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THEATER

THEATER; Emerging From the Shadows of Broadway's Past

By BARRY SINGER

HAS there ever been a more obscure Tony Award honoree than Sylvia Herscher? Even Ms. Herscher herself does not think so.

"Who am I? I wasn't unique," she insisted recently, seated in her favorite chair in her neat apartment on the 40th floor of Manhattan Plaza, the artists' residence high above Theater Row on West 42nd Street.

"Lots of people did what I did. It's just that I was lucky. Timing. In real estate, it's location; in the theater, it's timing. A confluence of everything coming together and a lot of luck. That's all."

Most Tony Awards are self-explanatory. Best performance by a featured actress in a musical; nothing could be clearer. Then there is a relatively new award, dating from the early 1990's, something called the "Tony honor for excellence in theater." This year, the actress Eileen Heckart, who starred in "The Waverly Gallery" Off Broadway, and the popular "Encores!," the seven-year-old concert musical series at City Center, are recipients of the honor. Along with Sylvia Herscher.

Who?

The facts are as follows. After a 50-year theatrical life spanning several careers -- as a general manager, a producer, a music publisher, an agent -- Sylvia Herscher, 86, is retired. She was the second in command for the composer and producer Jule Styne for many years and the composer Jerry Herman's self-avowed "mentor" for even longer. In her own words, she was "a theatrical matchmaker"; in Mr. Herman's words, "the woman who arranged things," the living embodiment of his greatest leading lady, Dolly Levi herself.

"I brought Sylvia every one of my new scores first," Mr. Herman readily acknowledged recently. "I clung to her -- for her ears and her instincts. You can't go to school for that. Sylvia, more than anyone I've ever known, represented an entire world that has disappeared."

Always, Ms. Herscher functioned in the offstage shadows. The threads of her professional existence were spun with finesse. Unraveling their intricate weave reveals one of the best-kept secrets, in a sense, of Broadway's increasingly mythic past: a woman whose quiet impact was felt on shows ranging

from "Gypsy" to "A Chorus Line."

Her work with Mr. Styne, for example, included assisting on his celebrated 1952 revival of Rodgers and Hart's "Pal Joey" -- literally sitting between the show's book writer, John O'Hara, and its composer, Richard Rodgers, who would not speak to each other, as their referee. She was the associate producer for Mr. Styne's hit 1955 production of the comedy "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?," and his general manager for the musicals "Hazel Flagg," "Mr. Wonderful," "Say, Darling" and "Gypsy," among others.

"Jule was a madman," Ms. Herscher recalled, "the most wonderful madman -- writing with one hand, producing with the other. I remember him sweating over 'You Gotta Have a Gimmick' in 'Gypsy.' They couldn't figure out what to do with those three ladies. And one day he screamed out: 'Come in here! I think this is gonna work.'

THEY were an odd couple, Jule and Steve Sondheim. Jule was so ebullient, he couldn't put a sentence together. Steve just played with words. Did they communicate at all? Yes. But it wasn't the easiest thing."

She shook her head at the memory. "I learned more up there in that little office of Jule's over the Hellinger Theater. I learned what makes a song work. What makes a scene work."

Did she always want to be in the theater? The question brought a crooked smile. "I wanted to be an actress," she confessed.

Born Sylvia Kossovsky in New York to Eastern European immigrant parents of modest means, she studied piano from the age of 5 and, as Ms. Herscher remembered: "I spent my life at Carnegie Hall. For me, it was serious music and theater, concerts and Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Rep. Not musical theater. Not at first."

She graduated from college in 1934, married in 1935 and worked at a variety of jobs until 1941, including summers in the borscht belt serving up theater at Rosenblatt's Hotel in Glen Wild, N.Y. "That's when I started doing musicals," she said. "Though I made the guests listen to Eugene O'Neill, too, on Sunday nights -- all his one-acters. They actually began to like it after a while."

She paused. "I didn't decide I couldn't be an actress; it was decided for me, if you know what I mean. Then I had a family -- two children. My husband, Seymour, worked at the Bulova watch company, he was Artie Bulova's assistant. When they were looking for somebody to do publicity, Seymour interviewed a guy named Alexander Cohen -- in 1942, I think -- and Alex was hired. Then Alex began to produce. Seymour left Bulova and joined Alex in 1959. They were together until Seymour died, six years ago."

Mr. Cohen, who died in April, truly gave Ms. Herscher her start. "My parents believed that every woman should have a career," she said. "Once my kids were born, I wanted to work again. Alex first gave me a job doing publicity for a 'King Lear' he was producing, with Louis Calhern, in 1950. Then he and Jule Styne were going to do a show called 'Make a Wish' and Jule needed a secretary. Jule used to

say he got stuck with a secretary who could neither type nor take dictation.

"Which was true. If you were a working woman in those days, you could be maybe a doctor -- but the sciences came not trippingly into my head, you see. Or you could teach -- and I knew I could never teach. Or you could become a secretary. The way not to be a secretary was to not learn how to type. And so I never did. Within a few years I was Jule's general manager."

She was silent for a moment, a trim, tiny woman with astonishingly alert eyes magnified by great enveloping spectacles. "Jule and Alex had one thing in common," she announced, as if realizing the fact herself for the first time. "They were never afraid to fail. They dusted themselves off and started all over again. So different from today. Everything today is by committee. Jule thought 'Pal Joey' should go on, 'Pal Joey' went on. We went to a factoring company and he put all of his Ascap royalties as collateral to get the balance of the money he needed to open that show. If he believed in something he got it on. Alex was the same way. Courage of your convictions -- go out and do."

In 1960, Ms. Herscher went out and joined William Morris. "Jule stopped producing," she said simply. "The agency thought I might represent performers, but it became very clear early on that my strengths really were with writers. There were producers who were interested in adapting a book; I would meet with them and find the right playwright. Composers looking for a project to musicalize, lyricists looking for a composer; whenever there was a situation that needed a little something, they would throw me in there.

"That's how I met Jerry Herman. For whatever reason, there was a problem with who should direct his first show, 'Milk and Honey.' I got involved and everything worked out very nicely. Jerry and I met. And we realized that we were truly soul mates. I don't think a week goes by still that we don't speak."

After five years, Ms. Herscher moved on to Edwin H. Morris, one of Broadway's leading music publishers. "Buddy Morris wanted to become a producer, which is why I signed on," she said. "But it became very apparent that if you're publishing 8 or 10 top composers and lyric writers, you can't choose to produce A and not B.

"Still, it was a joy. So much talent: Harold Arlen. Charles Strouse and Lee Adams. Jerry Herman. At Morris, a composer got support -- financial and emotional. You made a commitment to what you heard.

"It wasn't always art," Ms. Herscher added. "In 1965 I saw this little show, 'Man of La Mancha,' up at the Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut. And I didn't particularly like it. But I knew it was going to make money. I said to Buddy, 'Let's get "Man of La Mancha."' And he said, 'No.' " She shrugged. "After that he never said no to me again."

" 'Grease,' " Ms. Herscher went on. " 'Grease' was not a great show. I picked it up after hearing a run through downtown in the East Village. I went and I had a good time. I thought, 'This is going to work.' I arranged for the entire office to go to the last preview. And nobody would talk to me after that. They all hated it with a passion.

"Of course," she added, "they sure got over that."

E D KLEBAN," Ms. Herscher suddenly recalled. "Ed left his job -- he'd been working in record producing -- and came to meet with me and said, 'I have a show I've written, music and lyrics.' 'Gallery,' it was called. I arranged for Michael Bennett to hear the score. Michael wound up very impressed with the lyrics. He asked Ed if he would mind coming downtown to see some of the workshops he'd started with dancers and to meet this composer named Marvin. And out of that came 'A Chorus Line.' Which we published."

Ms. Herscher sighed. "Soon after that, Buddy Morris sold the company to his lawyer, John Eastman. You know, you end with 'A Chorus Line,' it's time to get out. I went to work as head of the theater department at G. Schirmer. By the late 70's I saw things were really changing. In 1982, I retired."

Which isn't to say that she stopped. "I've just made a new musical," Ms. Herscher practically crowed. "It's called 'Haunted.' Steven Schoenberg did the music, Diane Seymour did the lyrics and Marilyn Stasio did the book, based on an old Victorian novel. I put them all together; they'd never met each other. Things are rippling and rumbling. And I blackmail, I use every weapon in the book -- 'How long do you think I have to live?,' I tell the producers. 'Let's get moving.' "

She grew silent. "This is the difference between theater then and theater now. It's boring after a while to talk about. But you could have so many new things going then because there were people who were ready to take the chance. Now, unless you can show somebody the bottom line, forget it."

"Money -- the importance of money -- has had a profound effect on everything we do, so why not the theater, too? Of course, Jule and Alex all expected to make money. But they also recognized that failure was possible, too. And they went on their own gut. It was a passion. And that's not what we have now. Now we have calculation."

"I don't like to talk about it," Ms. Herscher said, "because I really start to cry." She actually did start crying, for just a moment. "I was involved in so many. Sometimes your heart broke, but if this didn't work, the next did. Now -- what they consider great (and I don't even know who 'they' is), I don't understand. I try to remember a musical that left me feeling something. I can't."

Her tone brightened: "I listened to Audra McDonald's first album" -- "Way Back to Paradise" -- "I listened to it very carefully, to all the new writers. And obviously they aren't writing for me. But. If I could only work with some of those kids. Because this is the talent of the age. I get so upset! Working is hard now for everyone, but they have to understand that it's working with the specific people that makes sense; that's what's important. And it's so hard to find the projects that sing."

"That's where I can help," Ms. Herscher insisted adamantly. "I know what sings. Still."

Photos: Michael Bennett, with cast members of "A Chorus Line" in 1983. (Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times)(pg. 23); Sylvia Herscher in her West 42nd Street apartment. She is one of the recipients of the Tony honor for excellence in theater. (Andrea Mohin/The New York Times)(pg. 5)

