

'Happy Days' are here once again

BY JERRY TALLMER

On a beautiful summer's day in May 1984, in the city of London, a vigorous, youthful 66-year-old American named Alan Schneider crossed the street to mail a letter to the playwright Samuel Beckett who was then living in Paris. A speeding motorcycle cut down Alan Schneider. He died four days later in the Royal Free Hospital, Hampstead.

In that same month and year, May 1984, an ever-young, creative 48-year-old American named Joseph Chaikin was cut

down — critically impaired, but not killed — by a stroke incurred in the

the elbow of Commerce St., Sept. 17, 1961.

Joe Chaikin, the founder of the groundbreaking Open Theatre, who this past decade has fought his way back from the stroke, inch by inch, step by step, day by day, year by year, into something close to full proficiency, does not wear a baseball cap while directing the 2002 "Happy Days" that enters previews Sept. 17 toward a Sept. 29 opening at that very same Cherry Lane Theatre. He also never happened to see the 1961 Alan Schneider production.

"Happy Days" is the Beckett drama in which Winnie, who is buried up to her waist in a mound of sand and burnt grass — up to her neck in Act II — does all the talking, chattering, cheery-grim recollecting, while her all but wordless husband Willie slithers around the base of the mound like some large, numb, house-broken boa constrictor. It ends with Willie reaching up for, or maybe not, the revolver that Winnie has extracted, along with all the other useful doodads — toothbrush, toothpaste, mirror, hairbrush, parasol, and spectacles — from her purse.

"Joe and I have been talking about doing this play for 25 years," says Bill Coco, Chaikin's friend, dramaturge, and, over the years, indispensable transmission belt between idea and full articulation. He's sitting across a table from Chaikin in the latter's longtime Westbeth apartment, facing out to the river.

"Joe always resisted 'Happy Days' because of the darkness of the second act," says Coco, as Chaikin throws in a word of concurrence. "Then, one day, two-and-half years ago, Joe called and said: 'Let's do 'Happy Days.' 'He'd found a way to find comedy in the darkness.

"We didn't have a theater, we didn't



"Happy Holidays" director Joseph Chaikin and star Joyce Aaron.

have anything except the play. Joyce Aaron has an apartment here [in Westbeth]. We simply went to work on it in Joyce's apartment, three days a week, for six months. One day I observed that we were in the year 2000 and going toward the 40th anniversary of the play's premiere at the Cherry Lane. Well, so we're a year late. I call it the 40th anniversary plus

one."

After Ruth White, Madeleine Reynaud, Peggy Ashcroft, Irene Worth, and Billie Whitelaw have played the part of Winnie in "Happy Days," among many others. Now it is Joyce Aaron's turn, a leading actress/writer/director of what might be called new departures since the early days

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course of a heart operation, his third operation in a handful of years, at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in this city.

The stroke left actor/director Chaikin an aphasic, throttled by a blockage of speech, of words, not an easy fate for any human being, but most particularly unfortunate for one whose stock in trade are words.

Alan Schneider, in his lifetime the foremost director of Samuel Beckett plays in the United States, could always be spotted at rehearsals by the baseball cap that was his talisman. One journalistic witness can still see Schneider, in that baseball cap, whispering suggestions in a huddle with one or both performers — Ruth White, John C. Becker — during rehearsals at the Cherry Lane Theatre for the world premiere (not the New York City premiere, the world premiere of "Happy Days" that would open there, at the little playhouse in

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of Peter Brook, Sam Shepard, and, with the Open Theatre, Chaikin himself. The 2002 Willie is Ron Faber, another Open Theatre graduate.

Now, in his Westbeth apartment, Chaikin volunteers, slowly, painstakingly: "We, were, wondering, who's, best, for, the, part, of, Winnie. Yes, and no. Yes, and no. Then Joyce, yes, is right here."

Is Willie, at the end of the play, really reaching for the gun or, in some hapless gesture of affection, trying to touch what still exists of Winnie outside the mound?

"Hm... hm... hm," says Joe Chaikin. And then: "As we go, into, rehearsal, that, will become, much clearer..."

"But... that's not clear now," Chaikin says, the words accelerating. Then: "I love rehearsals. So many things come out."

With a deepening smile — Joe smiles a lot — he says: "Let me tell you a beautiful story. When I was young, 20-something, somebody gave me a free ticket to see 'Waiting for Godot' on Broadway. This was the 1956 production with Bert Lahr, E.G. Marshall, Kurt Kasznar, and, of course Alvin Epstein [an incredible performance as Lucky, Pozzo's slave].

"It was fascinating, haunting, it stayed in my head, I bought books of plays by Beckett, then in 1979 Lynn Meadow had me direct 'Endgame' at the Manhattan Theatre Club."

Bill Coco throws in: "'Happy Days' is the only full-length play of Beckett's that Joe [until this one] hasn't directed."

"I'm still obsessed by Beckett," says the Joseph Chaikin who is now 67. "And once he sent me a letter and I met him, two times, in Paris. I love him. He was very

kind, but a really unhappy person. Major unhappy."

Joe Chaikin laughs out loud. "I was very articulate years ago," he says, the words tumbling out in a rapid but bumpy succession.

He was born in Brooklyn on Sept. 16, 1935, the son of a mother originally from Poland, a father from Russia, two who had met and married in Palestine and journeyed back and forth from there to the United States with the kids who would be baby Joe's brother and sister.

At five, the youngster was hit by rheumatic fever. "In the house two years," the adult says, the words tumbling out again. "Then better better better." Then rheumatic fever again, so [he was] sent to Florida to recover at the Children's Cardiac Center for two years.

"My father's teaching many languages, Hebrew, Russian, and stuff. He gets a job in Des Moines, Iowa, and that's where I was from 12 to 18 and then I went to Drake University, Iowa. At 18 I came to New York."

"I was lost. My sister had an apartment. Stayed there. Studied acting. Was a waiter at the Village Gate, for a few days. Hated it. But that's where I met Sam [Shepard, playwright to be] and [director] John Stix had us to dinner Uptown, and then Sam and I walked all the way down to the Village, talking. And that's around the time I got that free ticket to 'Waiting for Godot.'"

Sam Shepard and Joe Chaikin would remain close professional and personal friends from that day to this — a bond most recently made manifest by Chaikin's acclaimed direction of "The Late Henry

Moss" in last year's Sam Shepard season at the Signature Theatre.

But the young man back in the 1950s who was lost in New York, after studying with Mira Rostova and Nola Chilton had got his first true footing on stage at the Living Theater of Judith Malina and Julian Beck, in their early, crucial 14th St. productions of William Carlos Williams's "Many Loves," Jack Gelber's "The Connection," and Bertolt Brecht's "Man Is Man" (in which Chaikin won his first Obie Award; he would receive a Lifetime Achievement Obie in 1977).

"We had so many ideas in those days," says the Chaikin of today. "Mostly poor ideas," he lightly adds. "We started an acting workshop at the Living Theater, and when the Living Theater went to Europe [upon being busted for taxes by the feds] some of us stayed here, and worked on 'The Serpent,'" and out of that came the Open Theater.

When, after 10 years, Joe felt the Open


Theater "had become too establishment," he disbanded it. There was also his recurring heart problem, and the sheer effort to breathe.

"Then, a surprise, a valve replacement, and I was living again. I worked with Mira Rafalowicz, from Israel, we started the Winter Project at La MaMa... and then a third heart problem."

Then the stroke.

With Bill Coco at his side as his, so to speak, voice, his conveyer, his alter ego, Joe Chaikin has worked then to now without any real break, "in the old style," as Winnie of "Happy Days" likes to say. "No better, no worse, no change. No pain." Oh, Willie, don't bother about that revolver, this is going to be another happy day indeed.

"HAPPY DAYS." By Samuel Beckett. Directed by Joseph Chaikin. Previews begin Sept. 17 toward a Sept. 29 opening at the Cherry Lane Theater, 38 Commerce St., (212) 239-6200.

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