

Off-Broadway Play Focuses On City Woman

By LIBBY GASAWAY
Staff Writer

Elaine Farris Hughes is starring in the off-Broadway musical, "Two Hearts Over Easy," even though she is home in Vicksburg.

The play's characters are based on Hughes and two other women who were friends of author Bob Cabell's. He dedicated the play to these "brunch buddies," whose lives and personalities he says were his inspiration.

"We lived in the same apartment building in New York, and we became great friends," Hughes said.

"Bob is so talented ... he's a song machine," she said. "All his plays are musicals. He does the words and music, but he doesn't know music. He sings them, and has somebody tape them."

Cabell has had two major off-Broadway musicals in the past four years, "Two Hearts Over Easy," and "Pretty Faces," both in New York.

"Two Hearts Over Easy" is about

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Vicksburg Post/Mike Doyle

Elaine Hughes

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four people, but those four are composites of Cabell's three friends.

Cabell said his first meeting with Hughes was by chance.

"I've known Elaine for 14 years," he said. "I first saw her in a computer shop. I asked her something and she said, 'I don't know anything about computers but I'd just love to learn,' in that wonderful Mississippi accent, and I was hooked.

"But she ratted on us and went back to Mississippi ... I still haven't forgiven her for that."

Hughes returned to Vicksburg last year, 14 years after she received a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant to research Lebanese Americans in Mississippi. She went to Columbia University in New York and decided to stay on after the grant ran out.

"I was starving, so I did some acting and singing, and I wrote some

sour asked her.

"I studied singing then," Hughes said, "but I never got real professional.

"I was teaching and singing in rhythm and blues shows, at night clubs. I did that for about three years," she said.

"I wasn't so good, but I love it so much.

"My first job singing was at an inn in Pennsylvania. I'd go out on the weekend with a piano player and I'd sing all night," she said.

"When I was singing I didn't want to do anything else, I didn't want to write, go to dinner, anything."

She also was in an improvisational group for about a year and a half, and acted in a friend's play. "It was my only paid theater experience," she said.

And she made a lot of friends.

"She was like Auntie Mame for all

books," she said. "They're mostly books on writing ... textbooks and using meditation in writing ... three books with partners and two on my own. I published four books in five years."

She also taught English and writing at Nassau Community College, a logical choice since she had taught at Hinds Community College before going to New York.

But she has always been an entertainer — "I was on the stage at 3" — so she was in her element.

As a child in Vicksburg, Hughes took elocution, dancing and singing lessons.

"Then when I was about 14, I got boy crazy and quit everything else."

It was years later that she mentioned to Ellis Nassour, a fellow Vicksburg writer living in New York, that she had always wanted to sing.

"Well, girl, why don't you?" Nas-

of us up here," Nassour said. "She'd have a salon brunch once a month and there'd be artists, singers, actors. She was like a piper, a very intelligent woman, wonderful sense of humor, an honest and good critic.

"Elaine gave me the impression that I was the No. 1 guy in her life.

"But she lied," he said, laughing.

"At her house, every man there thought he was No. 1."

And each one was. She really cared about her friends, he said, and if one was down on his luck, she would manage to get him a job somewhere.

Back home now, Hughes has been reveling in Vicksburg and people and places she enjoyed as a child. She plans to stay in Vicksburg, but live part of the time in New Orleans.

"Between singing and writing," she said, "I think I can keep myself for the rest of my life."