

**ISABELLE  
ELLEN  
RONAN  
1887-1980**



**TEACHER  
WITH AN  
EYE FOR  
TALENT**

Tulsa's Central High School in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was known for its superior theater and drama department, led by a gifted and talented teacher named Isabelle Ronan, who had a knack for recognizing students with theatrical talent and a desire to perform. During her career, she helped students find success in radio, broadcasting and television careers.

Isabelle Ellen Ronan was born in Michigan in 1887. She performed in plays at Michigan State Normal College, graduating in 1910. She earned a Masters from the University of Wisconsin a few years later. In her free time, at her own expense, she registered for acting and voice lessons at schools in New York, Chicago and Texas – hoping to pass on new techniques to promising students. A woman of modest means, she would never marry and wore the same simple and plain wardrobe year after year. Instead, she invested in her students.

Isabelle Ronan was not a famous person, but she made a giant contribution to broadcasting in 1933. Ronan had heard plenty of promising voices and crossed paths with hundreds of talented thespians, but there was something different about Paul Auranndt's inflection and unique style of elocution. She took the 14-year-old student to the studios of KVOO Radio and told the station's news director "this young man needs to be on the radio." The career of Paul Harvey was born that day, and, as he might say, "the rest of the story" is broadcasting history. He became the most listened-to radio personality in America, with his daily programs heard by 24 million listeners weekly.

In 1937 a student of Ronan's named Arthur Rosenberg graduated, having already picked out his stage name – Tony Randall. He attended Northwestern University for a year before transferring to the Neighborhood School of the Theater in New York City, where he started using his stage name, which he said was more "actorish". He debuted on Broadway just four years later.

Ironically, Randall's start in acting came as a result of a chance pairing with another famous Tulsa-born actor. When David O. Selznick started Phillis Isley on her way to becoming Jennifer Jones, he sent her to a drama teacher who also coached Randall. The teacher needed a man to work opposite Jennifer and offered Tony the job. "Imagine, being paid to take lessons with Jennifer Jones!" Other Ronan students included Search for Tomorrow's Mary Stuart, voiceover artist Danny Dark, famous for Starkist and Budweiser commercials, NBC producer Wade Arnold and humorist Cal Tenny. She had an incredible knack for identifying each student's unique gift and giving them the freedom to perfect it.

Ronan's 1936 Easter Pageant became an institution in Tulsa, with 300 people participating from ages 2 to 67 in seventeen scenes from the life of Christ. One couple performed together for fifteen years! It was staged for 200 people at Woodward Park but would eventually draw 80,000 to Skelly Stadium. From the 1930s to 1950s she had her students perform on KVOO and KOME's "Experimental Theater of the Air", where they performed their own comedy and drama shows, as well as music.

Isabelle Ronan retired in 1953, after a final curtain call for her direction of "The Last Christopher Bean". Former student Ralph Blane, best known for his MGM musical hits "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" and The Trolley Song from "Meet Me in St. Louis", performed a special song he composed in honor of Miss Ronan, sung to the tune "Thanks for the Memories". She returned to her hometown of Marshall, Michigan, where she died in May 1980 at age 92. Her students would often say she made things happen – for other people – often at her own expense. Her retirement marked the passing of a golden era at Central High School.