Unsophisticated teenager from Otisville, N.Y., aims for a role with Houdini. Auditions. Gets the role. Stage career nixed by her parents. All is resolved. They relent. Girl heads to instant stardom.

And that is only the first act in the continuing saga of Dorothy Young, who left the stage to appear in movies, became half of a dancing team that won international success, wrote several books, became a painter of renown, helped her husband amass a fortune—and never forgot her deep Methodist roots and her affection for Drew University.

She made her stage debut as "The Radio Girl of 1950," a 1926 imaginary concept of what radio reception would be like 25 years in the future. Dorothy was Houdini's elfin Radio Girl in the show that toured the eastern United States in 1926 and 1927. Dorothy was hidden in a huge mock radio that was trundled on stage. Houdini would open the radio fully to show beyond doubt that there could not possibly be anyone in the box. He waited a few seconds, twisted the dials to "tune in" the local radio station of whatever city they were in, and lifted the lid. Up popped Dorothy. Houdini lifted her out of the radio. Set free, dressed in what she recalls as a "scanty costume," she danced the Charleston, the defining beat of the 1920s.

The show opened in Hartford, Conn., in September 1926, soon after appeared on Broadway, and triumphantly headed westward through major cities before returning to New York. Now, Dorothy sat on the opposite end of the couch from me, petite, chic, and radiating an energy that encompassed the windowed room. To the east, about 150 feet away, the Atlantic Ocean dashed surf across the strand. Westward, the main street fell away toward the Methodist camp meeting ground that has been Ocean Grove's hallmark since 1869. Each morning, Dorothy climbs a steep, curving staircase to eat breakfast in this room, facing her own exquisite painting of a charming young ballerina bent over to fasten her slipper.

From time to time, as we ventured leisurely through her life, Dorothy would dash down and up the stairs to get something—an old newspaper clipping, a photo, a program, a cup of tea. Her heels tapped out a sprightly message of confidence as she descended and ascended. Fortunately—Dorothy is in her 90s—she considers running up and down the stairs to be mere exercise.
ACT I:

**Daddy’s Girl**

Dorothy’s father, Rev. Robert S. Young, has been both the wellspring of her life and the key to her love for Drew University. Four Methodist minister ancestors preceded him in a direct line back to the American Revolution, and his father, an army chaplain, died of wounds suffered in the Civil War. Robert first studied medicine at Yale University, then transferred to Drew Theological Seminary in 1901 to pursue a Bachelor of Divinity degree.

Dorothy was born in 1909 in Otisville, N.Y., a village at the base of the Shawangunk Mountains in the Catskills. There, her father, pastor of the Otisville Methodist Church, administered a noted tuberculosis sanatorium in an era when mountain air was considered the best way to fend off the dreaded illness.

Two sisters, Roberta and Helen with whom Dorothy became very close, joined the family after Sherman, who was 10 years old when Dorothy arrived.

“I was always completely different from my sisters,” Dorothy said. “When we were little, my father took us all to buy shoes. My sisters wanted Oxfords, to wear with stockings. I wanted Mary Janes, with white socks. Daddy let me have my way; I was Daddy’s little girl until he died.”

Dorothy’s father believed in education and in exposing his children to historical and geographic features and new experiences wherever the family journeyed. Each of the three older Youngs went to college and became an educator. Dorothy completed high school at Beaver College Prep School in Beaver, Pa., and enrolled in Beaver College.

ACT II:

**The Show Goes On**

While at Beaver, Daddy’s little girl saw a performance by Anna Pavlova, the esteemed Russian ballet dancer. Dorothy knew then that she “had to be a ballet dancer.” The following summer, Father Young took the family to New York, helped the two older girls get summer jobs, and enrolled 16-year-old Dorothy in a ballet school. She read in the show biz bible, Variety, that Earl Carroll wanted showgirls for his “Vanities,” a much-publicized, handsomely staged musical girlie show of the time. Dorothy wanted to sign up. Father’s reaction was predictably to the point: “No.”

A year later, again back in New York City with her parents, she read in Variety: “Girl dancer wanted for Broadway show and tour of the United States.” Tryouts were at the Longacre Theatre at 48th Street and Broadway.

Dorothy Young hastened to the Longacre, arriving just in time to be about 200th in line. After many hours, she stepped onto a nearly empty stage, and broke into a lively Charleston. Two men in the orchestra seats, Harry Houdini and his manager, “Mr. Smith,” asked Dorothy to join them, and Houdini wasted no words: “We like you. We want you in the show.”

Dorothy, too young to sign, nevertheless signed. She was on her way to stardom.

She rejoined her parents at the hotel, bursting through the door exclaiming, “I’m going to dance on Broadway!”

“No,” replied Father Young. “You are not going to dance on Broadway! You are going home to Otisville with us.”
and soon was expecting a child. A very difficult childbirth left her weak and depressed but with a healthy infant son, Bob.

Fate changed the plot once more in the person of the then-famous actor, Richard Bennett—whose daughters, Joan and Constance, became even more famous in the emerging motion picture industry. Bennett heard Dorothy’s doctor say she needed something to get her mind off her problems and spoke up: “I’m casting for my new show opening in September. There is a part in it for ‘Dots.’” She jumped at the idea and became “Sally” in Bennett’s play, Jarnegan, at the Longacre Theatre—on the very stage where she had met Houdini.

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**ACT III:**

**The Dance Begins**

With her husband frequently on assignment, Dorothy needed help to accept Bennett’s offer. She bought a house in Allenhurst at the Jersey Shore and her mother came to live with her and young Bob, freeing Dorothy for her Broadway role. But the Broadway run ended and went on the road, and Dorothy could not possibly join the company. Thus, another closing, another farewell, another party on the Longacre Theatre stage—and another dramatic turn for Dorothy’s life.

A friend had brought a man to Dorothy’s party, a tall, lithe, smooth businessman named Gilbert Kiamie. They danced, a study in contrast, tall, dark Gilbert and petite, fair Dorothy. Unknowingly, they had taken the first steps on a long, winding road that would lead after more than 70 years to the Dorothy Young Center for the Arts.

Richard Bennett urged the couple to form a dance team, citing the excitement they stirred on the floor in the pairing of opposites. There were obstacles: Dorothy was married with a son, and Gilbert was involved in a floundering silk lingerie business that his late father had started.

Kiamie promised that the team would never be away from home for more than two weeks, a promise fulfilled until the death of Dorothy’s husband after 13 years of marriage. Off went the scintillating team, entertaining at the best clubs and other venues in the East, with
an occasional trip on cruise ships to Cuba and South America. They danced to classical tunes, but after one short trip to the Caribbean, they perfected their own Latin dance, the rumbaltero, which became wildly popular in the United States. "Gilbert was a real ham and he loved adoration," she recalled.

Dorothy appeared in several early motion pictures, many of which were filmed at a studio on Long Island. She often danced for other actresses and appeared in dance scenes in the early Fred Astaire musical comedy, Flying Down to Rio. Later, Dorothy's own novel, Dancing on a Dome, was also made into a movie.

World War II ended dance touring. Gilbert enlisted in the Army and, a few years after Robert's death, Gilbert and Dorothy reunited and were married in 1943.

ACT IV: PATRON OF THE ARTS

Peace brought two sweeping changes. First, when Gilbert and his three brothers inherited relatively small sums from their uncle, they considered opening a string of dance instruction studios. Dorothy demurred: "It would not have made a man of Gilbert." She urged him to put his legacy into the family's silk lingerie business. One-time playboy Kiamie won Dorothy's praise as "a very astute businessman." The Kiamies amassed a large fortune in real estate and stocks.

Shortly after the war, Gilbert and Dorothy moved to Pelham, N.Y. With Gilbert engrossed in his business, Dorothy welcomed a neighbor's invitation to take an art lesson from "a wonderful Frenchwoman." Dorothy enjoyed the first lesson—and all of the lessons that followed for the next 15 years.

After about 30 years of painting, Dorothy was invited to join the prestigious Fifty American Artists, whose honorary members include Winston Churchill and Dwight D. Eisenhower. At Drew, 30 of Dorothy's portraits, still lifes, and seascapes hang in University buildings. Probably best known is the portrait of her brother.

Dorothy credits her lifelong interest in philanthropy to her father's decidedly nonprofit mountain sanatorium venture and another significant Ocean Grove project founded by her father when she was 2. The latter was a cozy seaside resort called the Elim (Haven), after the desert oasis found by Moses and his people, available without charge to Methodist ministers and their families for annual pleasant summer sojourns in the healthful sea air. The entire Young family also spent summers at the Elim.

Dorothy's love for Ocean Grove never dimmed. She spent many wonderful times with Auntie Norton, who owned the house Dorothy now lives in. "She was the only one that I would ever visit as a child," Dorothy recalled. When Auntie Norton died, Dorothy bought the house, which she and Gilbert remodeled to be their weekend and summer home.

After Gilbert's death in 1992, Dorothy moved permanently to Ocean Grove. She calls it "the best decision I ever made in my life. I am so happy here." She demonstrates this in her charitable endeavors, her weekly attendance and support of St. Paul's Church, her 30-year membership on the board of the mental health facility at Fitkin Hospital, and in the Women's Club, Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Order of the Eastern Star.

Through all of that activity and effort, she has remained constant to Drew University. Its handsome campus became familiar to Dorothy over a period of more than 70 years, starting with family celebrations when brother Sherman received his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1928 and subsequent masters and doctorate degrees.

Gilbert and Dorothy Kiamie visited the campus often during the presidency of Robert Fisher Oxnard and accelerated the visits when Paul Hardin succeeded Oxnard. The Kiamies were contributors to the largely student-funded Sherman Plato Young Scholarship at Drew, and a prior contribution of $600,000 will endow the Dorothy Young Scholarship in the Arts.

Following his death, Gilbert N. Kiamie's Charitable Trust was administered by Dorothy, her grandson, James C. Perkins, and her great-grandson, James E. Perkins. After several years of court proceedings, trust money was freed for Dorothy's stunning gift of more than $13 million to build the Arts Center. It is the largest gift in Drew University history. Dorothy credits her great-grandson, "I couldn't have accomplished this without him," and President Tom Kean for his key role in facilitating the gift.

When Dorothy's narration of her life was finished, I needed to come back to Houdini and ask about his incredible escape from the Water Torture Cell, the finale of the Houdini show that opened with Dorothy, the Radio Girl of 1950. Although she saw Houdini escape, night after night, the act was shrouded in secrecy. Did Dorothy know the secret? "Of course," she responded. "Would she tell it to me?"

She waited a few seconds, as an actress with good timing should, then smiled and said, "I am sworn to secrecy."