



THE WRITE STUFF: Linda Lavin (left) and Sarah Paulson in the literary drama *Collected Stories*
Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Linda Lavin's performance is highlight of *Collected Stories*

Collected Stories

Written by Donald Margulies

Directed by Lynne Meadow

Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

261 West 47th Street

(212-239-6200), www.ManhattanTheatreClub.com

By Scott Harrah

Linda Lavin gives one of the best performances of her career as writer/college professor Ruth Steiner in Manhattan Theatre Club's Broadway revival of Donald Margulies' 1997 drama, *Collected Stories*. Tony winner Ms. Lavin brings multiple layers of humanity, vulnerability, and discontent to the main character, Greenwich Village-based short story writer Ruth Steiner.

Ms. Lavin's Ruth Steiner is teacher and mentor to her protégé, Lisa Morrison (Sarah Paulson), a naïve graduate student and wannabe writer. Much of the two-character drama is talky and not exactly compelling at times. What's truly fascinating to watch is the transformation of the characters: Ruth, a bit curmudgeonly and cynical, guides sycophantic Lisa through her budding literary career. At first, Ruth is slightly cold and treats Lisa as simply a student, but as the story progresses the teacher/writer warms up to the young woman. Ruth, renowned for being a Jewish intellectual female writer, starts regaling us with tales of her early days in New York in the 1950s. Lisa pays particular attention to Ruth's story of her seven-year affair with Delmore Schwartz, a famous beatnik poet.

Although the play's twists and turns are somewhat predictable, what keeps *Collected Stories* from being a middling tale of a protégé taking advantage of her idol is Ms. Lavin's indelible stage presence. Ms. Lavin's delivery and dramatic timing are always razor sharp, but it's her command of nonverbal communication that really makes Ruth effective, from the way she sighs and rolls her eyes to her many sarcastic looks.

As Lisa becomes successful, getting a rave review in the New York Times for her first book of short stories, Ruth's once-icy exterior quickly thaws as she starts treating the young woman as both her friend and colleague. We soon witness the fascinating arc of both characters as Lisa, desperate to find material for her first novel, steals the information about Ruth's long-gone relationship with poet Delmore Schwartz and turns it into a pulpy *roman à clef*.

We soon discover Lisa is hardly some innocent fledgling writer who simply wants to spend a lot of time with her idol; she's a calculating, conniving woman who wants to exploit Ruth for personal and professional advancement. Sarah Paulson is perfect as Lisa, giving the character the right mix of purported purity, with a dark, devious side lurking beneath her childlike façade.

Ms. Paulson is totally believable when she acts shocked and hurt once Ruth refuses to attend Lisa's

reading of her novel at the 92nd Street Y. It's this crucial scene in act two that really showcases just what an immense talent Linda Lavin is as an actor. Watching Ms. Lavin's final emotional meltdown, as she goes from being a haughty professor and colleague to a fragile woman in poor health who has been a victim of a double-crossing "friend," makes this otherwise run-of-the-mill story of betrayal exceptional, and is excellent theater, and part of the credit certainly must go to Lynne Meadow's fluid direction. It is intense indeed hearing Ms. Lavin's verbal evisceration of Lisa, and her venomous, scathing jabs at the ethical situation the young woman has created.

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LITERARY LADIES: Linda Lavin (left) & Sarah Paulson in *Collected Stories*.

Photo: Joan Marcus



COLLECTED STORIES

Manhattan Theatre Club's latest entry is Donald Margulies' spin on the *All About Eve* tale set in the literary world instead of the theater scene. Margo Channing is now named Ruth Steiner (Linda Lavin) and Eve Harrington is Lisa Morrison (Sarah Paulson). Young student, Lisa, worships writer/college professor, Ruth, who will soon become her mentor, confidante, and friend. The student appropriates her mentor's life and memories, and writes a book about it. The moral dilemma here is: once a story is told, is it public domain or do you respect the person's private life? What elevates this play from the mundane is Linda Lavin's superb performance as the writer. Ms. Lavin's work gets better with the years. She has layered her performance from crusty professor to nurturing mentor and, finally, to betrayed friend exquisitely. There is definitely another Tony nomination on the horizon for Ms. Lavin. Sarah Paulson, as the student, is good but not dynamic. The part of Lisa as written is not very enigmatic but predictable. One sees this production to enjoy and relish Ms. Lavin's performance.

SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE, 261 West 47th Street. (212-307-4100).

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