



Boston, MA. Vanessa James, Set, costume, and lighting designer for theater, opera, art director for film and television, performance artist, author of *The Genealogy of Greek Mythology* and *Shakespeare's Genealogies*, and educator, died on September 1 at Mass Gen Brigham Hospital unexpectedly after a short illness. She was 80.

James is known for her witty, elegant, and historically accurate designs in paper, plastic, tape, and other pop and traditional materials. She created magical and beautiful decors often in collaboration with her husband, director Donald T. Sanders, at major New York theaters and cultural sites, as well as for major movies and TV. Theater productions included Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater, La Mama and the Signature and Duke Theaters as well as for site specific venues including New York's Port Authority Bus Terminal, the George Washington Bridge, Pelham Bay Park, The Metropolitan and Cooper Hewitt museums and New York City historic houses such as The Old Merchants House (*Old New York, False Dawn*) and places of architectural interest as well as international festivals.

James lived in New York City, at Holland Farm in Belchertown, MA, and Belair in Newport, RI. James was also a painter and worked in woolen needlepoint. She was noted for her championship of a postmodern, multi-style point of view, anything good from any era.

When she left London in 1968 for New York, the Times of London bemoaned her loss as an example of the drain of major England's talent to the States. Within a year of USA arrival, she was one of the first women to qualify for United Scenic Artists membership in all major categories and became a member of United Scenic Artists IATSE. Her final work for theater was seen as recently as the last week of August with the rapturously received *Play With Time*, starring Rosalba Rolon and John Hellweg with the music of Philip Glass at the Tanglewood TLI Festival in Lenox, MA.

Her notable movie Art Direction and scenic artist work includes *Brand X*, *Ragtime*, *Sophie's Choice*, *King of Comedy*, and the TV series *Sesame Street*, *Chiefs*, *I'll Take Manhattan*, and *Evergreen*, as well as the yet-to-be-released National Geographic, *A History of the White House*. Her work received three Emmy Award nominations. After seeing an exhibition of her work at The Ronald Feldman Gallery, Diana Vreeland chose examples for The Metropolitan Museum Costume Collection. Her work was also exhibited by Independent Curators International (ICI) and was covered extensively in the NY Times in articles and reviews and photographed by Bill Cunningham.

"I try to do visually what Oscar Wilde does with words", she said to Times writer Stephen Holden. Art critics Grace Glueck and John Russell covered her artistic place in theater and performance.

About Vanessa James continued

Her Theater Productions were often adaptations of novels or stories such as *The Owl Story*, *Naked Lunch* and *Edith Wharton's Old New York, New Year's Day* (all at the Public Theater) or

The Torrents of Spring and *The Basil and Josephine Stories* and *Gods and Goddesses*, *Bullfinch's Mythology* (New York Art Theatre) which gave them the fantastical, enchanting quality of living movies. Or they were memorable visual original performance art pieces such as *33 Scenes on the Possibility of Human Happiness*, a postmodern fete d' champetre and *Thomas Cole, a Waking Dream* (both at New Jazz at the Public Theater) with scores by Henry Threadgill or new plays like *The American Pig, an anti-imperialist Vaudeville* (The Public); *The Party* by Arnold Weinstein (St Clements, NYATI); *Van Gogh's Ear* by Eve Wolf (Signature Theatre) and *George Sand and Frederick Chopin, A Winter in Majorca* by James Melo (Tuscan Sun Festival with Jeremy Irons and Sinead Cusack) both for New York's ERC/Ensemble for the Romantic Century of which she has been resident designer since 2004. Her designs constitute a unique body of work in American contemporary theater. Taken as a whole, her theatrical creations, particularly with Sanders, were more than decorations; they were a kind of theater itself, and her work celebrated the timeless importance of the decorative and fine arts.

Among her many accomplishments was a fanciful 1984 satirical New York Art Theatre Ball at the New York Academy of Design, which featured a white foam rubber ball gown which she designed for patron Christophe De Menil, for whom she also designed a jewelry collection. She was the lead coordinating artist/set designer for *The Red Robins*, a play by American poet Kenneth Koch featuring sets by Roy Lichtenstein, Alex Katz, and Red Grooms.

She designed two extravaganzas for the original Studio 54. Her much-praised Paul Echols-directed revival of *Four Saints in Three Acts* was an homage to her hero, Florine Stettheimer. She was an early member of the Youth Theatre of Great Britain, starring in *The Duchess of Malfi* with Michael York. She was the designer for Kristin Linklater, *The Company of Women*, and a special consultant for the restoration of the Victory Theatre in Holyoke, MA, the last remaining Broadway-sized theater in the Connecticut River Valley.

James was born in London to Pauline Horn Rolfe James and Alfred Victor James. She attended Croydon High School for Girls, the Wimbledon School of Art, and the University of Bristol. She taught at many schools, including Vassar, CUNY Buffalo, the Fashion Institute of Technology, and Columbia College Chicago. She was a guest artist and a tenured faculty member at Mount Holyoke College, where her course on 20th Century Fashion was the largest and most popular on campus. At the time of her death, she was working on the completion of a third book, *The Genealogy of the Monarchies of Western Europe, 1000 to the Present*.

She is survived by her husband of 57 years, Donald T. Sanders, their son, Valentine James Sanders, a cousin, Geraldine James, sisters and brothers-in-law, Judith and John Sheridan, Regina and David Haines, and niece and nephew, Anna and Guido Guidotti.

Amei Wallach of New York Newsday wrote of her work. "It's social commentary, invention, drama, aesthetics, a joke-everything".

A memorial for Vanessa will be held in the spring of 2026.