

Give Her Regards to Broadway

Elaine Paige stars in Molière in London, but yearns for the Great White Way.

By Sheryl Berk

In the West End, she's known simply as Elaine — like Cher, or Madonna, the first name says it all. Every role she plays becomes her own: Eva Peron in *Evita*, Grizabella in *Cats*, Florence in *Chess*, the title role in *Piaf*. I tell her about my friend who paid \$500 for her autograph on an opening night *Evita* stagebill.

"Oh, heavens," she laughs. "I'm not all that big, am I?" Modesty turns to mischief: "Do you have the number of that fellow? There's lots more where that came from, and I could use the money!"

Joking aside, Paige appreciates the recognition and respect, and longs to be known as a worldwide star, "not just this British broad, you know?" This month, she's playing Célimène in Sir Peter Hall's production of Molière's *The Misanthrope* at London's Piccadilly Theatre. It's her first non-singing dramatic role in her 20-year career in the theater, and her first show since starring as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* on Broadway last year.

"I love to work," Paige says. "When I'm not, I get fidgety." That may explain her mile-long "to do" list for the next few months: On June 7 and 8, she'll perform at a charity event celebrating the work of producer Cameron Mackintosh (Queen Liz herself will be in atten-



Four faces of Elaine: As Célimène in Peter Hall's current production of *The Misanthrope*.



As chanteuse Edith Piaf in the 1994 London production of Pam Gems' *Piaf*.

dance); she will be in concert June 19 at the Hampton Court Palace Festival; and her 15th solo album is in the works. Paige just wrapped a video version of *Cats* to be released this year and performed at Royal Albert Hall with Antonio Banderas on April 7 in celebration of Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber's 50th birthday.

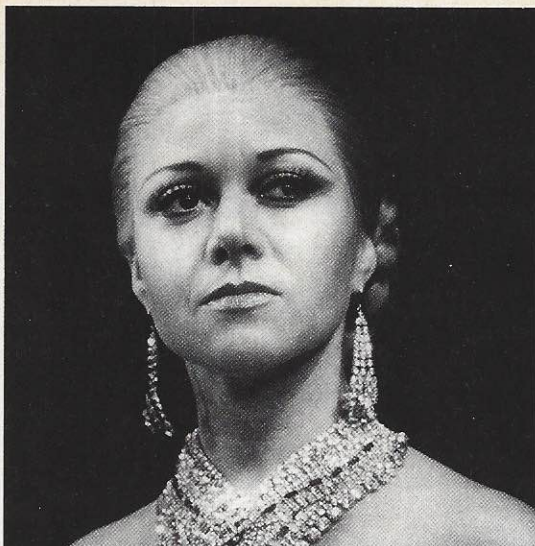
She rattles off her schedule, then sighs. "It's quite a full plate," she says. But what's missing on the agenda is what she's craved throughout her career: Broadway.

"You see, I finally got a taste of it in *Sunset*," she says, "and I miss it. I miss the audiences; I miss the city. I've been talking about a New York theater project, and quite frankly, it would be bliss to be back."

Speaking by telephone from her dressing room at the Piccadilly, Paige may be an ocean away from the Big Apple, but everything's as if she never said goodbye.

Why did you decide to do *The Misanthrope*?

One reason is that it was a non-singing role, something I hadn't done. Célimène is a coquette, a flirt, and a gossip. But what I like about her is that she knows how to enjoy life. We're alike in that way; I definitely believe in trying new thing and living life to the fullest. [The play is] all in verse,



As Eva Peron in the original 1978 London production of *Evita*.



As Grizabella in the original 1981 London production of *Cats*.

and the rhymes and breathing are a real challenge. It's absolutely fascinating, yet it terrifies me. I don't have music to govern things, and I'm so used to that.

You've certainly been doing some singing on the side!

Oh, absolutely. The voice is like an instrument, and you really have to keep it tuned. I just did the Sir Andrew concert — I got to sing from *Evita* with Antonio Banderas — and that was quite a spectacular evening. Don't think I'm hanging up my hat because I'm not singing in *The Misanthrope* — quite the contrary.

Do you ever get tired of performing the songs you made famous?

Do I want to scream when some-

one asks me to sing "Don't Cry for Me Argentina"? No. These are songs that are tied to special moments in my life, special shows and people. I have great affection for them. I just put on the old *Cats* suit again to sing "Memory" for the video of the show. And you know what? It felt like home.

Do you have a favorite role?

Every role you're doing at the time is your favorite. When I did *Cats*, I was in love with Grizabella. But obviously, *Evita* will remain extra-special for me because that was my first major role in the West End. It was also a new form of musical theater at the time, and I was very proud to be a part of it.

Would you like to have done the movie?

Oh, well, of course. But I hear Madonna does a wonderful job.

You haven't seen it?

Can't say that I have — maybe because I want to remember it the way I remember it.

Has any show you've done been a disappointment?

I was disappointed with the way *Chess* was received. It was greatly underappreciated. I think it was the best musical score of the '80s. The book let it down; the story didn't hold people's attention. I put so much into it — we all did — and it was very sad to see it misunderstood. It's a musical you have to think about. You can't just sit there and let it wash over you, and maybe that was its downfall.

You are the leading Lady of the West End, yet you've said you felt you wouldn't be a success until you played Broadway.

That's right. And I tried for nearly 18 years to come. *Sunset* was a wonderful opportunity, yet it wasn't a role I created. That's what's so ironic.

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That's your goal — to
create a Broadway role?

Absolutely. That's always
been my dream. I'm working
on something at the moment,
but I can't talk about it. I'm
superstitious and I wouldn't
want to jinx it!

**You've done several
Andrew Lloyd Webber
shows. What's he like, pro-
fessionally and personally?**

It goes without saying that
he's terribly talented. Despite
what the critics say about his
work — and I do think they
are unkind — his success is
the proof in the pudding.
Audiences love his musicals.
There's nobody in modern
musical theater who has
achieved what he has.
Personally, I find him very
complex. He is very dedicated
to his craft. Andrew eats,
sleeps, and breathes music.
He appreciates beauty in all
forms. He has a love of archi-
tecture, and he writes a col-
umn about fine food and wine
here in *The Telegraph*.

**Why do you think so
many of his shows receive
negative reviews?**

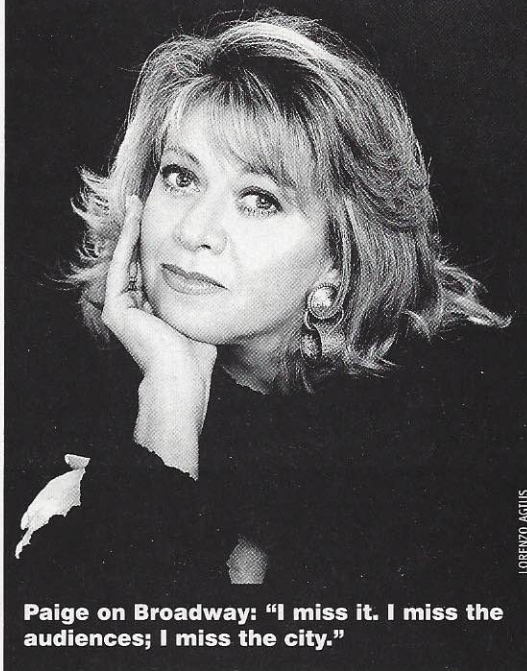
Well, in Great Britain, I
would think it's because the
British characteristic is to dis-
like a great success story.
Being a success here is a little
unseemly. You Americans love
success, for oneself and for
others, so the only reason I
can fathom for disliking him
in the States is because he's a
foreigner. Who knows what it is? But
it's very unfair.

**What's the difference between
Broadway and the West End?**

When I was on Broadway in *Sunset
Boulevard*, I don't think I've ever felt
so appreciated in my life — more so
than in my own home country.
America has a wonderful musical the-
ater tradition that spans decades. We
don't have that in the same way here.
We're more involved in classical the-
ater, Shakespeare and such. Musicals
aren't revered as much in England.



Ready for her close-up: Asa Norman
Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*.



Paige on Broadway: "I miss it. I miss the
audiences; I miss the city."

Playing the Broadway stage was such a
kick for me. The applause was thun-
dering. I remember thinking, "I've
really arrived!" That was a joyous feel-
ing to take home every night.

**Would you ever consider living
in New York?**

If it was a great show, I'd love to
live there for a long run. I was in
Sunset for 10 months or so. I think
New York has a powerful life force.
The people have a lot of drive and a
lot of energy. People work very hard
and play very hard. They're much