

# Barbara Rush in Broadway debut

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NEW YORK — Bad plays can be fun, if they're bad enough.

A nominee for this year's "Moose Murders" prize for the best bad play of the year is "A Woman of Independent Means," which opened Thursday night on Broadway at the Biltmore Theater.

Normally staid critics were rolling in the aisles, or at least in their seats, at the press preview I attended. This was the real thing, a genuine four-star fiasco with a cast of one.

No small feat, by the way, for a single actress to achieve what normally takes an entire cast of bumbling players to produce: Unwitting theatrical mayhem of the kind immortalized in "Noises Off."

The actress (and I feel cruel naming her) is Barbara Rush, making her Broadway debut in this Edsel of stage vehicles. The playwright is Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey, who has adapted her nov-



Barbara Rush in a scene from 'A Woman of Independent Means'

el of the same title for the stage.

The format is the reading (or, if you prefer, reciting) of letters, and the reader-writer is a fictional character apparently based on Miss Hailey's maternal grandmother. The heroine is named Elizabeth Steed Garner, and she's a pulp-fiction snob from Dallas. J.R. would have nothing on her.

"A blank page to me is like a drink to an alcohol-

ic," says Bess, late in life, and by this point we want to confiscate every scrap of vellum within her reach, along with her typewriter and fountain pen.

We know much more about this shallow woman than we could ever care to know, even if she had lived. As fiction, Miss Hailey's epistolary chronicle is a crashing bore, a compendium of cliches, a resolutely trivial invention.

It contains the stan-

dard junk-novel mix of outrageous wealth — Bess inherits the big bucks from her mother early in life — fame, travel, mild sexual allusion, the passing of generations in a dynasty, occasional perfidy by the heroine, and dripping sentimentality.

The play spans 78 years (from 1899 to 1977, when Bess dies) and marks no fewer than seven major deaths among the heroine's friends and relations. These are in-

terspersed among accounts of giddy junkets abroad, marriages, births, family feuds, two world wars and a stock market crash.

History only intrudes, true to the form, as it applies to the lives of individuals. Bess is just sure the First World War killed her first husband, even though he didn't serve in it. She is equally certain that the crash of '29 killed her stockbroker, even if he didn't leap out a window.

Her long friendship with said stockbroker begins, by the way, when he runs over her daughter in a car. Bess, who is too kind to sue, instead signs him up as her financial adviser after her husband dies. He makes her even richer. Meanwhile, she seems to become famous running the "Midwestern Life Insurance Co.," singlehanded.

One son dies of spinal meningitis, another is never spoken of again after he's packed off to war, and Bess's daughter (who was hit by that car, but saved) gives her grief — and a granddaughter.

Some of the accounts in this play are frankly mind-boggling, and Miss Rush's thumbnail dramatizations of them become unintentionally hilarious. A scene involving coffins on a train, and one accidentally left on the station platform, is played with, as it were, dead seriousness, but it produces inevitable guffaws.

Bess's stories are peppered with such weighty aphorisms as, "Life is our only defense against death." Major events are conveyed in short-hand, with brief sound and light effects. Indicating that Bess's house is burning to the ground, Miss Rush emits little squeals of horror while a fire bell clangs.

The shorthand and the macabre reach their apotheosis with the assassination of JFK. The "Ask not" passage of his inaugural speech is interrupted by gunshots, and Bess promptly writes a letter to the president's widow that concludes, preposterously, in French: "Courage, ma chere Jacqueline!"

It's pretty clear by then that Bess is a busybody, who keeps her 3-year-old great-granddaughter on the phone because no one else will listen to her. She is spoiled, selfish, jealous and petulant, and she is lousy company. Only in her old age does the portrait

Miss Rush slogs through this muck and mire with eyes wide open, executing some rather deft costume changes on stage. The costumes are by Garland Riddle. The setting is Bess's last apartment in a luxury condo, and it is done in a style one presumes to be Texas Excessive. The lighting, which is called on to do more than it should, is by Martin Aronstein.

Such trash may be good for a derisive snicker or two, but not at Broadway prices. It is best left on the nightstand.