

## STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

## RHYMES WITH STRITCH

*Where are Grandma's pants?!*

My first thought as **Elaine Stritch** (who is not my grandmother; mine's genteel) strode on stage opening night of last month's quick Toronto run of her Tony-winning *Elaine Stritch At Liberty*. The roar of approval was prolonged at this homo-heavy Pride Toronto fundraiser.

Turns out she is more comfortable in just a shirt, tights and shoes. And I soon forgot the half-an-outfit thing; Stritch's almost-eighty years of living have been so interesting - and she dove into her one-woman show with such dazzling gusto - you could feel everyone at the Elgin Theatre getting sucked up in one same instant.

Her extraordinary range has allowed an extraordinary career in theatre, film and television, working with greats like Edward Albee, Steven Sondheim, Hal Prince, Woody Allen, and Gloria Swanson. 'Ladies Who Lunch' is her signature song. Her personal life includes dating JFK, Marlon Brando and Rock Hudson and friendships with Judy Garland (a drinking buddy) and Noel Coward (who adored her). Her numerous demons, like decades of hard drinking beginning in her early teens, play supporting roles in her life.

Alone on stage but for a stool, Stritch high-energy charmed as she spun stories for two and a half hours, one part poise, one part piss and vinegar.



She knows she's good at what she does and it's one of her most likeable qualities. Life has whacked her a few times upside the head and she's not afraid to admit to that, either, admirably. When she chokes up a couple of times you believe her.

All of this leaving a vastly improved impression of the show biz legend than did my phone conversation with her a few weeks prior. Why bother agreeing to an interview if you're going to be difficult? I wondered back in May. And at midnight on a Monday no less. Just go to bed if you're tired.

Now it's merely pleasantly funny to think of having been personally scolded by Stritch. She may be who she is offstage, but onstage in June she cast a spell that (almost) made it easy to forget I originally fancied calling this piece *Interview With A Vampire*.



Since its now past midnight and you're still working, what is it like for you leading a life off the beaten path?



What do you mean off the beaten path?



Just that most people are asleep right now and here you are doing an interview.



That's nonsense; lots of people are awake right now.



Well congratulations on the huge success of your show.



Thank you.



I read that you say in it, 'I think I'm reclaiming a lot of my life that I wasn't all there for'. How is it that you are reclaiming?



Do you know the meaning of the word reclaiming?



Yes I do.



Well then, I'm reclaiming, just like the word means.



Oh. I haven't yet seen your show but I've been reading reviews. I can't say I can think of another recent show that's been so universally well reviewed. Do you read them?



Of course I do. I read every one.



How does it feel to enjoy such raves?



It's wonderful.



What sets your show apart? There are a lot of autobiographical theatrical events out there.



I don't know.



Could it also be that yours does more than share personal memories? I've read over and over that you are soul bearing night after night.



It's not soul bearing at all. I'm telling my life, it's as simple as that.



At *Liberty* is over two-and-a-half hours long. How is it carrying a show that long?



It's not a long show. It's no longer than any show on Broadway.



What I mean is that you are the whole show for over a hundred and fifty minutes.



If that's what you meant, that's what you should have said.



One review I've read said you talk about 'the loneliness of your present life'. How could someone like you possibly be lonely?



I don't talk about loneliness in my show at all. I'm not lonely. I'm alone when I want to be and I like being alone.



Okay, how about something else I noted, that you discuss many of your regrets –



I don't discuss any regrets.



You don't?



No.



Gosh - sounds like I've been reading a lot of untrue information about your show. Do you regret not getting the role of Dorothy on *The Golden Girls*?



It was frustrating. I was disappointed.



I'll try one more, but about you. In my research I read a comment that for you life was performing or suicide – it was that urgent.



A person would have to be out of their mind then. It was never like that. Suicide? You'd have to be out of your mind.



Was your alcoholism about facing life – about needing a crutch to help you do bigger and riskier things than most would ever dream to?



That's exactly what it was.



So how do you get up there and talk about something so personal?



Because alcoholism is a disease. Alcoholism is not something to be ashamed of. If it was cancer it would be the same thing.



How does it feel to be strongly identified with 'Ladies Who Lunch' – one of the greatest songs ever written?



I'm identified with a lot of different things.



Well this has been a delight. Thank you very much for your time tonight.



You're welcome. You're very good at interviewing. I hope I gave you good answers to your questions.