

## A PLAYWRIGHT

### OF INDEPENDENT MEANS BY EILEENE WINTERS

*Life is a splendid thing for Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey. Her first novel, "A Woman of Independent Means," was a bestseller. Now a play, it enjoys a raving run in Van Nuys and may see the lights on Broadway. Her second novel, "Life Sentences," is on the current bestselling list and Hailey's at work on a third. She also finds time to be a wife and mother of two.*

STUDIO CITY'S ELIZABETH FORSYTHE HAILEY, author of two best-selling novels, is now a playwright. Her one-woman play, "A Woman of Independent Means," based on her acclaimed novel of the same name, is enjoying an extended engagement at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys and, with minor revisions, will go on tour and may ultimately hit the big time in New York.

The story is a tapestry tracing the life of a woman from girlhood to old age, and is taken from letters by Hailey's grandmother, about herself and all the people whose lives touched hers. It stars Barbara Rush. Because of her remarkable acting skills, the audience forgets, after a few minutes, that there's only one actress on stage. All the characters come to life, and the stage is teeming with well-drawn, three-dimensional human beings.

"It's been a wonderful experience," exclaims Betsy, as Hailey prefers to be called. "I can't believe it, my first time writing for the theatre. I know how terrifying and cruel the theatre can be at times. I was scared to death when it came time for those words to be said out loud, to an audience. I wasn't at all sure it would work."

Barbara, however, knew that "Independent Means" would work as theatre. "She was determined to memorize it before there was any thought of a production," Betsy states. "She started last spring and didn't want to start rehearsal until she knew all the words. She even went back and read the book."

Five years ago "A Woman of Independent Means" first appeared on the paperback national best-seller list. Today after 13 printings, and more than a million copies sold, the computers automatically re-order the book when the stores run out of stock.

The novel is based on the life of Elizabeth Steed, Hailey's grandmother, and



is written in the form of letters to her family and friends. Betsy drew the story from travel diaries her grandmother kept from European trips. "I really created a character that would be more introspective. The facts are largely true. Her life had a number of dramatic and tragic twists. I was haunted by the idea that a woman could lose a husband and a child in such a short space of time and still survive with an incredible sense of adventure and interest in her life," Betsy explains.

While she always had a desire to write, Betsy never dreamed of having a book. "I just wanted to see if I could do something of that length and scope," she says.

Betsy Hailey's journalism career began during her college years in Dallas, her home town. She was a reporter when she married Oliver Hailey, and went to Connecticut with him when he entered the Yale School of Drama. "And that," she says, "was the end of my journalism career." After two babies, the Haileys moved to Hollywood, where Oliver works as a freelance screenwriter.

Betsy often helped him to write story outlines, and to draft scenes. Together they worked on the "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" TV series.

Oliver is also a playwright in his own right; together they saw the dramatic possibilities of the book. "Oliver had a teaching job at Cal Poly, which was about an hour's drive from our house. He said 'Let's use this drive time creatively—you start reading the book and I'll help you edit. We'll decide what stays and what goes.' It was a wonderful way to do it and used time that would be otherwise wasted. He'd go and teach his class, while I would go to the library and work on 'Life Sentences,' (Betsy's second novel about contemporary women meeting the challenge of today's problems). With his help, we got the play into shape in three months."

With her husband's encouragement, Betsy's perseverance paid off. Today producers are interested in taking the show to Dallas and St. Louis. New York producers have also expressed interest, and a London production is a definite possibility.