

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

➔ For filmmaker Chiemi Karasawa, the documentary *Elaine Stritch: Shoot Me* marks a milestone in her career: the film is her directorial debut.



Stritch speaks candidly in the film about her diabetes and her long battle with alcohol.

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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."

Karasawa's documentary, which debuted at the 2013 Tribeca Film Festival, won strong praise from critics. Karasawa says Stritch was thrilled with the reception.

loading everything she could find about her. "I fell down the rabbit hole researching her," the filmmaker says.

It took a bit of courting to convince Stritch to allow cameras to follow her around once their hairdresser formally introduced them. The actress kept putting her off, saying, "We can start next month." After four or five months of that, she finally relented, leaving a message on Karasawa's answering machine at 2 a.m. saying they could begin.

In *Elaine Stritch: Shoot Me*, the actress speaks candidly about her diabetes (the film includes several harrowing scenes of her confronting medical crises), her long battle with alcohol, and her decision, after 24 years of sobriety, to resume drinking (one cocktail a day, despite the fact that she says nothing scares her more than drinking). She also forthrightly expresses frustration at no longer being able to recall the lyrics to songs she's performed for decades.

The documentary is also hilarious. At one point, the ever-candid Stritch runs into an old friend and exclaims, "Your hair looks good for a change." In another scene, after being kept waiting on the set of *30 Rock* for Baldwin to arrive, Stritch refers to him as "Alec Joan Crawford Baldwin." And there's plenty of the kind of dishy stuff you'd expect from an actress of her stature, most notably her story about picking up a very young JFK, asking him to dinner, "because he was too attractive to leave behind," and getting dumped by him after their second date when she wouldn't put out.

Karasawa had extraordinary access, following the actress over 18 months as she completed a national tour of her one-woman show, rehearsed and performed a new show of Sondheim songs at her longtime home at the Carlyle Hotel in New York, battled growing health scares, and made the decision to return to Michigan to be closer to family.

The COM alum acknowledges that there were a few prickly moments when shooting began "before we understood each other's rhythms and some after the edit was completed, and she wasn't exactly sure if she liked it." But at the end of the day, she says, her subject "allowed me the freedom to create something about her without ultimately standing in the way."

For Karasawa, the film represented a milestone in her career. *Elaine Stritch: Shoot Me* is her directorial debut. She had intended only to produce the documen-



tary, but Stritch didn't want anyone else around and insisted Karasawa direct the film herself. "She believed in me, and that was incredibly inspiring," she says. "She has great confidence in people. It's infectious. She knows what it's like to be given an opportunity."

The film, which debuted at the 2013 Tribeca Film Festival, earned strong praise from critics. The *Village Voice's* Alan Scherstuhl called it "a gift of a documentary celebrating its subject's brittle brilliance." ABC News described it as "an irresistibly entertaining documentary." Stephen Holden, reviewing the film in the *New York Times* after its national release, wrote that "on a deeper level, *Shoot Me* is an unflinchingly honest examination of a woman who is aware that the end is approaching."

What was Stritch's reaction to the final film? Karasawa says it was hard for her at first. "She is terribly hard on herself. She said, 'I love it, it's well shot, it's well edited, it's entertaining and engaging....I just don't want to be in it!' She initially thought it was sad." But at each subsequent screening, seeing how inspired and invigorated audiences were leaving the theater, Stritch has been thrilled by the reception. "Secretly, I think she loves it."

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Watch a trailer for the documentary *Elaine Stritch: Shoot Me* at bu.edu/bostonia.

Filmmaker and actress have remained close since work on the documentary ended, and Karasawa says that Stritch has inspired her in countless ways. "She's incredibly courageous and inspires people to have the same courage," she says.

The filmmaker believes the project left her with a greater appreciation for her own parents, who are 80 and 90. "Elaine gives a very articulate voice to the aging process," she says. "She allowed herself to be documented in a way that makes the experience palpable, entertaining, poignant." *John O'Rourke*



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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 Uppppp!' 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-