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SPRING THEATER: PERFORMANCE

SPRING THEATER: PERFORMANCE; If the Nurse Resembles Warhol, There's a Reason

By BARRY SINGER

IN her 20-year career, Julee Cruise has played many roles entirely unconnected to theater. "I approach everything as an acting piece, though," Ms. Cruise, a singer and actress, said recently. "Supplying the singing for the song 'Mysteries of Love' in David Lynch's 'Blue Velvet'? Acting. That soft little voice isn't me; I'm actually a belter. My work with the B-52's? More acting. Their front man, Fred Schneider, saw me in this awful musical here in New York, where I had to play five instruments, speak in Shakespearean pentameter and sing rock 'n' roll. Not very many of us who can do that. Next thing I know, I'm replacing their lead singer, Cindy Wilson, while she's on maternity leave."

At the moment, Ms. Cruise is acting in overdrive, portraying four characters in "Radiant Baby," a new musical about the 1980's graffiti artist Keith Haring. In the show, directed by George C. Wolfe, which opens next Sunday at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, she plays Andy Warhol, Haring's mother, a demonic nurse and a critic who resembles Susan Sontag. "George just kept piling on the roles," Ms. Cruise said. Which one is the hardest? "The costume changes. I'm the oldest person in this cast."

Ms. Cruise, who is 46, was born in Creston, Iowa, the daughter of a dentist. Arriving in New York in 1982 with a bachelor's degree in French horn playing from Drake University, she found a job downtown in the chorus of "another dreadful musical." Her musical director was a fellow French horn player named Angelo Badalamenti.

"He liked the way I sang," Ms. Cruise remembered, "and later called me to say he was doing the music for this weird film called 'Blue Velvet' with this weird director who had made a movie called 'Eraserhead.' And I said, 'That's David Lynch.' Angelo wanted me to find a singer to sing on the soundtrack. And that singer turned out to be me. Before I knew it, Warner Brothers was asking for a whole album."

Ms. Cruise and her voice became a touchstone of Mr. Lynch's macabre universe. "Falling," from her album with Mr. Badalamenti and Mr. Lynch, "Floating Into the Night," was subsequently adapted as the theme song for "Twin Peaks," Mr. Lynch's cult television show, where Ms. Cruise had a recurring role as the singer in the roadhouse bar.

Ms. Cruise went on to pursue a solo career as what she calls "a rave diva." She was on the road touring

in support of her 2002 album, "The Art of Being a Girl," when the Public Theater first called about "Radiant Baby." "I told my agent: 'Nix. I'm not doing some faux rock musical,' " Ms. Cruise said. "But I'd always wanted to play the Public. Twenty years ago I used to stand outside the place on my way to my restaurant job and say, 'Oh, God, please.' "

For her new job, Ms. Cruise did research on Andy Warhol. She also debriefed a pal who had known Keith Haring: "My dear friend Frank Holliday lived in a loft with Keith, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kenny Scharf during the 80's. He gave me a lot of insight into both Keith and his mother."

Susan Sontag's essence came straight out of the bottle. "At first, I was just playing some unnamed critic character," Ms. Cruise said. "Then my husband mentioned that he had waited on Susan Sontag during his youth as a waiter in the Village." Ms. Cruise smiled. "I thought that was so great. I talked the wig master into putting a white streak into my hair right away. I know who this critic is now. And that, I can act." BARRY SINGER

Photo: Julee Cruise as Andy Warhol in "Radiant Baby" at the Public Theater. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)