

Detailed portrait of a 'Woman of Independent Means'

Barbara Rush stars in staging of novel

A WOMAN OF INDEPENDENT MEANS, a play by Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey; directed by Norman Cohen; set by Marcia Hinds; lighting by Pam Rank; costumes by Garland W. Riddle; sound by Jon Gottlieb. Presented by Laura Zucker and Alan Miller at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. 8 p.m. Thurs, Fri & Sun; 3:30 p.m. Sat, through Jan. 29. Tickets: \$10. Reservations: 780-2240.

Bess Steed Garner.....Barbara Rush

By Jay Reiner

Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey's "A Woman of Independent Means" was hailed as an impressive first novel when it appeared in 1978. The book takes the form of a collection of letters written over the course of a lifetime by a chatty woman named Bess Steed Garner — a thinly disguised stand-in for Hailey's own grandmother to whom the novel is dedicated (along with Hailey's playwright husband, Oliver Hailey).

The book is an absorbing read, filled with the lively, independent spirit of a woman who knows her own mind and is not afraid to speak it. Bess was born to a Dallas family of wealth and position and, although not a woman of extraordinary accomplishment, her observations on life are shrewd and her strength in the face of numerous losses and disappointments is admirable. As for the other characters we glimpse through her letters, our imagination fills in the blank spots quite nicely.

Now the novel has been turned into a one-woman play by Hailey, directed by Norman Cohen and starring Barbara Rush. The drama's format remains essentially the same as that of the novel. Rush presents Bess to us entirely through her letters, covering a period from childhood to old age. Except for an occasional

change of costume and some movement about the stage, no attempt has been made to dramatize the events she speaks of. While the results have merit, for the most part they fall considerably short of the satisfactions to be had from the book.

Events and characters that Hailey describe movingly on the page suffer by comparison when similarly described onstage. Theater is a palpable medium, whereas Hailey's words appeal more to the imagination than the eye or ear. The book touches us deeply when it tells of the tragedies that left their mark on Bess' life — the deaths of her young husband, son and father all in the space of three years. But when these same events are related to us in a theater, the fact that we haven't met these characters face to face tends to diminish our sense of loss.

Dramatic logic is sometimes another casualty in the play. When, for instance, we read that Bess has had a serious falling out with her daughter, we accept it as an unfortunate fact of life. Yet when Bess tells us of the same painful episode onstage, her anguish doesn't entirely satisfy our curiosity.

A larger problem is Bess herself; she simply isn't as sympathetic a character as formerly. To a certain extent this is because Hailey has concentrated on external developments in her life while deleting portions of the letters that deal with her more complex, reflective inner world. More than anything else, it was this rich inner life that drew us to the character and gave her substance that was sometimes lacking in her worldly affairs.

Despite these drawbacks, Rush manages to draw a finely detailed, vivid portrait of Bess. Her transformation from a spoiled adolescent — "I



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got everything I asked for," she says at age 15 on the subject of Christmas, "but I always do" — to a perceptive, resourceful woman is carried off with an adroit mixture of subtlety and charm. Rush is even more impressive

when she leads Bess into the hazards of old age, a difficult transition for most actors to make. Rush does the character proud, but it remains to be seen just how far this play can successfully travel.