Capturing a Broadway Legend on Film

COM alum’s documentary shows why Elaine Stritch is one of a kind

Most people know Elaine Stritch mainly as Alec Baldwin’s mother on the NBC comedy 30 Rock. And that’s a shame. Because while the role of Colleen Donaghy showcased the legendary actress’ considerable comedic talents and her irascible, commanding persona—and brought her an Emmy—Stritch is first and foremost a stage actress, who over the course of a seven-decade career has earned a reputation as a fearless performer.

She garnered rave reviews for her work in William Inge’s Bus Stop in 1955 and left an indelible impression in Broadway musicals, among them Noel Coward’s Sail Away and Stephen Sondheim’s Company, where she introduced one of his best-known anthems, “Ladies Who Lunch,” and later, in revivals of Hammerstein and Kern’s Show Boat and Sondheim’s A Little Night Music. Stritch has proven equally adept at drama, starring in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and A Delicate Balance, both by Edward Albee (Hon.’10).

But Stritch’s greatest triumph has always been playing herself. She won a Tony Award (and later an Emmy) at age 77 for her critically acclaimed one-woman show, Elaine Stritch: At Liberty, which recounted her career and personal successes and tragedies.

A born raconteur with flawless timing, the 89-year-old actress is the subject of a documentary by Chiemi Karasawa, titled Elaine Stritch: Shoot Me. Karasawa (COM’90) met Stritch when she was working as a script supervisor on the set of the John Turturro film Romance and Cigarettes, where the actress played James Gandolfini’s mother. “The day she came to do her scene, she blew everyone away with her incredible energy and charisma,” says Karasawa. “It was like a tornado blew through town.”
Elaine Stritch: Shoot Me

She recalls a scene with the actress, Gandolfini, and Steve Buscemi in a hospital room. “She was scolding Jim for something he had done, and one of her lines was ‘Shuuuut Up!kg!’ Karasawa says. “I think the craft service guy on the next stage dropped his knife, it was so explosive and intimidating.”

Several years later, Karasawa spotted Stritch at the hair salon they both frequented, and she began to think about directing a documentary about her. Karasawa had recently started her own company, Isotope Films, and was looking for nonfiction material to produce.

At the time, she says, she had only “a layman’s knowledge” of Stritch’s career, but she went home and Googled the actress, down-