

ARTS

Katherine Helmond

A Timeless Talent Returns to the Theater

by Iris Wiener

For the past four decades, Katherine Helmond has brought television, film and theater some of its most memorable roles. With no intention of slowing down now, the six-time Emmy nominee, Golden Globe winner and Tony nominee best known as the man-hungry Mona Robinson on *Who's The Boss?* and the bemused Jessica Tate on *Soap*, returns to the New York stage to take on an intricate role in Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist Paula Vogel's new play, *The Oldest Profession*.

"The show is about survival, and I think we're looking at survival very strongly these days, around the world and in New York especially," says Helmond of the play, centered on five prostitutes learning to deal with aging as they try to persevere in the world's oldest profession. "It's about how to live and how to keep using yourself fully all the way until the end. These women have been prostitutes for so many years, and it's a peek into a kind of life that most of us never get a chance to look at."

This production is a special one for Helmond, as she has toured the United States giving speeches about the aging process and keeping oneself vibrant until the end. In 2003, she spoke with women between the ages of 75 and 100 about choosing to live life to its fullest each and every day. "A lot of that depends on how much



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her semi-steady stint as Ray Romano's mother-in-law on *Everybody Loves Raymond* (where she'll next be found in the upcoming Thanksgiving episode). But her real-life immediate family solely consists of her husband, artist David Christian. "I did not have children, and the majority of women not only have a husband, but have children. And they've been asked to juggle life in a way that's overwhelming!" she says admirably. "As the years and decades have gone on and lifestyles have changed so amazingly, I think that women have been asked to do an overwhelming job, they've been asked to be wives, housekeepers, mothers, organizers and many of them work now. And then they're also supposed to look glamorous," Helmond laughs. "The best thing that they can do for themselves is to compartmentalize, so that during the onslaught of having children they don't forget about their husbands!"

A Galveston, Texas native, Helmond says that after having enjoyed twenty years of marriage on Long Island, the eastern end holds a special place in her heart. "I lived in Wainscott, and then moved to the hilly areas near Sag Harbor. I loved living there, the atmosphere, the people, the look of the place. Each of the villages were so lovely and unique. When I drove from one town to the other doing my grocery shopping, and getting the fish and going out to Montauk to get lobster,

spoke about how we can help our health hold up, and how we can make active choices and stay active with young people in our society and with our community, by joining groups and being part of a church, or joining groups that work with children that can't read. There are organizations where older people take younger kids, and spend extra time teaching them to read or write."

One of these groups is "Pets for People" an organization for which Helmond toured the nation with *Who's The Boss?* co-star Danny Pintauro. The pair worked to set up older people with an adopted pet, and partnered them with a young person unable to have an animal at home. "The older person would keep the pet, and then the young person would go after school and walk and feed them. It kept young and old people together, which is so important because our families are now so fragmented and there is so much divorce," she says, as she reflects fondly on the program.

Helmond credits much of her strength as a female to her mother and grandmother, who gave her the solid foundation she needed to make it to where she is today. "My mother used to write poems and stories, and she was always interested in music, and my grandmother brought the dynamic of being a decent person," she says of growing up in a home with both generations present. "My grandmother was an individual and an independent woman, and taught me to depend on myself and to treat people decently. She used to say to have a sense of humor about yourself, and not to take yourself so seriously because everything changes everyday, you just don't realize it," Helmond says softly as she remembers hearing these words at the age of 8.

Helmond has played the matriarchal figure quite often on television, including

the people there to be lovely," she says wistfully. Fellow Long Islanders will surely visit the actress in New York to see her turn as *The Oldest Profession's* Mae, the madam of the five struggling women. "She's been the mommy, the nanny, she's kept them together and organized and kept them from getting sick. She's kept them in the group together so they have protection as a unit. The play does show that as people are getting older and are moving into other problems in life, how Mae loses her grip on a lot of things that she used to have a very strong grip on. It shows her fight to hang on in life," Helmond says proudly as she looks forward to the Big Apple's response to her latest venture through the fourth wall. "I think that's something that everybody's interested in. Paula set up an unusual situation, and people will enjoy watching the women's progress and their lives."

As for Helmond's own most invaluable achievement after 40 years of entertaining? "My grandmother said to me that if, at the end of the trip of life, you can't at least end up as a decent person, what is the point of taking the journey? That was powerful enough to stay in my mind when I was a kid, and one day I grew up and said, 'Yes, that is the way to live.'" ❖

The Oldest Profession is playing at the Signature Theatre Company's Peter Norton space off-Broadway at 555 W. 42nd St. (between 10th and 11th Aves.). The performance schedule is Tuesday-Saturday at 8pm, with matinees on Saturdays and Sundays at 3pm. For additional information, visit www.signaturetheatre.org or call 212-244-PLAY.