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Overlapping lives laid bare THEATRE NEW YORK:

By BRENDANLEMON
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The playbill of *Art, Life & Show-Biz*, now at PS 122 in downtown Manhattan, says that this "non-fiction play" has been "written, transcribed, and directed" by **Ain Gordon**, but all these activities could have been subsumed under another word: curated. For **Gordon** has essentially looked at the wealth of veteran female performing talent in New York and from it culled three spectacular, immensely absorbing portraits. **Gordon's** subjects are Helen Gallagher, Lola Pashalinski, and Valda Setterfield. Each is played by the real-life performer. Such simplicity is not apparent before the curtain rises. We settle into one of PS 122's snug spaces and confront a screen on to which **Gordon** and his co-designer Darren Chilton have projected a computer-desktop graphic with text like "**Ain OSX**" and "**Ain's Docs**". But the accompanying classical music suggests that the production will be both high-tech and historical. And it is. **Gordon** sits in a chair, initially asking the performers about their careers in chatshow-host fashion, and interspersing details from the interview sessions he conducted with the women to assemble the material. The women sit with the scripts in their laps, although they have each assimilated the words so well that you soon forget they are technically on book. The play has moments of pain, but it is also

suffused with music, terrific vintage photos, and artful stories. The women's clothing is very different - Pashalinski in black tux, Setterfield in grey plaid, and Gallagher in red blazer and skirt with black blouse - and at first their careers, too, seem dissimilar. The first was a founding member of New York's Ridiculous Theatrical Company in the 1960s; the second performed with Ballet Rambert in her native England before coming to America in 1958 and eventually beginning a decade-long stint in Merce Cunningham's dance company; and the third is associated primarily with musical comedy on Broadway. Soon, however, correspondences emerge. Over the past two decades, Pashalinski and Setterfield have worked with some of the same directors - Joanne Akalaitis, for example - and Gallagher and Setterfield have both appeared in *Wit*. Most of the overlap, interestingly, occurred after each performer unhitched herself from early career-making associations, and, after periods of self-doubt, re-emerged as a more complex individual. Even with the fascinating biographical and professional similarities, the women are too singular to be mistaken for each other. Gallagher is feisty and short and rather withholding about her romantic life. Pashalinski puts one immediately in mind of

Gertrude Stein. And Setterfield, despite her seeming reserve and, relative to the others, lack of strict experience as a comedian, can be extremely amusing. Although **Gordon** has kept the piece refreshingly unsentimental, all the women bear scars - both physical and emotional. It is difficult to imagine three veteran male performers submitting themselves to this kind of exercise. Setterfield survived a serious auto accident, and Gallagher endured the indignity of a return to Broadway after a long absence in a bit part in *Sweet Charity*. Pashalinski, meanwhile, recounts the most vulnerable moment in her career, in the mid 1980s, when she could not find work, and ended up getting a job in a cubic-zirconium factory. "We shared a floor," she says, "with a place where mentally retarded people packed boxes of pencils. You had to walk through them to get to us . . . It's funny now. But I was scared. Who was I? Why was I suddenly invisible?" Thanks to **Gordon's** ingenuity and to the women's skills as performers in this spare yet marvellous evening, neither Pashalinski nor Setterfield nor Gallagher is removed from view. Brendan Lemon PS.122, 150 First Avenue, at Ninth Street, New York. Tel + 1 212 477