

COVER STORY



Actress Barbara Rush's latest endeavor is the well-received one-woman play, "A Woman of Independent Means," adapted from Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey's novel. In the production, Rush ages 70 years without benefit of makeup or quick costume changes.

Daily News photo by Andy Gomperz

Rush not rushing through 'Woman'

By Rick Talcove

Daily News Theater Critic

Mention the name Barbara Rush and most people immediately think of a gracious, attractive, perpetually well-groomed movie star.

And why not? Rush has been active in Hollywood since 1951, and her film catalog is well above average. It includes dramas ("The Young Lions," "No Down Payment"), comedies ("Come Blow Your Horn," "Oh Men, Oh Women") and a science fiction "cult" film or two ("When Worlds Collide," "It Came From Outer Space").

Add her recent series ("Flamingo Road") and the inevitable guest shots on "Fantasy Island" and "Love Boat" and the image is complete. Barbara Rush is safe, secure, stylish.

But wait a second. Is this the same Barbara Rush who currently is playing a four-month local stage engagement that will pay her nothing, has her totally alone on stage for two hours and shows her aging 70 years — without benefit of makeup or quick costume changes.

It is. The play is "A Woman of Independent Means," Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey's adaptation of her 1978 novel that depicts a woman's life in the letters she writes to family and friends. Directed by Norman Cohen, the production has been playing to the public at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys since early October, but reviews are only now being written.

"I have a personal motto: You don't put on a show until it's ready. That is, until you know it's the best work you can do," said Rush in her Beverly Hills home. "We — Norman, Betsy Hailey, her husband Oliver and I — have been working on this play since June. We worked two hours a day. Of course, we each also did separate other projects as our careers dictated, but the dedication was there."

Apparently, so were the audiences. From the time it opened at the Back Alley, the play has

been performed — four times a week — to mostly full houses, a tribute to the popularity of both Hailey's novel and Rush's drawing power as an actress.

Finally, early this month, critics were invited.

"When I first read the book in '78, I immediately asked Betsy if she had any plans for adapting it to the stage. The first version she wrote was long. The second version was shorter, but I memorized every word — prior to rehearsals."

Since June, Rush and her creative co-workers have experimented and refined Hailey's script, deleting a good deal of material and transposing the order of many of the letters.

"Essentially, the play must convey a sense of time passing," said Rush. "And it must work for both people who have read the book and those who haven't. In fact, it's the response of the latter group that I'm especially interested in."

Stage acting is hardly new to Rush, who began by starring in the National Company of the Broadway hit "Forty Carats" in 1970. Three years later she saw the Melrose Theatre Equity-waiver production of Oliver Hailey's "Father's Day" — a play that had been dismissed by Broadway after one night — and co-produced it in a full-Equity production that toured extensively and played two engagements at the Huntington Hartford Theatre.

"'Father's Day' was the first time I actually worked on a play. When we played San Diego prior to the Hartford, we all fiddled constantly with the script, whipping it into shape. The version of 'Father's Day' that is now performed everywhere is the version we refined during that run."

Her creative appetite intrigued by stage performing, Rush went on to star in a number of shows, including "Private Lives," "Kennedy's Children," "Unsinkable Molly Brown," "The Supporting Cast" and — for two years — "Same Time, Next year."

"After you've done enough plays, you begin forming some dos and don'ts. For me, there are

two basic rules. One, never work for a director who has also written the play. Two, never work with a writer who will not allow one word of his or her script to be changed.

"This project has been a real collaboration. For instance, I asked Betsy if we could have some additional information on the heroine's first husband, who dies early in the play. Betsy agreed, not because I was the star but because she saw that the script needed that information."

Surprisingly, Rush does not find the idea of performing a solo show eight times a week particularly taxing. Besides citing good overall health habits, Rush relishes the idea of not having to change costumes and wigs during scene blackouts, as she did in "Same Time, Next year."

"And then, I never think of Betsy's script as merely a series of letters. This is a play, with a beginning, middle and an end. The only hard part was that out of about 1,000 letters in the book, we can only use 98 of them in the play. But those 98 are the most vital, because they tell the story."

Ironically, when Rush first decided to do the play she had trouble finding a director. Several known directors turned the project down, despite their admiration for the book.

"They all said the same thing: 'You can't expect an audience to sit still while you read them letters.'"

A chance meeting with Cohen immediately afforded her the ideal director. She also credits costume designer Garland Riddle with providing her deceptively simple clothing to span 70 years.

"In the past, I've sometimes had to do shows too quickly and open them before they were ready. Here at the Back Alley, I'm getting my way. I want to take 'A Woman of Independent Means' on the road, to Chicago, New York, London."

With more fine tuning to do — for example, the play's hour-long first act will be cut to 50 minutes — Rush may have a serious, critically acclaimed stage hit on her hands. For now, "Love Boat" will have to wait.