

'A Woman' at the Back Alley Theatre

By Rick Talcove

Daily News Theater Critic

There is little use wasting words: Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey has adapted her novel, "A Woman of Independent Means," into a superb one-woman play and Barbara Rush is quite wonderful in it. The production at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys easily qualifies as one of the best theatrical offerings of the year.

This show is bound to have a long life on the stage.

Since one-person shows are hardly at a premium these days, one might wonder what is so special about this particular endeavor. First and foremost, the writing is extraordinarily good — simple, direct yet full of feeling and occasional surprises. Secondly, Forsythe has written a script that is truly a play, not merely a recitation. The action builds and the character develops before our eyes.

As for Rush, she and able director Norman Cohen have approached this small but formidable play with little theatrical pretention but with a good amount of theatrical sense. Required to age seven decades during the course of the evening, Rush has opted for a simple, direct manner with the transitions in age and attitude taking place to fine subtle effect.

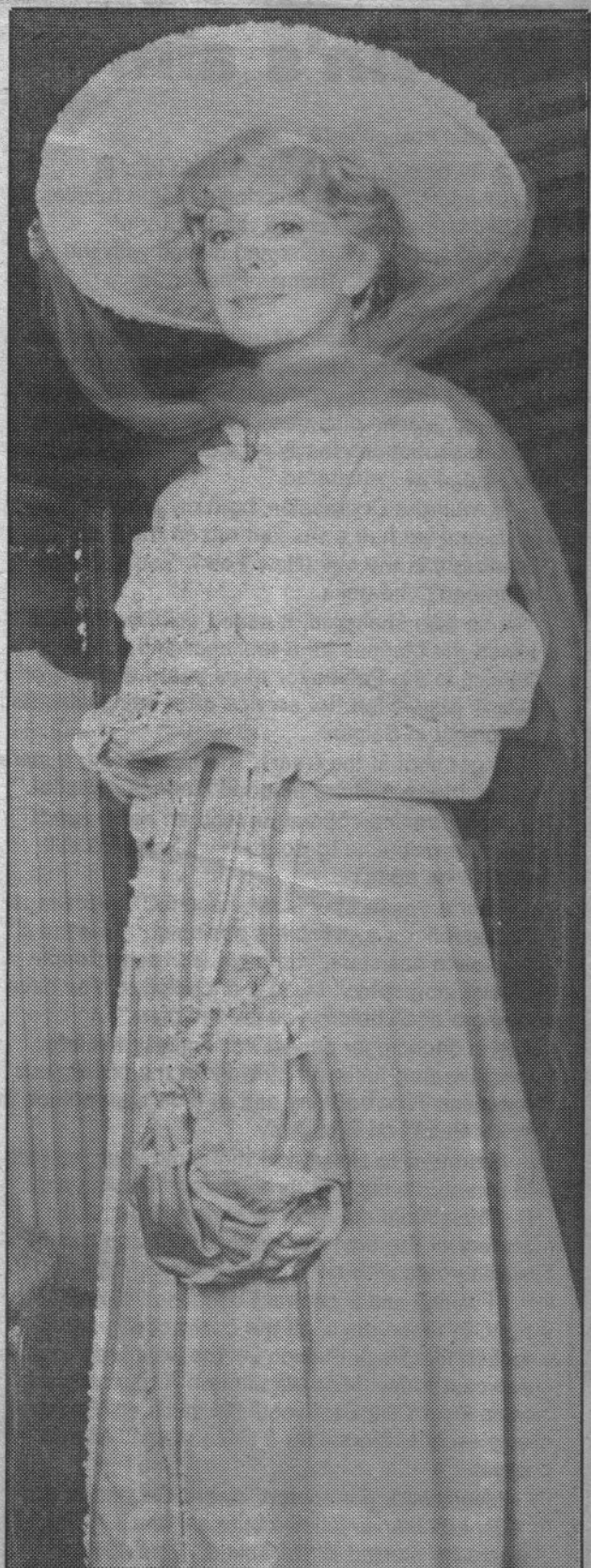
As in the novel, Forsythe chronicles this woman's life in letters she writes to friends, relatives and strangers. Far from being monotonous, this style of writing allows us to view Elizabeth Steed Garner as a complete woman, living life through its ups and downs, always with grace and dignity.

For Rush, this play can only enhance her career. At first, Rush's presence seems to be more her own than the character's. But within minutes this actress has us hooked on the character she is playing and accomplishes a minor theatrical miracle over the course of the next two hours.

This production is first class all the way, with Marcia Hinds' set, Pam Rank's lighting and Garland Riddle's costumes all adding to the overall achievement of this fine effort.

"A Woman of Independent Means," which was developed in workshop over a period of several months, remains at the Back Alley through January. It is a perfect holiday show, one that should last beyond this season and through the oncoming years.

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Barbara Rush stars in the one-woman play called "A Woman of Independent Means."