

A Woman of Independent Means

REVIEWED BY POLLY WARFIELD

Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; 780-2240. Opened Oct. 8 as a workshop production; Equity-waiver opening Dec. 9; plays Thurs., Fri. & Sun., 8; Sat., 3:30; ends Jan. 29.

It takes an able and charismatic actress to hold an audience enchanted throughout a one-woman show, especially when it is a full-length play. It takes a writer of considerable skill and a knowledgeable director as well. We have it all in *A Woman of Independent Means*, written by Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey, directed by Norman Cohen, starring Barbara Rush in a lovely, lustrous, many-faceted performance of depth and charm as playwright Hailey's real-life grandmother. The playwright emphasizes that the story inspired by her grandmother is not always strictly autobiographical but the character and personality are accurate and truly drawn. First staged in a workshop production, it is still considered a work in progress but audience response has been so consistently positive it was decided at last to allow reviews before the show goes on tour and ultimately to New York.

Elizabeth Alcott's birth and girlhood ushered in the 20th century—auspiciously, it would seem. Her life encompassed bewildering changes; she was equal to all of them. Born to a leading Dallas family and a degree of gentility and affluence, she encountered personal hardship and grief and bore them with strength, dignity and a fine aristocratic sense of *noblesse oblige*. Her sweet femininity was adequate disguise for a steely will; her velvet glove encased an iron hand. Bess was a woman worthy of Shaw. Betsy Hailey, her granddaughter/namesake proves worthy of Bess.

Actress Rush, in turn, does justice to both. She gives us Bess as a girl and as a woman of gradually developing strength, intellect, confidence and maturity. A dewy young bride endowed not only with beauty but also a \$20,000 inheritance (handsome for those days), she unhesitatingly lends her husband the money interest free (to be paid back at "\$1,000 a year for the next 20 years"). Her good business sense takes time to manifest but when left a widow with three young children she copes, invests wisely (when all about her are losing their heads in the 1929 crash) and, through consequent suitors, second marriage, European adventures, becomes—persuasive femininity regardless—a formidable woman, a woman of independent means and independent mind. And now, thanks to her granddaughter and the actress who portrays her, no longer an unsung heroine.

The play is handsomely staged on a simple, well-decorated set designed by Marcia Hinds, lit by Pam Rank, to the accompaniment of sound designed by Jon Gottlieb. Actress Rush, looking beautiful throughout, manages smooth and unobtrusive costume and wig changes suitable for a stylish woman from the late 1890s to the 1930s. These are designed by Garland W. Riddle.

An actress proves her mettle. A playwright's moving tribute to her grandmother proves a distaff tribute in general—whatever difficulties, hindrances, encumbrances, there have always been valiant women. Play, production, performance are spirit lifting.



ED KRIEGER

And of a different festive nature is Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey's *A Woman of Independent Means* with **Barbara Rush** (right), now extended through Jan. 29 at the Back Alley.