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## Lee Nagrin, Pioneer of Performance Art, Dies at 78

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By Andrew Salomon

Lee Nagrin, a pioneering multimedia and performance artist who was a fixture of the avant-garde theatre scene for the past 40 years, died this morning at Beth Israel Hospital due to complications of colon cancer. She was 78 and lived in Manhattan.

Nagrin, who is the subject of *Behind the Lid*, a career retrospective performance piece created with Basil Twist that opens June 12 at Silver Whale Gallery, was a fiercely independent artist who also worked as a singer, choreographer, director, and playwright. After appearing in the cult horror classic *The Blob*, she turned down a four-year contract from Paramount to continue her work in New York. She was also the first person to produce the work of Ionesco in the United States.

"I think Lee pulled the best out of you," composer Richard Isen, who collaborated with Nagrin on several works, told Back Stage. "She gave you a lot of freedom.... She let the moment get created by whatever the people brought, rather than push everyone into her own vision."

Nagrin grew up in Seattle, studied drama and English at the University of Washington, and worked at Seattle Repertory Playhouse. In 1950 she moved to New York, where she played a role in the development of several Off-Broadway theatres, including the Sullivan Street Playhouse, the Bridge Theatre, Theatre One, and the Downtown Theatre.

Nagrin, a singer of significant talent who trained with Metropolitan Opera coach Kathleen Lawler, fused operatic styles with more-popular musical forms.

From the early '70s to the early '80s, she worked with fellow multimedia artist Meredith Monk and her company, The House, touring nationally and internationally in such productions as *Vessel*, *Education of a Girl Child*, *Recent Ruins*, and *Ellis Island*. In 1979, Nagrin formed her own company, the Sky Fish Ensemble. In 1986, she premiered two works, *Bone Orchard* and *Bird/Bear*, the latter winning an Obie Award for Best New American Play.

Nagrin is survived by her longtime companion, Bruce Hutchinson. A memorial service will be announced at a later date.

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