

Janice Kingslow

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Emma Janice Kingslow (born August 5, 1924) was a native of Tazewell, Virginia, but spent most of her life in Chicago. She participated in various theater projects while growing up, including school plays and writing, directing and acting in children's plays – even winning best actress in an original play twice in city-wide competitions. Her first taste of radio acting came at age 12, when she played the role of Booker T. Washington as a young boy on WENR.

Upon graduating from Chicago's Hyde Park High School, she attended Woodrow Wilson Junior College and then Chicago Teachers College with the intention of becoming a teacher. Her involvement in drama during that time was limited to writing and producing puppet shows for the community. In 1945 during her senior year, however, singer Etta Morten convinced her to try out for an understudy role for the lead character in the hit Broadway play *Anna Lucasta*, then headed for Chicago. She landed the role and dropped out of school to pursue an acting career. A year later, she took over the lead role from Hilda Simms and after the play's close in Chicago, moved to New York.

Despite a promising start, success was fleeting. She struggled to find work, as she was considered too light-skinned to play the few roles available to Black actors and entirely dismissed from any roles for white performers. To make matters worse, her mother's health was failing, and Kingslow didn't have the money to make sure she was taken care of.

While in a casting office in New York, she was approached by a representative from one of the major Hollywood studios. He had seen her in *Anna Lucasta* and thought she had a "real future in Hollywood." This was what she had been dreaming of since childhood and meant she would have had the money that could possibly save her mother's life. A long-term contract was on the table, but there was a catch: she would have to change her name and her race. She refused, later writing in *Negro Digest*, "What good was fame or money if I lost myself? This wasn't just a question of choosing a pleasant-sounding false name to fit on a theatre marquee. This meant stripping my life clear of everything that I was. Everything that had ever happened to me."

Kingslow returned to Chicago in 1947 and landed a main role on Richard Durham's *Here Comes Tomorrow*, a radio soap opera featuring a Black cast. Upon that show's conclusion Kingslow was immediately cast in Durham's follow-up series, *Destination Freedom*. After that ended in 1950, she continued to pursue acting roles, but with little success. Her once promising career dried up.

While she continued to seek acting jobs, to make ends meet she worked first as the public relations director at Provident Hospital and later as an assistant program director with NBC Radio in Chicago. However, the stresses of her personal and professional life became too much for her to bear, and in 1955 she was committed to Manteno State Hospital, described as "catatonic and out of touch with reality."

After years in the hospital and more years of slow recovery, Kingslow – Janice Kingslow Gilbert after her marriage – began working with individuals with mental illness. She was even recognized in the *Chicago Tribune* for her therapeutic work. Kingslow died at the age of 59 on March 6, 1984, in Chicago.

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