

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Juanita Hall

November 6, 1901 – February 28, 1968

First African-American Tony Award Winner



Juanita (Long) Hall was born on November 6, 1901, in Keyport, New Jersey to an African-American father, Abram Long, a farm laborer and an Irish-American mother, Mary Richardson. Juanita's mother died when she was an infant and she was raised primarily by her grandmother, who encouraged her interest in music. As a child, Juanita sang in the church choir and became fascinated with the old Negro spirituals she heard at revival meetings. Juanita knew then that she would pursue a career as a singer. At the age of 14, Juanita began teaching Singing at Lincoln House in East Orange, NJ. A few years later, she married actor Clement Hall, however the marriage didn't last long and they had no children. Clement Hall died in the 1920's. Juanita went on to attend New York's Julliard School of Music and studied Orchestration, Harmony, Music Theory and Voice.

While teaching music, Juanita had small stage roles and worked with the Hall Johnson Choir, becoming a soloist and serving as assistant director until she formed her own choral group, The Juanita Hall Choir, in 1936. Her choir operated for five years and gave more than 5,000 performances, including radio appearances three times a week. Her choir also performed at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City.

Juanita performed in several stage productions, but her breakthrough in musical theater came when she appeared in an annual talent show called "Talent 48." There, the songwriting team of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, who were in the process of writing the play, *South Pacific*, heard Juanita sing. Her high spirited, graceful and mischievous nature won her the part of "Bloody Mary," an Asian woman who sells souvenirs on a Pacific island where U.S. naval personnel are stationed during World War II. Her opening night's performance on April 7, 1949 at the Majestic Theater in New York was called a "masterpiece." Juanita played "Bloody Mary" for over 1,900 stage performances of *South Pacific* and many of its songs, including "Bali Hai," sung by Juanita, became internationally known.

South Pacific won the Pulitzer Prize for drama and nine Tony awards. In 1950 Juanita Hall became the first African American to win a Tony Award when she was named Best Supporting Actress for her role in *South Pacific*.

Juanita Hall and the role of "Bloody Mary" was so synonymous that the Post Office delivered letters to her addressed "'Bloody Mary, N.Y.C.'" When *South Pacific* was made into a film in 1958, Juanita again played Bloody Mary. However, her songs for the film were dubbed by Muriel Smith, who had played the role in a London production.

In 1958 she recorded *Juanita Hall Sings the Blues*, backed by an impressive group of jazz musicians including Claude Hopkins, Coleman Hawkins, Buster Bailey, Doc Cheatham and George Duvivier.

The same year, Juanita starred in another Rodgers & Hammerstein Broadway show, *Flower Drum Song*.

Affected by diabetes with failing eyesight and health, Hall performed in *A Woman and the Blues*, featuring her nightclub and Broadway acts in 1966. Her condition led the Actors Fund of America to stage a benefit performance on her behalf in 1967. A year later, on February 28, 1968 Juanita Hall died in Bay Shore, Long Island.

