She made a high-energy but graceful entrance, nothing too theatrical, sat in a director’s chair at a butcher-block coffee table in this reporter’s office, picked up a pot containing the orchid Phalaenopsis Jungle Cat ‘Bloody Mary’, and asked, “Do you mind if I take this out of its pot? It may be overpotted.”

How could anyone mind? Ellen Zachos ’82 is the author of Orchid Growing for Wimps, subtitled Techniques for the “Wish I Could Do That” Gardener (Sterling Publishing, 2002). She is the founder and mainstay of a Manhattan company, Acme Plant Stuff, the stuff being the several horticultural things she does: write about plants and photograph them; teach at the New York Botanical Garden, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and the Horticultural Society of New York; design, install, and maintain public and private gardens around New York City; run several greenhouses for private clients; and lecture on a range of topics for the Central Park Conservancy and for nurseries and horticultural organizations around the world. The doctor, so to speak, was making a house call, and the wimp seized the moment. “Please do,” he answered.

Jungle Cat ‘Bloody Mary’, promised by the commercial grower in California to have flowers of a “delicious tomato-red overlay on yellow background with intense red lip” and alleged to be of mature size, had been in its pot for some months, had five leaves, but had yet to produce a bloom spike or a bud. It had arrived from the grower in a four-inch, clear, plastic pot, its fleshy white roots visibly making their way through New Zealand sphagnum moss. The grower advised to keep the moss moist at all times. But not too dry, of course.

The wimp had taken this advice and moved his orchid from its plastic pot into clay soon after he got it, teasing away the spaghnum from the roots and resettling them in bark. He had chosen to move the plant up to a six-inch pot, willing it to be bigger than it was, to hasten the day when in reality it would be what in his mind’s eye it was already, a voluptuous ‘Bloody Mary’ erupting with sprays of delicious red-lipped blossoms. When Zachos turned the little orchid out of its container, examination revealed that its roots didn’t come close to filling the pot, thus increasing the chance of sog in the unpenetrated bark.

“You should put it in a four-inch pot,” the doctor said. The wimp produced one, for he at least has a well-equipped office, and in a dexterous twinkling Zachos had tucked ‘Bloody Mary’ in.
JOHN HARVARD’S JOURNAL

ZACHOS HAS NEVER PLAYED BLOODY MARY, OR NELLIE FORBUSH, OR ANY OTHER ROLE IN SOUTH PACIFIC, ALTHOUGH SHE USED SEVERAL SONGS FROM THE SHOW AS AUDITION PIECES IN THE DAYS WHEN SHE MADE HER LIVING AS AN ACTOR. HER MOST NOTABLE CREDIT IS LES MISERABLES, IN WHICH SHE APPEARED ON BROADWAY AND IN THE NATIONAL TOUR AS THE SWING.

“DO YOU KNOW WHAT A SWING IS?” SHE ASKS. “A SWING UNDERSTUDIES MULTIPLE ROLES. AS SWING IN LES MIS, I UNDERSTUDIED 13 WOMEN. YOU HAVE TO HAVE 13 TRACKS, WITH 13 DIFFERENT PEOPLE’S LINES IN YOUR HEAD. YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN YOU’LL BE ON. IT’S A BIG SHOW, AND SO FREQUENTLY YOU HAVE MORE THAN ONE PERSON OUT. YOU GET TO THE THEATER AND THERE ARE FIVE PEOPLE OUT WITH FOOD POISONING AND YOU HAVE TO COMBINE THREE TRACKS. SOMETIMES YOU’RE NEEDED IN THE MIDDLE OF A PERFORMANCE BECAUSE LES MIS IS A TREACHEROUS SHOW AND SOMEBODY TURNS AN ANKLE. IT CAN BE A RUSH, BUT THE DOWNSIDE IS YOU NEVER GET TO MAKE A ROLE." SHE DIDN’T WANT TO SWING ANYMORE.

As Mary Turner in Of Thee I Sing at the Cleveland Playhouse

SHE DIED ON THE BOARDS AND NICE TO THE RACES. (SHE LOVES TO DANCE, BUT WOULD NEVER BILL HERSELF AS A DANCER. IN BROADWAY PARLANCE SHE’S “A SINGER WHO MOVES WELL.” “I’M WELL ENOUGH TO DO THE LEAD IN DAMES AT SEA, BUT NOT WELL ENOUGH TO DO 42ND STREET.”)

At Harvard Zachos performed in a musical every semester and was on the board of directors of the Gilbert and Sullivan Players. She studied the history and literature of nineteenth-century England and France. (“WHEN I WAS ON STAGE IN LES MIS,” SHE SAYS, “I KNEW MORE ABOUT THAT TIME PERIOD THAN ANYBODY ELSE ON STAGE—AND NOBODY CARED.”) SHE LOVED HER EXPOSITORY WRITING COURSES, WROTE SOME POETRY, AND GOT INTO SEAMUS HEANEY’S POETRY SEMINAR HER SENIOR YEAR. BUT “PERFORMING WAS THE FOCUS OF MY LIFE.” AFTER A POSTGRADUATE YEAR IN GERMANY ON A ROTARY FELLOWSHIP, SHE FOCUSED ON BROADWAY.

SHE GOT HER FIRST PLANT AS AN OPENING-NIGHT GIFT, INSTEAD OF A BOUQUET, WHEN SHE APPEARED AS TZETELT IN FIDDLER ON THE ROOF AT THE BURT REYNOLDS DINNER THEATRE IN JUPITER, FLORIDA. “IT WAS A SPATHEPHYLLUM, THE MOST COMMON PEACE LILY,” SHE SAYS, “BUT TO SOMEONE WHO HAD NEVER GROWN ANYTHING, IT WAS WONDERFUL. I WAS INTRIGUED, AND I HAD TO KNOW MORE. MY DESIRE FOR KNOWLEDGE JUST TOOK OVER. MY APARTMENT FILLED WITH HOUSEPLANTS AND BOOKS.” SHE SHARES THE APARTMENT WITH HER HUSBAND MICHAEL MACDONALD, A RECORDING AND MASTERING ENGINEER. THEY MET IN 1985 IN A RECORDING STUDIO WHEN ZACHOS MADE A DEMO TAPE. “I THOUGHT HE WAS VERY CUTE,” SHE SAYS, “SO I ASKED HIM OUT.”

When she was between theatrical engagements, instead of surviving in the traditional role of waitress, Zachos worked in a plant shop. She moved on to study at the New York Botanical Garden, where she earned certificates in commercial horticulture (both garden design and plant production) and ethnobotany.

She wearied of the actor’s life. “I FELT THAT MY LIFE WAS NOT REALLY MY OWN, AND I WANTED IT TO BE. I DECIDED TO GET OUT. I MAKE QUICK AND SOMewhat PASSIONATE DECISIONS, AND MY HUSBAND, BEING THE VOICE OF REASON, SAID, ‘WHY DON’T YOU JUST WAIT...”
Harvard Medalists

Three alumni received the Harvard Medal and were publicly honored for their extraordinary service by President Lawrence H. Summers at the Harvard Alumni Association's annual meeting on June 5.

For Robert J. Glaser, S.B. ’40, M.D. ’43, a former professor at Harvard Medical School, former dean of the Stanford and University of Colorado medical schools, and since then a foundation executive active in medical philanthropy—Loyal son of Harvard and visionary scientist, your learned leadership has greatly strengthened the health and life of this University, ensuring a firm foundation for future generations.


For Franklin D. Raines, A.B. ’71, J.D. ’76, chairman and CEO of Fannie Mae, the world’s largest nonbank financial services company—Past president of the Board of Overseers, elected director of the Harvard Alumni Association, and chief marshal of the class of 1971, you serve with energetic commitment and conviction in pursuit of the public interest, keeping Harvard’s promise alive in our community and in our world.

She did and she didn’t. “I do a lot of lecturing, and it’s clear to me that the skills I developed as a performer make me a much better lecturer.” She is recently back from Sweden, where she addressed a Hoya conference. Hoyas are evergreen, shrublike, mostly epiphytic, usually climbing, plants of the milkweed family, from Southeast Asia through Australia, and they comprise her favorite genus. She has a hoya tattooed on her right calf that is meant to be the orange-flowered Hoya tsangii. One of her goals is “to get everyone hooked on hoyas.” A possibly more attainable goal is “to have a gardening television show, which would combine the two things I like most, performance skills and horticulture.” Many of the gardening shows that she sees feature people who are comfortable in front of the camera, but lack strong horticultural knowledge, or people who know their plants but look like deer caught in the headlights.

Meantime, along with her other work, she is writing the text and taking the photographs for a book about 200 tropical plants for Timber Press, a big job. It has the working title “Tempting Tropica: Houseplants for the Connoisseur.” Zachos promises that well over half her subjects will be perfectly easy to grow without a greenhouse. She is growing them herself in her cramped Manhattan quarters and in her airy, spacious, light-filled house on two woodland acres in rural Pennsylvania, where she and Michael live on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.

In case she was missing the roar of the greasepaint, she had a brief reprise in May when Les Miserables finally closed after its run of 16 years. Management, says Zachos, “invited all the Broadway alums to come back to see the show, participate in a post-show performance, and attend a party at Rockefeller Center. I bet I was the only horticulturist on stage!”

~Christopher Reed