Uta Hagen, the formidable and wide-ranging stage actress who electrified audiences with her Tony Award-winning performance as the ferocious, tart-tongued Martha in the original Broadway production of Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" in 1962, died yesterday at her home in Manhattan, her daughter, Leticia Ferrer, said. She was 84.

Over seven decades, Ms. Hagen acted in Shakespeare, Chekhov and Shaw, as well as in plays by Mr. Albee and Tennessee Williams. With her husband Herbert Berghof (who died in 1990), she ran the HB Studios in Manhattan and was celebrated not only as an actress but also as a teacher of acting and author of books on the subject. She continued to teach after a stroke and until several months before her death. Occasionally she appeared in films and on television, but principally her life was onstage, and it was there that she was able to incarnate the widest diversity of characters.

Ms. Hagen made her professional debut in 1937 playing Ophelia to Eva Le Gallienne's Hamlet, and was acclaimed for her Nina (in "The Seagull"), Desdemona (opposite Paul Robeson's Othello), Shaw's St. Joan, Blanche DuBois in "A Streetcar Named Desire" and as the title character in "The Country Girl" by Clifford Odets. Mr. Albee's Martha became her signature role.

It was a long journey from Ophelia to Martha, but one that she traveled with an unmatched authority and an intuitive sense of character. Whether she was playing a saint or a termagant, she anchored each role with a firm base in reality. Despite her onstage strength, she said she always considered herself "a vulnerable actress." Once asked what qualities an actress needed to play Martha, Ms. Hagen said, "Intelligence, voluptuousness and hypersensitivity," and then added, "wit" -- all of which she had in abundance.

In a recent interview, Mr. Albee recalled her "extraordinary performances as Desdemona in 'Othello' and Martha in 'Virginia Woolf,'" and praised Ms. Hagen first as "a profoundly truthful actress" and then as "a dedicated and demanding teacher."

"I should add," he said, "she was a great anti-hypocrite, and a superb cook -- not a bad friend to have."

In 1999, she called her whole goal as an actress "the spontaneity that comes without planning." Whenever possible, she uncovered the drama behind the comedy -- or the comedy behind the drama. As she said, "Somebody with wit and a sense of humor sees the most tragic event without the sentimentiality, sees in any life experience something ludicrous -- which is probably why Chekhov is my favorite."

She believed a performance should change in the course of the run, depending on the identity of the other actors, the audience response and the actress's mood and temperament. She played Blanche opposite Marlon Brando, Anthony Quinn (her favorite), Ralph Meeker, Richard Kiley and Jack Palance. "If you go on with another actor and your performance doesn't change, you're a bad actor."
In contrast to many other actors, she loved long runs: "After a couple of months," she said, "it really starts to get in my bones." On keeping a part alive, she called Laurette Taylor her guide. She saw her play Amanda in "The Glass Menagerie" 10 times, saying, "Ten different exciting performances -- to me, that is the magic of the theater."

Uta Hagen was born in Göttingen, Germany, on June 12, 1919. Her father named her after a 13th-century statue he saw in a Nuremberg cathedral. When Uta was 7, the family moved to Madison, Wis., where her father was head of the department of art history at the University of Wisconsin (her mother was an opera singer). From the age of 6, when she saw Elisabeth Bergner play Shaw's "St. Joan" in Berlin, she wanted to be an actress. She studied briefly at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, and at the University of Wisconsin, and left college -- and left home -- to pursue an acting career.

In 1937, Le Gallienne was preparing to play Hamlet in a production in Dennis, Mass., and was having difficulty finding an Ophelia. Ms. Hagen sent a letter requesting an audition. As Le Gallienne recalled in her autobiography, her impulse was to refuse, but something in the letter encouraged her to invite the young actress to audition.

"She was very young -- only just 17 -- a tall, rather gawky creature, by no means pretty, but with a face that one remembered," Le Gallienne wrote, adding she had "the shy ungainly grace of a young colt." For her audition, Ms. Hagen acted the end of the trial scene from "St. Joan," "quite badly," Le Gallienne said, "and yet I sensed in her an inner truth that very occasionally filtered through in a word or a look." She told her to go and think about the role and return in an hour.

"The improvement was startling," Le Gallienne said, "The truth that had glimmered so faintly in the first reading now blazed up strongly, and the overall effect was strangely moving." She cast her.

In the dress rehearsal, she said, "the sacred fire struck, and the child Uta was transported to a region which I well knew she would not set foot in again for many years to come." And so, just 18, Ms. Hagen made her professional debut as Ophelia, an Ophelia that was several inches taller than Hamlet.

She then joined Le Gallienne's theater company, which was preparing a production of "The Seagull." The director was playing the role of Nina, with Ms. Hagen as her understudy. That production never came to fruition, but soon Ms. Hagen heard that Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne were about to do it on Broadway.

At the audition, Lunt told her to do something simple, not classical and nothing from "The Seagull." She had planned to do the last scene from "A Doll's House," but at the last minute decided to do Nina anyway. "I played the whole last scene as Nina alone, without a Konstantin present," she recalled, "and I came offstage in a daze." As she headed out the stage door, she was called back, and Lunt (who was playing Trigorin) rehearsed with her long into the night, and then told her she had the part. Ms. Hagen's Broadway debut came the next year as Nina in Lunt and Fontanne's "Seagull." In his review in The New York Times, Brooks Atkinson singled her out for praise as "grace and aspiration incarnate."

That summer, working in Ridgefield, Conn., she acted in "The Latitude of Love," opposite Jose Ferrer. In the course of the play, she was required to knock him down. Several months later they were married. During their 10-year marriage, they appeared together in several plays, including "Angel Street."

Ms. Hagen is survived by her daughter, Leticia, known as Lettie, of New York City; a granddaughter; and a great-granddaughter.

Ms. Hagen said she considered the period between 1938 and 1947 as "the transitional years of my career, during which I lost my way and a love of acting until I finally regained it to begin a true life in the theater." During that time, she acted in seven Broadway plays, including "Key Largo" (with Paul Muni) and "Othello" (with Robeson as Othello and Ferrer as Iago). The turning point, she said, was in 1947 when Harold Clurman directed her in "The Whole World Over." The play was forgettable, but she greatly admired Clurman as a director and teacher, and it was in that play that she met Berghof, who replaced another actor in the company.

Having divorced Ferrer, she married Berghof and the two dedicated themselves to teaching actors in their HB Studio, on Bank Street in Greenwich Village. In subsequent years, teaching young actors became as important to her as her own acting. In one of her books, "A Challenge for the Actor," she disagreed with Shaw's pronunciation "He who can does. He who cannot teaches." For her, "Only he who can should teach."

In 1948, she led the national company of "A Streetcar Named Desire" and then followed Jessica Tandy in the role on Broadway. In 1950 she played the title role in "The Country Girl." For that performance, she won her first Tony.

In 1950, she finally played St. Joan, in Margaret Webster's production. Always outspoken about politics and human rights, Ms. Hagen was blacklisted in the 1950's, and, she said, "that fact kept me pure." Unable to work in the movies or on television or to tour plays through the United States, she continued to focus her attentions on New York theater. She was a member of the Phoenix Theater, but her acting became more sporadic.

Then, in 1962, the call came to return to the stage. The producer Richard Barr and his partners were bringing a new play by a new playwright to Broadway, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" by Edward Albee, and they were searching for an actress to play the central role. Ms. Hagen read the play between classes and it so gripped her that she taught her final class, she said, "in a
daze." Immediately she agreed to do it, and when she met the playwright she told him the play was "like a great modern Bosch canvas."

In the play a faculty couple, George and Martha (Arthur Hill and Ms. Hagen) engage in a long night of mutual abuse -- and revelation. Ms. Hagen's performance galvanized the play. "Virginia Woolf" was a turning point for the actress and for Mr. Albee. The play received five Tonys, including awards for both Ms. Hagen and Mr. Hill. In 1964, they both did the play in London.

In the years that followed, Ms. Hagen occasionally ventured back into theater. In 1968, she played Mme. Ranevskaya in Le Gallienne's A.P.A. "Cherry Orchard." Later she did Peter Hacks's "Charlotte" (in which she played Goethe's mistress), Shaw's "You Never Can Tell" and "Mrs. Warren's Profession," Nicholas Wright's "Mrs. Klein" and, in 1998, Donald Margulies's "Collected Stories."

After playing Martha on Broadway and London and making a recording with the original cast, she did not return to the role -- until 1999.

In a single performance for the benefit of the HB Playwrights Foundation, she played Martha once more in a staged reading on Broadway. Jonathan Pryce played George and Matthew Broderick and Mia Farrow were the couple's two guests.

At 80, she was aware of the pitfalls. "It's a terrible risk for me," she said. "I'm 28 years too old for the part. I was 42 when I played it. Martha's supposed to be 52. People have such incredible memories of my performance. I don't see how anybody could possibly live up to it, certainly not me, almost 40 years later."

But once she came onstage, and said Martha's first line: "Jesus H. Christ," followed by her imitation of Bette Davis saying "What a dump," and as she pitched into verbal battle with her husband, the intervening years passed in a cloud.

URL: http://www.nytimes.com

CORRECTION-DATE: January 29, 2004

CORRECTION:

An obituary of the Broadway actress and drama teacher Uta Hagen on Jan. 15 misidentified the German city where the cathedral is the site of a statue for which she was named. It is Naumburg, not Nuremberg.

GRAPHIC: Photos: Uta Hagen as Martha in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" in 1963. (Photo by Photofest); As Desdemona in 1944, left, and in the title role in "St. Joan" in 1951. (Photo by Vandamm Studio); (Photo by Talbot-Giles)

LOAD-DATE: January 15, 2004