

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

THE INIMITABLE ELAINE STRITCH

Sophia Stein · Monday, March 17th, 2014

ELAINE STRITCH: SHOOT ME is a primer for actors on how to dig deep and strike gold. For the rest of us, Ms. Stritch offers a roadmap on aging that recalls that Dylan Thomas poem: “*Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*” As the 87-year old legend of Broadway and television asserts, “Folks who are still alive in their eighties must know something, or they wouldn’t still be here.”

The documentary portrait by first-time director Chiemi Karasawa lets us get up close and personal with the Tony and Emmy Award-winning actress-songstress sublime — the one and only Elaine Stritch. The Broadway beloved is also an intermittent alcoholic, diabetic, and survivor. Candid reflections about her life are interspersed with clips from rehearsals and performances, and testimonials from close friends including Alec Baldwin, Tina Fey, James Gandolfini, John Turturro, Hal Prince, George C. Wolfe, Nathan Lane, and Cherry Jones. The film is one hell of a fun ride with a woman in her prime at each and every phase.

Karasawa began her career as a script supervisor, assisting many directorial giants, including Martin Scorsese, Stephen Frears, Sam Mendes, Spike Jonze, and Jim Jarmusch. In 2006, she transitioned from script supervising to producing documentaries under her production shingle, Isotope Films. *Billy the Kid*, her first feature, won accolades at South by Southwest and the Los Angeles Film Festival. However, it was not until Karasawa was pushed by the subject of her latest film to assume the helm as director that she took the plunge. How fortunate for us all that Stritch had the foresight to insist. Karasawa has masterfully integrated all her filmmaking training and experiences to date to become a skilled, insightful director in her own right.

I had the pleasure to speak with Chiemi Karasawa about *ELAINE STRITCH: SHOOT ME* and the unusual circumstances that gave birth to this very original coming of age story.



Elaine Stritch performing on her opening night at The Café Carlyle in Chiemi Karasawa’s “ELAINE STRITCH: SHOOT ME.” Courtesy of Smart Broad Films, LLC. A Sundance Selects release.

Sophia Stein: So is it true that you actually met Elaine Stritch through your hairdresser at the Vartali Salon in Midtown Manhattan?

Chiemi Karasawa: I had worked with Elaine for a day on *Romance & Cigarettes*, the John Turturro film, when she was playing James Gandolfini’s mother, probably three or four years

earlier. Then, I met her as a person in real life at the hair salon.

S²: How did you recognize her — in the hair salon, with wet hair and all?

CK: You can't miss Elaine. She has a very distinctive manner of dress. And her voice – you could stop a truck with her voice! Elaine is inimitable. Elaine is quite old, but she still has an incredible command of everything. Just to see this woman charging around, you knew that she was somebody! Also, I recognized her from [her recurring cameo as Jack's mother] on *30 Rock*. So I asked my hairdresser if that was her, and he confirmed that yes, indeed, that was Elaine Stritch.

S²: When did you realize that you really wanted to commit to making a documentary with Elaine?

CK: My hairdresser was the one who had the idea — Piet Sinthuchai at Vartali on 57th Street. Piet suggested that I make a film about her, so I googled and YouTubed her. I fell into that rabbit hole, watching everything you can watch. I realized that Elaine Stritch was (a) older than I thought, and (b) had such a diverse and extensive theatre history. I had only recognized Elaine from her film and television roles. I didn't realize that she was also a Broadway legend! Elaine had worked with Tennessee Williams, Noel Coward, and Stephen Sondheim. These people had written shows and characters just for her. That's when I started hanging out at the New York Public Library, Theatre and Film on Tape Archive. Just watching *A Delicate Balance*, renting the original cast recording of *Company*, seeing *At Liberty* — I was just blown away. It was one of those moments where it's like someone says, "What! You don't know who the Rolling Stones are?!" I just feel like this is somebody that you had to introduce to the whole world — so that nobody else could ever feel as ashamed and humiliated as I did when I figured out who Elaine Stritch actually was.

S²: How did you go from meeting her to convincing Elaine Stritch to be the subject of a documentary film project? What did that entail?

CK: It was a lot of courtship. In the beginning, Elaine was very cordial, kind, and polite — as she is to her many fans. Piet would keep scheduling our appointments around the same time so that I could continue to talk to her, run into her at the hair salon, keep letting Elaine know that I really wanted to do it!

Elaine was finishing up *A Little Night Music* on Broadway at the time. I kept thinking, "Oh my God, I'm going to lose my chance to document this." But Elaine really didn't want me to start filming while she was navigating the end of that show; she thought that it would be too much to juggle. So I waited very patiently ... just kind of knocking my head against the wall because I wanted to be documenting that, but she was insistent that I couldn't do that!!

Finally, the hair salon owner [Vartan Vartali] arranged a dinner party where they seated me next to Rob Bowman, Elaine's musical director. Rob and I chatted all night long. After that, Elaine must have gotten the word that Rob thought that I was serious and capable, because she called and left a message on my answering machine at 2:00 a.m. one morning (that I will shoot myself for accidentally erasing) — in which she basically caved and said, "I'm all in. Let's go."

S²: At that point, did Elaine have some specific questions for you about the process? Did she

have any conditions?

CK: The very first discussion that we had about the documentary and what it would entail is actually the dinner scene in the film where Elaine is wearing that white suit and the white hat, and she's showing me what's in her insulin bag. She pulls out the Bombay Sapphire mini.

She was very insistent that it not be a puff piece. She wanted it to be honest. She wanted to be able to be honest herself. She didn't want anything to be set up. She wanted the truth. I was very open and obviously inspired to hear that ... because, you know, when someone is a celebrity of that caliber, you worry that they are going to constantly be concerned with preserving their image.

Elaine was about being a real person — which I thought was incredibly brave. And of course, that made me want to document her all the more! How many women are running around at the age of eighty-five and still managing their careers on television? And mounting a one woman cabaret act that's about to tour the country? And living out of a hotel?!



Elaine Stritch displays a still from "Angel in the Wings" in Chiemi Karasawa's "ELAINE STRITCH: SHOOT ME." Courtesy of Smart Broad Films, LLC. A Sundance Selects release.

S²: Originally, you were intending to produce the film, but apparently Ms. Stritch had different ideas about that. This film is your directing debut.

CK: It was such a long courtship process. Elaine became very comfortable with me and my cameraman, and she just didn't understand what the difference would be if I directed the film myself. She was correct, there would have been no difference. It's not like I told Elaine what to do — ever! — if you know what I mean.

I suppose that I hadn't seriously considered directing the film myself earlier because I had just assumed that I wouldn't be able to raise the money for the film on my name. Elaine felt comfortable with what was going on, and she didn't want to have to deal with one more person. I was trepidatious about bringing another person into that mix, as well, because it had taken four or five months to get there. Graciously and gratefully, I accepted.

S²: We see how Elaine is sometimes involved in directing the camera with some really funny sequences and quips. At one point, for example, Elaine berates your cameraman that the lens is too close for comfort, "unless this is a skin commercial we're shooting here." How did your cameramen take that? Were they able to accommodate with grace?

CK: We shot the documentary over the course of a year and a half. That really only happened in the beginning couple of weeks of filming. As soon as Elaine became comfortable with the people around her, she basically let them do their job and left them alone.

For the English muffin scene, I had sent a cameraman over there to be a fly on the wall and document the rehearsal process. I had to be in Toronto opening a movie, and I asked Elaine if she would mind. "No, send him over," she said. This poor guy had never met her before. I took the liberty of including a couple of those moments in the film, which is probably somewhat misrepresentative of our entire experience with her; however, it did properly expose some aspects

of her character.

S²: Was Elaine involved in the editing of the film at all? Did she see cuts and give input?

CK: Listen, if Elaine had been involved in the editing, two years later, we would still be in the editing room arguing over what should go in and what should go out. [Big laugh.] Six months after shooting began, I put together a three-minute teaser of selects that I thought we could use to raise the rest of the money for the film. I showed it to Elaine, and she went wild. She thought it was fantastic. Which put me at great ease, because I showed her being her irascible self. And she totally went with it.

She didn't care how she looked. She didn't care if she had make-up on or even clothes on or off. (She was ideal, in that sense.) "If it's good, use it," was her attitude. She had no vanity — which I thought was insane and remarkable. As I cut together scenes, I would show them to her every now and then, and she felt compelled to move forward.

The first time I showed her a finished cut after we had gotten into Tribeca Film Festival, she was nervous. Rightly so. When somebody puts together a string of events that are meant to be a picture of your life at that stage, I don't think anybody is ready for what they are going to see!

I don't think that Elaine had ever really watched herself as a human being before. She had only watched herself on screen as a performer. To her mind, she wasn't performing enough for the film to be entertaining. Yet everybody else who saw the cut thought that it was magnificent because Elaine was as honest, and candid, and courageous, as anybody they have ever seen on screen.

So it took her a while — until the premiere of the film, I think — for Elaine to realize that the film was engaging, entertaining, and informative about her life, in a way that didn't diminish her as a performer. After that, she really enjoyed it. What she cares the most about is the audience, and when the audience stood up and gave her a standing ovation ... then, she thanked me. [Big laugh.]

S²: You made a very conscious choice to forsake what you call the "carriage-to-casket" documentary approach, and to shoot a vérité film. What did that entail?

CK: Carriage-to-casket would have been a twelve year mini-series! — because Elaine's life was so incredible and productive and fruitful and full of amazing moments.

The most interesting thing about Elaine, to me, was the way that she was living her life at eighty-seven years of age. Elaine is still so very much alive! We don't get to witness that very often; that's not documented or promoted in the media all too often.

To be going on this very universal journey [a working professional transitioning into semi-retirement], with someone as extraordinary as Elaine — that needed to be up front and center. While we were documenting Elaine, she had this epiphany about her life: sitting on that bed and saying, "It's time for me." To realize that she had to be making choices and decisions that she didn't necessarily want to be making ... but she had to step up to that plate and admit it, that is the moment that informed the entire structure of the film for me.

It's a coming of age story — except that Elaine just happens to be eighty-seven.

S²: Did Elaine really leave New York City and move to Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, for real?

CK: Absolutely. As soon as we premiered the film in April, at the end of that month, she moved out of the Carlyle Hotel and into the condo that you see in the end credits.

S²: Wow, like Carrie from *Sex and the City*, I can hardly imagine Elaine Stritch living anyplace other than New York City. What is she living for? What sustains her today, if you know what I mean.

CK: I think it was a rough transition because the lifestyle is so different. It is the lifestyle that she needed because she was having tremendous health challenges. She needed to have a full-time 24/7 live-in caregiver. She needed space, and she needed a little more peace and quiet. Her phone at the Carlyle rings off the hook, and she can't turn down invitations to openings and dinner parties and the like. She needed to start spending more time taking care of herself.

She told me herself, "I am not leaving the Carlyle first!" "I came to New York to work!," she insisted, "And if I am not going to be working as much, then I want to have a different kind of life!" That was a fantastic revelation, that she was willing to make that transition.

Birmingham is where all of her nieces and nephews live. Her sisters have all passed, but they left her with this enormous family. Being "Great Aunt Elaine" is a new role for her. It's as if she is embarking on a new journey. This is the way that I tried to present it in the film.

S²: The clip of Elaine's Tony acceptance speech in 2002 is so powerful. She says, "I do not know what would have happened to me if I couldn't get out what was inside of me." I imagine that the documentary similarly became a vehicle for her to liberate what was inside of her.

CK: That's absolutely right. I think that one of the scariest things for Elaine was to be able to tell the truth. And one of the most gratifying things for her was to be rewarded by people accepting her truth. That process was entertaining and helpful to her.

I was also going through a very difficult time in my life when we were shooting the film. Elaine and I both say, "If we didn't have the movie to anchor us, it would have been a different couple of years." She and I became very close friends. I revealed as much about my life to her, as she did to me. Of course, that's the other side of the camera.



Director Chiemi Karasawa and Elaine Stritch, "ELAINE STRITCH: SHOOT ME."

Photo courtesy of Erick Grau.

S²: What did she teach you? What did you learn from Elaine?

CK: No matter how frightened she really is of any situation, Elaine still has a tremendous amount of — balls! She rises to every occasion. She refuses to let her fear defeat her; she lets it energize and sustain her. I think that that is an incredible quality to have at any stage of life.

Also, Elaine teaches us all to really embrace the process of living and aging. To not try to hold onto the past, or who you were ten or twelve, or even two years ago. This is who you are now! This is what you look like! This is what your life is about! Get with it! I think that is an attitude that we need much more of these days.

I think Elaine is beautiful. I actually think she is more attractive now than she has been in the past. Her face is so expressive. It reflects all she has experienced, her many triumphs. I applaud her acceptance of herself in such a graceful way.

S²: It was such a revelation to me, that a woman of that age, who doesn't have the melody of youth in her voice, is still such a phenomenal singer and performer. The rendition of "I Feel Pretty," where Elaine is struggling so hard to remember her lyrics in rehearsal, and then we see the performance, where she just turns it on — that's one of the most powerful demonstrations of "stage presence" I have ever seen.

CK: I know. She's got everybody in the palm of her hand. To me, that was stunning. That Elaine has the courage to get out there when she doesn't know if she can remember a song from start to finish anymore. To believe that she can do it, and she did. That, to me, just speaks volumes about Elaine and about what all of us are capable of doing.

Elaine never came onto the scene as any kind of a traditional talent. Even though she had a very melodic voice in her younger years, it is really her character, her personality, her imagination, that informs what happens with an audience during each performance. There's just no explaining Elaine's connection to an audience. It's like watching a wild animal, or a baby. She's an unfiltered presence that you just can't get enough of.

S²: You had an illustrious career as a script supervisor before you got into first producing and now directing documentaries. You have worked with so many legendary film directors, on so many remarkable films. Julie, Elaine's friend from Alcoholics Anonymous, describes Elaine as "a Molotov cocktail of madness, sanity and genius." I was wondering if you could give us a snapshot description of some of the great directors with whom you have worked?

CK: I'll try.

S²: Martin Scorsese —

CK: A passionate master of craft & style, deep & lovely.

S²: Stephen Frears —

CK: Mischievous, accomplished, yet humorously insecure.

S²: Sam Mendes —

CK: Charming, humble, patient and exacting.

S²: Spike Jonze —

CK: Sensitive, authentic, imaginative and sincere.

S²: Jim Jarmusch —

CK: Beyond cool, a bad-ass and a sweetheart.

S²: Having directed your first doc, are you prepared to direct again? What are you working on now?

CK: I would love to direct again. I am hoping that I won't have to raise all the money myself next time. Not that I mind producing — it is just such an all-encompassing task. If you want to direct something great ... you can never entirely give up on producing. A couple of different people have pitched directing projects to me. I'm open, if anyone has any great ideas out there that they would like to pitch for me to direct.

As a producer, I've got a bunch of work coming out. *Seeds of Time* is at SXSW right now, which is an environmental documentary about agricultural crusader, Cary Fowler. *Amazing Grace* is the documentary of Aretha Franklin's gospel concert from 1971, originally directed by Sidney Lumet. The footage was never edited; so we finished the editing. Hopefully, with Franklin's permission, we will be able to get that out there soon.

For additional information, "[ELAINE STRITCH: SHOOT ME](#)" official website.

Top Image: Elaine Stritch and Rob Bowman in Chiemi Karasawa's "[ELAINE STRITCH: SHOOT ME](#)." Courtesy of Smart Broad Films, LLC. A Sundance Selects release.

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