

## BREAKOUT TALENT

BY GERARD RAYMOND

> Jayne Houdyshell

# Striking the Mother Lode

"It's really nice to think that one can be a new kid on the block at the age of 52," says Jayne Houdyshell. Currently appearing as the dynamic but chronically ill mother in Lisa Kron's autobiographical play *Well*, she chuckles over the circumstances of her breakout role—a triumphant Broadway debut.

In the critically acclaimed metatheatrical comedy, Houdyshell plays the playwright's mother, Ann Kron, who spends most of the play lying inert in a La-Z-Boy recliner, felled by what she calls "allergies." In the 1960s and '70s, however, Ann Kron was the real-life driving force behind the racial integration of her Lansing, Mich., neighborhood. Her daughter, Lisa Kron, who also stars in the play, has put the character of her mother onstage to advance her own self-serving theories about wellness in individuals and society. But by the end of the evening—barely moving from her chair—Ann has effectively overturned her daughter's carefully planned agenda, winning the hearts of the audience in the process. "It's the most generous thing imaginable, what Lisa has written: She allows her own mother to hijack her own play," Houdyshell marvels. "What an astounding way to come to Broadway."

Houdyshell has been hooked on theatre since she was 10 years old, growing up in Topeka, Kan. "My principal exposure to the theatre was listening to cast albums of Broadway musicals," she recalls. "I'd listen to them over and over and drove my folks nuts. I'd gaze at the pictures on the album covers and create the whole scenario in my head, fleshing out the scenes, guessing from the lyrics." In her early teens, she joined a group of precocious older adolescents and college students who produced, directed, and acted in plays for other teens. "There were a lot of bright people there, and I can remember being introduced to Brecht and seeing Peter Brook's [production of] *Marat/Sade* at the age of 14. I can't tell you I necessarily understood a lot of it, but I knew it was great theatre," she says. Her next big influence was a high school teacher, an Anglophile who introduced her to the great British acting tradition through films and touring shows. Seeing the formidable Dame Judith Anderson, at age 73, play the title role in *Hamlet* on tour in 1971 made an impression on Houdyshell.

"I developed this deep respect for what the British were doing in terms of training," Houdyshell says. "The acting





Houdyshell

school curriculum was very appealing because of the particular emphasis on technique, text, period work, and the classics." Spurred on by the same Anglophile teacher, she enrolled in an intensive conservatory program at Oakland University in Rochester, Mich.: the now-defunct Academy of Dramatic Art, whose faculty came from London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. "I got some really spectacular training there," she recalls. "It instilled an awesome work ethic that has kept me in good stead for a long time in the theatre, and it also instilled in me a hunger to play a broad range of roles. I wanted to work nonstop and to do big parts, and it seemed to me that the best place to do that was in regional theatre."

In theatres mostly in the Midwest and Northeast, Houdyshell proceeded to

build an impressive résumé, pursuing major regional-theatre roles even after moving to New York in 1980. "I traveled between nine and 11 months out of the year, going from job to job for about 20 years until I finally burned out on it," she says. The payoff came in the roles she played (Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo*, Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, Big Mama in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*) and where she played them (Peterborough Players, Missouri Rep, the Wilma Theatre, Delaware Theatre Company, Asolo Theatre Festival, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Yale Repertory Theatre).

"When you chew on beautiful roles—" Houdyshell starts to say. "I don't want to go on about that or I'll sound pompous and I don't mean to be." What she doesn't spell out is that this rich experience is what prepared her for her remarkable breakout role. By this stage of her career, she was also craving something different: "I really hadn't had the opportunity when I hit my mid-40s to know what it was like to originate a role or to be around a playwright who was developing work." That ambition was realized in 2002 with *Well*.

### Getting 'Well'

Playwright-performer Lisa Kron, at the time best known for her solo performance pieces (*2.5 Minute Ride*, *101 Humiliating Stories*) and her collective

work with the Five Lesbian Brothers, was looking for someone to play her mother in a weeklong workshop of a new play at Baltimore's Center Stage. On a recommendation, Kron caught a performance of Charles L. Mee's *True Love* at the Zipper Theatre in New York, in which Houdyshell was playing a woman addicted to sex. The role was the polar opposite of Ann Kron, but Houdyshell still got the job. *Well* had yet to evolve into the playfully Pirandellian, emotionally complex theatrical experience it is today, but "even at that very early stage, [Ann Kron] just leapt off the page and I was able to intuit who she was," she recalls. From then on, the role was hers.

"Everything about the way I approached this role and worked on it is totally out of the norm—and that made perfect sense to me because this whole play is so out of the box," she says. "Because of the extraordinary circumstance of playing a woman's mother onstage, opposite the woman herself, who also happens to be the playwright, it was clear to me that I didn't want to try to imitate Ann Kron.

"Once I felt really deep under the skin of the role and very comfortable, then I felt it was perfectly natural to meet Ann," she continues. "I could get to know her on her own terms, just two women meeting." The actor and the playwright's mother exchanged emails and talked on the phone but didn't meet in person until 2004, when Ann attended a performance of *Well* during its premiere Off-Broadway run at the Public Theater. After the show, Houdyshell says, Ann Kron exclaimed, "Oh my goodness, Jayne. I watched you there up on stage and thought, 'Even I want to be Ann Kron!'" The

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two have since become great friends, and the actor has visited Ann at her home in Lansing. Moreover, Houdyshell says she is thrilled when after a performance of *Well*, she is accosted by audience members who seem to believe she's really Lisa Kron's mother: "That's such a compliment to me as an actor, but also the greatest compliment because Ann is a very cool person. I have so much admiration for her ethics, her politics, her integrity, and her humanity."

The role, Houdyshell says, is also one of the hardest she's ever tackled. "Many people say, 'Wow, you've got it easy,' meaning I spend a great deal of time onstage in the La-Z-Boy. But it's a very odd challenge to try to project when you're in a jackknife position. By the end of the show, I'm really worn out." For half an hour before the play even begins, Houdyshell pretends to be asleep in her chair—in full view of the incoming audience. "That was my bright idea way back when we were doing readings and workshops," she says, laughing ruefully. "I never dreamed for a moment we would do a long run of the play." It serves to establish that Ann has spent a significant part of her life unwell and chair-bound, but, Houdyshell reveals, there are nights when "I feel like I'm going to jump out of my skin!" The best nights are when she listens to the rise and fall of the audience chatter and can "go into some Zen-like zone and feel totally refreshed and alert when the play starts." Her fear is that one night she may indeed drift off to sleep and wake up to find Lisa standing there

and talking to her. "Actors do so many strange things; this is just one of those odd jobs that I do."

Then there is the complicated, contradictory personality of Ann, the chronically ailing woman who attempted to heal an entire community. "There is this deep power in her that feels archetypal and universal, as big as Medea," Houdyshell says. "When you have to play someone who has to be so real, but at the same time you have to project to a 1,200-seat house, every muscle in my body is being worked. I feel myself using my training in the classics and all that vocal and text work that I had as a student in acting school."

In the two years between the Off-Broadway production of *Well* and its current Broadway run, Houdyshell continued to pursue roles in new works. In 2005 she won two prestigious regional theatre prizes: a Barrymore Award for her supporting role as a neurotic woman obsessed with tidiness in Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House* at Philadelphia's Wilma Theatre, and a Joseph Jefferson Award for playing a Midwestern mother very different from Ann Kron in Bruce Norris' *The Pain and the Itch* at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

"I've never thought in terms of the smart career move. I have always gone from job to job," Houdyshell says. "It's a gift and I don't know where that comes from, because this is a business that is all about insecurity. I've been very fortunate to trust that the next job will always be there." So what comes next for an actor who is now the toast of Broadway? Houdyshell laughs. "Another great role in a great play." <



Daughter and Mother: Lisa Kron, left, with Houdyshell

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kind of sappy, [but] Polly has kind of a tough, astringent quality to her that I knew would cut against any kind of saccharine quality that could be in the script." The character is based on his late Aunt Lillian, so it was important to Busch on a personal level as well. "Physically, she couldn't be more opposite... [but] in so many ways she sort of is that character," he explains. "[Polly] said, 'Every line I say, that's exactly what I would have said to my grandkid.'" The pivotal role of the orphaned grandchild was cast through the office of Carol Hanzel, who had done a lot of commercial casting and had extensive experience with children. She found P.J. Verhoest, an understudy for the young Peter Allen role in *The Boy From Oz*, whom Busch found to be "the most sophisticated, mature, skilled actor.... I really gave him almost no direction."

While Busch is given sole credit for directing, he unreservedly admits to having help on the project, particularly from Andress, who often directed him onstage, and Bergen, who brought a wealth of experience to the set. Andress dealt with Busch's self-professed problem of "trying to erase 30 years of a rather baroque acting style. We would look at the playback, and I was just doing too much eyebrow acting." Bergen was equally tough but subtle. She'd sometimes lean over after a take and offer something like, "A little too much going on with your mouth there. I don't know if you know," recalls Busch.

*A Very Serious Person* will debut April 28 at the Tribeca Film Festival. As yet, it has no distributor, but Busch is quick to point out that "none of my other movies had a distributor at this point either." In addition to *Die, Mommie, Die!*, Busch also appeared in *Psycho Beach Party*, which he adapted from his play. With a film in the festival circuit; a documentary on his life, *The Lady in Question Is Charles Busch*, in current release; and a new play, *Our Leading Lady*, going up at the Manhattan Theatre Club this fall, it hardly seems possible Busch couldn't get cast in a school play when he started. "You have to have the confidence of believing that you're doing something special and worthy," he says. As he continues, one senses the hand of Aunt Lillian: "You have to know that maybe you won't have made as much money or fame as somebody who's going [the] more traditional route. That's the risk you take. But then sometimes it all works out, and you can walk away with the whole game." <