Uta Who? If You Don't Know, It's Time to Find Out

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ON THE TOWNS

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

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COME to the cafe at the George Street Playhouse here, and consider the walls. Only a theater historian or a critic of cut-and-dried photographic art could summon the objectivity to describe an assembled by happenstance and inspired by reverence. Don't expect a rational statement from an ardent longtime theatergoer. It didn't take a curator to coordinate the pictures and the posters, which could be called two one-woman walls of fame, with fabulous supporting casts. It is scrapbook art from a life in and devoted to theater. The whole display is quite random, but real, nonegative, and nothing less than breath-taking.

David Saint, the theater's artistic director, is the accidental curator. On a recent afternoon, he was visiting the veteran actress Uta Hagen in her apartment in Greenwich Village. If you're thinking "Uta who?" drop the newspaper and book fiches for a matinee or evening performance of "Collected Stories," but fast.

Mr. Saint saw the collected pictures — production shots, publicity stills, program covers — reflecting Miss Hagen's career of more than 80 years, he had forgotten her as a sort of folkloric exhibit for display. Even the benevolent taskmaster, she said, "Sure, as long as you frame it." The joy of seeing the cafe's chance picture show is that its photographs of shows, here and gone, there and back, real, live Uta Hagen, being — no, not acting — Ruth, the writer and professor in Donald Margulies' play. To one who attended the Off Broadway production, which was essentially the same as George Street's, once is not enough. The sooner you see "Collected Stories" here, the sooner you can see it again.

Mr. Margulies' even-handed play begins with a tutorial in the apartment of Ruth, an unassuming Christian. Her husband, Uta Hagen, was a writer. He is no, not acting — Mr. Margulies' "independent" actress, with a moral name. "But I want to be thought of as an actress," she said. "I am an actress, and I have a career to be proud of." She is, in fact, the author of "Respect for Acting," a collection of essays titled "The Common Sense of Aging," and "A Challenge for the Actor" (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991). The first book, which she discovered in a bookstore, she said, is about her preferred revision, which is not selling.

Ms. Hagen was out-of-town by the marketing of "Comparatively Applied Creative Writing," when it played at the Lucinda Theater, from July to October, in 1993. "It was a big breakthrough," she said. "The word of mouth was great, but I had a running battle with the producers, who weren't promoting the show as an event." The advertisements were chancy and unsightly, she recalled. "We could still be playing," she said, "but we were dumped." One of the producers, Leonard Soloway, said "Collected Stories" had "lost half its investment." "The George Street promotion is twice as good as Off Broadway's, and the program cover is stunning," she added. "I am grateful for another chance to play this role." The George Street program credits the four Off Broadway producers because Ms. Hagen, said the original, "designed it as a triptych," and "wrote the script and reconfigured from a proseema for a stage play."

At last Sunday evening's performance, the theater was about 70 percent filled. At the end, the audience roared as no other in this theatergoer's 17 years of attending George Street Productions. And mind you, this was not opening night, where cheering sections and claqueurs are de rigueur.

For all that, many ticket-holders who don't ask "Uta who?" are referring to Ms. Hagen as "Uma whatever." "People don't know who she is," one first-timer remarked, also citing a capacity estimate of 70 percent on press night, April 2.

For the record, she played Ophelia to Eva Le Gallienne's "Hamlet" in 1957 and Desdemona to Paul Robeson's "Othello," with José Ferrer, her first husband, as Iago, in 1933. And Blanche Dubois and George Elgin and Martha. She replaced Jessica Tandy in the original Broadway production of "A Streetcar Named Desire" in 1929 and was the original star of "The Country Girl" in 1851 and of Martha in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" on Broadway in 1962.

Among the pictures in the cafe, perhaps the most resonant is of Ms. Hagen in "The Sea Gull" (1938), her Broadway debut with the Lunts. It is inscribed: "We're watching your - with love and good wishes, Lynn and Alfred." Yes, she taped a cameo appearance in the HBO drama series "Of Mice and Men," last week, the character "24 Points Down," she said. "It was a day's work. I took the money and ran." But her chief credit in the bio released by HBO is the film "Reversal of Fortune," in which she played a supporting role. "In 1984 or 1987 or 1988," she barely recalls. Talk about cultural dumbing-down, slow-burn values.

Although business at George Street is good — subscription and single-ticket sales are up — and the buzz about Ms. Hagen is spreading, "we're shocked that we're not sold out," Mr. Saint said. "Are the people not here, or have they not found out?"

It's not that Ms. Hagen needed time to impress critics when she opened "Collective Stories" Off Broadway; her performance was summed up as the theater event of 1928. "She's the only actor I've ever seen who loves to keep on in a role," Mr. Saint continued. "Most want out in three months, she if you're lucky. She says that she doesn't hit her stride until six months or a year. Such artists just don't exist anymore."

In fact, she plans to conduct a class on "sustaining long runs. "Don't be better now than I was last summer?" Ms. Hagen asked. "We're making it happen as if it never happened before." She said of herself and Ms. Simon.

Mr. Hagen added: "It's all about living with it. Its performance changes every night. The high points are in different places. It's totally alive," he added, having seen her play Ruth by his actual count, 24 times. "The work is never done," she said.

Mr. Saint continued: "This is what real theater is about. This is it. She is it."

And it is magic.

An actress beyond adjectives: Uta Hagen in "Collected Stories" at the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick.

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