

Barbara Rush will test N.Y. stage

By Rick Talcove

Daily News Theater Critic

The Los Angeles-to-New York theatrical connection, always a shaky proposition at best, is about to have its latest round of action when Elizabeth Forsyth Hailey's "A Woman of Independent Means" opens on Broadway at the Biltmore Theatre May 3.

Hailey's one-woman play, adapted from her best-selling novel of the same name, will star Barbara Rush. Rush received great critical and audience acclaim when she recently performed the play over a five-month period at Van Nuys' Back Alley Theatre, an Equity-waiver facility with fewer than 100 seats.

Needless to say, the Biltmore is slightly larger: 950 seats.

Though "Woman" will play a few weeks in Boston as a tryout for New York, the show's arrival just a few days prior to the deadline for the Tony Awards' nominations will certainly trigger a lot of New York reaction — pro and con.

For whether we like it or not, the animosity that exists between New York and Los Angeles is a very real one. The theatrical road is littered with the remains of well-meaning, locally praised productions and performances that were shot down in the Manhattan theatrical arena. Two recent examples are the Barbara Perry one-woman show, "Passionate Ladies," and the L.A. Theatre Works' staging of "Greek."

The shows could not be more dissimilar. Perry's production, written and performed by her, was a

series of vignettes about five various females, all linked in some way to show business. Despite Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Awards for both writing and performing, Perry could not last beyond one week in New York. What was deemed special and noteworthy in Los Angeles was mostly shrugged off in New York, despite an encouraging word here and there.

The case of "Greek," a demanding, absurdist reworking of the Oedipus legend by England's Steven Berkoff, was even more severe. The show was condemned outright and closed after less than a week after it officially opened for review. Once again, the production was lauded locally by the local Critics' Circle and numerous local reviewers. Even more telling is the fact that several of the more vitriolic New York reviewers were

obviously condescending, if not downright hostile, toward Los Angeles theater critics in their reviews of the show.

Good, bad or indifferent, does a production coming from Los Angeles have several strikes against it before the curtain even goes up?

"I think you can worry yourself silly about that," said Rush, in a recent interview. "How a reviewer responds to a show can go back to what he had for dinner or even which side of the bed he got out of that morning. As a performer, you just do the best job you can."

But good intentions aside, isn't there a bit of politics involved? Why do highly touted foreign productions seem to last longer than similarly touted domestic productions — especially from the West Coast?

"The New York theatrical community doesn't want to admit that Los Angeles is coming of age

with theater," said one director who has worked in both cities. "New York is still the proving ground for theatrical excellence. Los Angeles is important and has made great strides in both quality and quantity of productions. But New York is still where it's at."

Of course, "A Woman of Independent Means" is neither the first nor the last local production to brave the New York scene. Los Angeles has long been a spawning ground for productions prior to New York. Some shows originate here — such as the musicals "Kismet," "Song of Norway" and "Peter Pan"

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as well as the Pulitzer Prize-winning plays "The Shadow Box" and "The Gin Game."

Neil Simon has spent most of the last decade premiering his projects here. Other shows — like England's "A Taste of Honey" and "Oliver!" — played their American premieres locally before facing Manhattan's audiences and critics.

Observers have differing opinions as to how the production of "A Woman of Independent Means," should be handled. While agreeing the show is special, various individuals offer some interesting ideas as to how the show should be taken into New York.

"Barbara should tour with it first and build a reputation for both

herself and the show outside Los Angeles," said one producer.

"Although Barbara is popular on television, that kind of fame doesn't always translate to theater. Look at Carroll O'Connor's recent New York play folding in one night.

"After six months or a year, she should take it off-Broadway to the Manhattan Theatre Club or Hudson Guild; in other words, a prestige place and try it out for three weeks. That's what Pat Carroll did with her Gertrude Stein show. However, Pat was a New York favorite. Who knows if Barbara is?"

Another producer of both plays and musicals offers this observation:

"To me, 'A Woman of Independent Means' was a lovely and special evening. But those are the kind of shows that are the hardest to predict success for. They're also the hardest to sell to the audience. Barbara is wonderful and the show has great charm. But is charm enough when tickets for plays are \$40 each?

"I admit that when you see some of the God-awful overpriced stuff from England and regional theater, 'A Woman of Independent Means' shines. But there is a certain snob appeal necessary to put over one-person shows. I think the show and Barbara are bound to have a long afterlife, no matter what New York says."

And so it goes. By the same token, the theatrical record books are also filled with New York shows that succeeded there and failed here. As Los Angeles continues to flex its stage muscles, theatrical clashes — and surprises (good and bad) — are bound to happen.



"A Woman of Independent Means," starring Barbara Rush, will open at New York's Biltmore Theatre on May 3 after five months in Van Nuys.