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NEW YORK

FEBRUARY 26–MARCH 10, 2024

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ON THE COVER: Abdou, a 24-year-old from Senegal, waiting outside St. Brigid to renew his stay at a city shelter. Photograph by Philip-Daniel Ducasse for *New York Magazine*. THIS PAGE: Jessica Lange. Photograph by Mark Seliger for *New York Magazine*.



The CULTURE PAGES

IT'S THEATER SEASON

INSIDE:

Amy Herzog
and Sam Gold

Victor Cazares

Stereophonic

Made for Her
Jessica Lange's
haunting role in
Mother Play, like so
much of her work,
is one only she
could perform.

BY MATT ZOLLER SEITZ

Photograph by Mark Seliger

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SITTING IN A CHAIR next to a window in a break room at the Hayes Theater, where she's rehearsing *Mother Play*, the new work by Paula Vogel (*How I Learned to Drive*), Jessica Lange has a regal presence and a storybook narrator's voice. There's a subdued gravitas to the way she tells her own tale: She was a hippie intellectual from rural Minnesota who went off to Paris and New York to study mime and dance and figure herself out. Despite having no money, no industry connections, and almost no formal training as an actress, she landed the lead role of Dwan in the 1976 *King Kong*, played her as a daffy sexpot, made the cover of *Time*, and got pilloried by critics. She's still brutal on herself and her work, delivering the sorts of scathing assessments you would expect to hear from the many fearsome women she has played over the past half-century. She also keeps challenging herself, even though, at 74, she has nothing to prove.

Were you apprehensive about being on Broadway for the first time in 1992, when you did *A Streetcar Named Desire* with Alec Baldwin as Stanley?

Oh, I should have been. I should have thought about this a lot instead of saying "yes" to Blanche DuBois. I mean, I really opened myself up to being crucified. I know I should never say this, but I didn't have the kind of director I needed for my first time onstage in a big Broadway theater in something like that. I needed a lot of help, even in terms of understanding what it means to project beyond the footlights.

What do you get from stage acting that you can't get from movies?

The main thing for me is that moment when you step onstage and it's like you've boarded a train and it's going to go, no matter what. There are no stops. And that is thrilling. I just wish I had been better prepared for the experience of playing Blanche. I knew I could play her, but when I signed up, there was a lot I didn't understand about theater at the time. I pretty much drove myself mad because there was no separation. Blanche was there all the time.

"There," meaning inside your head? Yeah, through the whole thing, long after the run ended.

Tell me about *Mother Play*, which is built around a series of five evictions.

Part of the reason I immediately agreed to do this play, besides being knocked out by it, was the idea of doing a new play. Nobody had ever presented me with that possibility before—to actually create the character. That whole process is fascinating because we're still making adjustments, which of course you don't do

with Eugene O'Neill! It's a moveable feast. Also, the idea of playing a character who ages from her 30s to 80 was incredibly interesting because it's not the same as doing something on film where they put on makeup. When I did the older version of Edith Beale in HBO's *Grey Gardens* in 2009, I spent four hours in the morning with people pasting on all these prosthetics to make me look like I was 78 years old or something. How do you bring a character from 30 to 80 onstage? With the spirit or the energy level? And externally, with the voice, the body language?

How do you play somebody in their 30s? Talk faster?

I think there would be a completely different energy to it, and maybe you'd even [*she raises the pitch of her voice to make it girlish*] move it into a head voice, rather than [*throatily, scratchily*] drop it way down from years of sorrow.

Are they going to do anything with lighting or sound to convey the passage of time?

Without giving too much away, yeah, there will be cinematic properties to it.

In your career, would you say you have been selective in what you chose to act in?

I wish I'd been *more* selective. The only regrets I have are having said "yes" to things when I should have known better. But you talk yourself into it because you haven't worked in two years or something. Or you think, *I can do something with this. I can make something of this part.* And then down the line, you think, *I shouldn't have bothered; it was a waste of time.* When I look back, I've done, what, maybe 35 films? There are probably only a third

of those that I feel really great about.

Which films are in the other two-thirds?

Oh, I don't want to get into them.

Were some periods more creatively fulfilling than others?

Without a doubt. I mean, the first third I would say was thrilling. And then I hit a really dry patch for the middle third. If I think of my work, my so-called career, it's three acts. The second act was almost across-the-board disappointing.

And it wasn't just the people I worked with that were disappointing. It was also me. I was distracted. I had children growing up, a family at home, a lot of ... I can't blame anybody but me, really. A great deal of my distraction was the regret that I'd be sitting in a trailer somewhere in Bumfuck, America, rather than being with my children. And that tortured me. It made me incredibly unhappy. I think that was reflected a lot in my work. I'd be on a set and all I could think about was, *I wish I were home.*

It felt to me like I'd come to the end of something. I was too disheartened. The work and the roles and the films were not interesting to me anymore. I was disenchanted with all of it except for occasionally doing a stage play.

I've really enjoyed this recent phase of your career, in which you jump between playing very respectable roles and ones that aren't respectable at all.

I agree. It feels like a great time. In this third act, it's all very interesting to me again.

Especially in *American Horror Story: Murder House*, the anthology's first season, where you go full Bette Davis.

There's even an episode that opens with you carrying a ham into a dining room and exclaiming, "Ladies and gentlemen: the ham!"

The first couple seasons were fun because they were so out there and the characters were so baroque, and they'd say to me, "What should we do?" and I'd say, "I don't know. Write me some monologues." And they would write these wonderful monologues, as outrageous as could be. Those characters were overwritten and fun to play. And each one's so different. The great thing about this premise was every season was a different story. I don't know how, if you were in a long-running series, you would keep one of those characters going for seven or ten seasons.

It was brilliant how they didn't tell anyone it was an anthology at first.

I got to the end of season one and they'd killed everybody off and I was thinking, How can they possibly renew this?

Right! *How's this going to work?* I knew they were miniseries from the beginning because otherwise I don't think I would've signed up!

In run time, *American Horror Story* is equivalent to doing six feature films a year. How did you justify it to yourself?

It was a brand-new project, and Ryan Murphy is incredibly persuasive. When he called me out of the blue in early 2011 to ask me if I would do this, I was at my farmhouse in upstate New York, bored out of my mind, and it sounded like a great idea. But it was only for that first year that I agreed to do it. Then they came back to me and said, "Would you do another couple years?" The thing that's seductive about doing something like that is they're writing specifically for you. They know your voice, in a way, and they know what you like to play. And that first season, I enjoyed it. I was in Los Angeles, and I wasn't working that much because it was a supporting character. So I thought, *Well, why not do a couple more seasons?* I ended up doing four altogether. Then at some point after the fourth season, I thought, *I'm done.* My contract was over, and I didn't want to do it anymore.

From an actor's point of view, how would you describe a bad directing experience, as opposed to a good one?

I don't want to be told what to do. I want to be given the opportunity for discovery. But you also want some guidance. Bob Rafelson could move things in a direction that he wanted without saying, "Do this, do that." Sometimes, they'd just say one or two things, and it was as if a light went on and you understood what they were looking for. I remember Karel Reisz talking to me about playing Patsy Cline. He said, "It's like a Champagne bottle exploding: the cork blowing off, Champagne spraying." I thought, *Oh, okay. I understand that.*

What era would you have really loved to live in?

Obviously, the '20s. In Paris. What could have been more exciting than that? Everything was blowing wide open. The art. Just people living a different way. They're coming out of that Edwardian era and then suddenly it just explodes.

The modern era is defined by social media, where you're consistently praised.

Well, that's nice to hear. You know, I have no access to social media, which is



In *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in 1992.

“Nobody had ever presented me with the possibility to actually create the character.”

probably for the best. Everybody seems to comment on everything. That's a rabbit hole I have avoided at all costs. I've always had a hard time seeing myself in the public eye. After *King Kong* was released and I was flying home to Minnesota, somebody on the airplane had *Time* magazine and that was the cover: me in the hydraulic hand. And I was so, so horribly embarrassed—I don't even know what the word is, but I almost started to cry. I thought, *Oh no. Is this what it's going to be? Some kind of something happening that you have no control over?* In some way, it's always been that way for me. Does that make any sense?

It does. What has it been like to have relationships not only scrutinized by strangers but commented upon negatively: “She never should have gotten involved with Mikhail Baryshnikov or Sam Shepard”?

Well, here's the good thing: During those years, in those relationships and when my children were young and growing up, there wasn't the kind of scrutiny there is now. Every once in a while, you'd be hounded by paparazzi, but it's nothing compared to now. I don't know how people maneuver through this today, where everything is suddenly public. But also, I don't understand why people choose to make their personal lives public. Why are you posting about that? It's private, it's family—it's whatever it is. I guess that's just old-fashioned. But privacy has always been incredibly important to me.

What sustains you, drives you forward?

Coffee. Sometimes that's the only thing that gets me up. And family, I guess, more than anything. That has always been the case. Motherhood's big. That's why this play is fascinating.

I wrote down one of your character's lines from a draft of *Mother Play*: "You are twice the man your father was. You, my son, have my blood. You have my balls. Fear nothing. Crush the invaders. Kill, kill, kill." I thought, *Yeah, this is a Jessica Lange part.*

I hope I can deliver that properly! I don't know. But it's a wonderful play. I think it's going to be a great challenge. And it's heartbreaking.

In what way?

That idea that there can be a decision—a wrong decision that comes out of some kind of emotion or misinformation, some misalignment of the stars—and suddenly your life takes a turn and it's never the same and it's never right.

Story of my life.

Probably most people's. And then, in this play, there's the loss and the haunting and the regret.

You've talked very frankly and openly about depression. How have you been able to channel that into your work in a productive way, rather than letting it paralyze you?

As an actor, you're always drawing on personal emotion in the Actors Studio sense: memory or emotional recall. And a lot of the characters I've played have a dark side. That sadness that you have in life, that sorrow, that anger—whatever it is you're carrying with you—that's part of the instrument. That's what you're drawing from. I wish I were a happier person. I wish I didn't have bouts of depression, but I do.

Is that why you love Blanche DuBois so much?

Yes. That sense of her tremendous vulnerability and the madness that's right below the surface. Obviously, Blanche was close to Tennessee Williams. I think she's probably the best character he ever wrote. You think about her young husband, who killed himself because of what she said to him. How do you live with that? How do you live with that kind of remorse or guilt or loss? Even the last line, where she takes the doctor's arm and talks about the kindness of strangers: There's just something so lyrical and poetic about that character. It seems to me that she's one of the most beautifully written characters in American theater along with Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. They're both dealing with remorse and loss and sorrow. There's that surviving, that desire to make things—Oh God, I don't even know if I can explain it! To find the reason to keep going.

CHEAT SHEET

The Voices of the Season

The weird, wide-eyed, weepy, and wild. *By Jason P. Frank*

THESE DAYS IN THEATER, it seems like everyone is a belter with a healthy mix—talented, of course, but lacking personality—thanks to an increase in movie-based musicals, jukebox musicals, and pop-influenced songwriting. Casts now largely consist of musical-theater robots designed to view Broadway as a place for technical ability without vocal storytelling. Yet there is reason for hope. There are currently more types of voices on display than we've seen in a long time—here are some of the standouts.

1. THE POP STAR Maleah Joi Moon in *Hell's Kitchen*



► The Alicia Keys jukebox musical doesn't innovate so much as combine a slew of musical-theater references. But its chief revelation is the newcomer in the lead role—Moon's earthy tone is more common in pop and R&B than on Broadway, and it's never mechanical or predetermined.

SEE IT IF: You got sad when Keys missed the opening note of "My Boo" during the Super Bowl.

2. THE NEW CLASSIC Kelli O'Hara in *Days of Wine and Roses*

► Singing Adam Guettel's score, which eschews easy melodies in favor of jazz-infused dissonance, O'Hara is at max capacity. She sells strange musical-theater arias in abundance, swerving across vocal lines that depict her character's descent into alcoholism.

SEE IT IF: You cry rewatching Barbara Cook sing "Losing My Mind" from *Follies*.

3. THE CONTROL FREAK Eden Espinosa in *Lempicka*



► Her raspy vocal pyrotechnics have always impressed, especially now as the titular Cubist painter—instead of just focusing on her belt, listen to the way she flicks up her voice at the end of some lines or packs vibrato into the tiniest word.

SEE IT IF: You want to watch an Elphaba perform in a show with a second act that doesn't fall apart.

4. THE COMPLETE 180 Sutton Foster in *Sweeney Todd*

► Known for ebullient performances, Foster is now taking on roles nobody would associate her with, first Marian the Librarian from *The Music Man* and now Mrs. Lovett. Early buzz was unkind—her upper register wasn't working in a viral bootleg of "The Worst Pies in London" from the first show—but Lovett is a pusher, and Foster's full-throated commitment to any role asked of her fits the character.

SEE IT IF: You're curious and have a few hundred bucks to spare.

5. THE EMOTER Joy Woods in *The Notebook*



► Woods has the ability to bloodlet through song with emotions gushing and the audience becoming unwitting voyeurs of immense pain. Following a beloved run as Audrey in *Little Shop of Horrors*, she is bringing her vocal bareness to the Nicholas Sparks romantic tragedy as "Middle Allie."

SEE IT IF: You're not scared to cry in public.

6. THE MUPPET Eddie Redmayne in *Cabaret*

► After years of Alan Cumming and Joel Grey sharing dual custody of the Emcee, Redmayne is the first new blood to take on the role on Broadway since 1998. If you saw the *Les Misérables* film, you know what he brings vocally: a certain Kermit-like quality, even as he competently sings this show's heartbreaking "I Don't Care Much."

SEE IT IF: You still miss Jim Henson.

