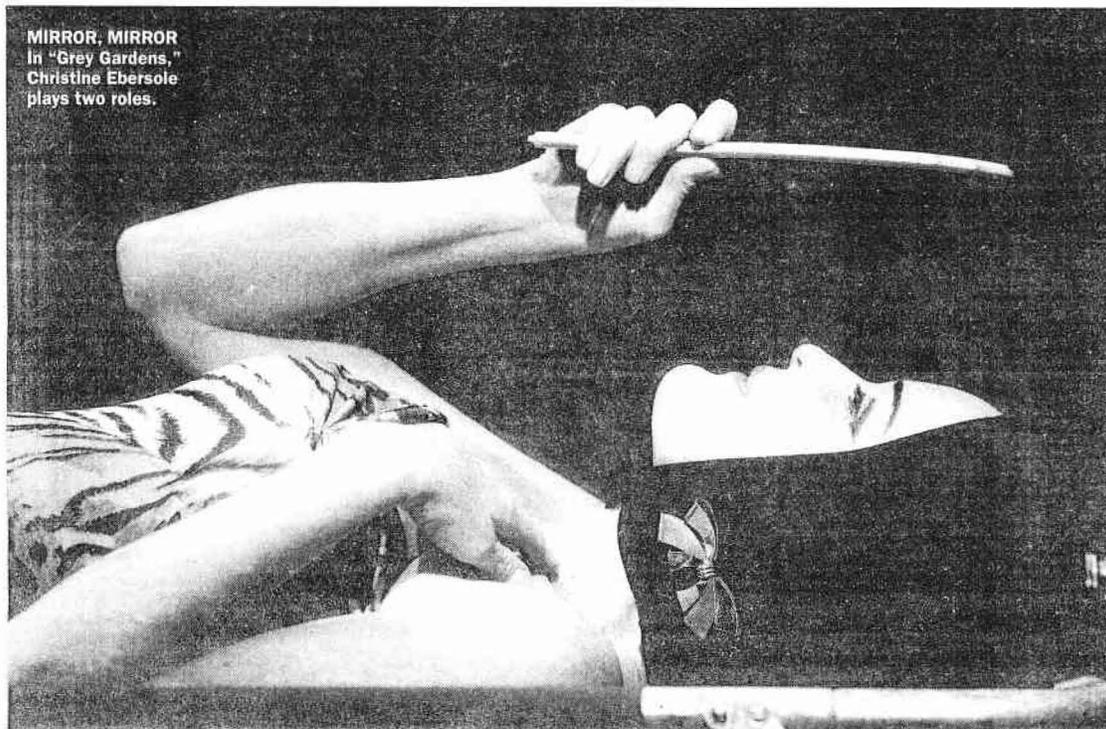


10/29/06 MON

BEAUTIES

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In "Grey Gardens,"
Christine Ebersole
plays two roles.



Christine Ebersole blooms in 'Grey Gardens' **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

When actress Christine Ebersole was a young girl growing up in Winnetka, Ill., she would sneak off by herself to Sacred Heart Church during lunch break at school. "I would stop in the Catholic church," says

Ebersole, who was raised a Unitarian but sometimes went to the church with her neighbors. "No one would be there and I'd look around and I'd start singing in Latin, just what I remembered from the Mass. It wasn't to show off. It was just to connect."

Now theatergoers are headed to "Grey Gardens" to worship Ebersole. Adapted from the cult 1975 documentary by Albert and David Maysles, the musical, opening Thursday at the Walter Kerr Theater, tells the story of Edith "Big Edie" Beale and her daughter, "Little Edie" Beale, relatives of Jackie O who fell from the heights of society to living in a crumbling, Gothic East Hampton mansion called Grey Gardens, surrounded by cats and raccoons and creeping memories.

In Act I (set in 1941), Ebersole plays the 50-ish Big Edie, who hopes to steal the limelight at her young daughter's engagement party by planning a miniconcert of her own. In Act II (set in 1973), Ebersole becomes Little Edie (with Mary Louise Wilson playing the now 80-ish Big Edie), a droll, paranoid woman with odd fashion sense who shuffles around the tumble-down estate and battles with her mother.

Ebersole says that in preview performances and in the show's previous hit Off-Broadway incarnation, audiences fell silent watching Little Edie's painful vulnerability.

"To have that experience is so powerful, because everyone's connecting to that part of themselves that understands [how] we're all the same," says Ebersole. "We all identify with the humanity of that."

The 53-year-old actress is clearly feeling like she has come in from the wilderness. As Ebersole, who lives in Maplewood, N.J., reclines on a couch in her dressing room, she talks passionately about politics, delves into childhood memories and recounts mis-steps alongside accomplishments.

After an early stage triumph in a revival of "Oklahoma!" — followed immediately by a turn in "Camelot" in 1980, as Guenevere opposite Richard Burton and Richard Harris, stage and screen Arthurs — Ebersole was in the second wave of "Saturday Night Live's" Not Ready for Prime-Time Players in 1981, with Eddie Murphy and Joe Piscopo. She lasted one season.

Then she moved to Los Angeles, doing small roles in major films like "Tootsie" (1982) and "Amadeus" (1984), and, after briefly returning to Broadway for the ill-fated "Harrigan & Hart" in 1985, began a run of TV guest spots. She starred in sitcoms that didn't make it (Ted Danson's "Ink") or family movies that didn't bring in families ("Richie Rich," "My Favorite Martian").

In 1999, an agent helpfully told Ebersole she was over the hill.

"Success [on TV] depended on things outside my control. It depended on my Q rating" — a system by which a performer's appeal is tracked — "or my age or my looks. Talent didn't have to figure in. What made me leave L.A. — and my husband and I decided it together — was a faith that I could put my talents to [better] use," she says.

Her faith was rewarded with a role in Gore Vidal's "The Best Man." Then in 2001, she won a Tony for her turn in the hit revival of "42nd Street." A year later, she was nominated for "Dinner at Eight."

When "Grey Gardens" opened Off-Broadway earlier this year, Doug Wright's book, Scott Frankel's score and Michael Korie's lyrics all earned raves, but it was Ebersole who made heads spin. Its arrival on Broadway has been much anticipated, thanks to her. So now instead of being over the hill, she has reached her peak.

"As you get older, the field narrows," she says. "But within the narrowing of that field came the role of a lifetime." And though she feels she returned at the right time, a bit of the Beale sisters seems to haunt her.

"My only regret is that I didn't buy real estate in New York!" she says with a laugh. "I spent all my money on boots and hats. My whole agenda was, spend everything you have. And now ... well, let's just say I'm hoping to get out of debt by Christmas!" ♦

Ebersole felt she 'could put my talents to [better] use.'