

STAGE REVIEW

A Woman of Independent Means

Back Alley Theatre, through Jan. 29

Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey's stage adaptation of her 1978 novel, "A Woman of Independent Means," is a penetrating portrait of the female psyche, which adds another notch to female-consciousness raising while providing a worthy vehicle for the prodigious talent of Barbara Rush.

Inspired by Hailey's grandmother, Elizabeth Alcott Steed, and the letters she penned during her lifetime, this one-woman show reprises the novel's letter-structure to vividly evoke a thinking and feeling woman, charting her childhood in a wealthy household of a Texas backwater in the 1890s to her demise in a Dallas luxury apartment in the 1960s.

Throughout her 73 years, Elizabeth had such an unstinting belief in the power of the written word that a blank page for her was like a drink to an alcoholic. To her parents, her husbands and children, friends, business associates and newspaper editors, even to Mrs. John Kennedy, she wrote about

love and death, domestic accidents and world crises, travel, the changing mores and institutions of a nation on the move, civilly expressing all the emotions that made her lose sleep. It was her way of explaining herself to herself.

And that self was fascinatingly multifaceted and ambivalent: spoiled little girl, charming manipulator who finagles French antiques from cousin Josie by sending her to a convalescent home, indefatigable social climber, appreciative wife and tender mother, upright and staunch businesswoman who honors all the claims of her late husband's insurance company and, as eventual chairman of the board, reinstates dividends. She is also a histrionic middle-aged flirt, inveterate explorer and pop philosopher. Above all, it is a self who becomes less a reflection of other people and societal structures and more a reflector of her own inner sense and sensibility.

In tackling the project, Barbara Rush, that pouting daughter on the edges of Sirkian melodramas of the '50s and female appurtenance for Daves *et al.* in the '60s, mobilizes and stretches her ability and craft since Elizabeth's letters are graphically enacted rather than tranquilly recited. Rush, for instance, not only lets us hear about Elizabeth's excitement of

owning an automobile for the first time as she writes to her broker friend but takes us on a proud if cautious drive down the town's main street, looking every which way and avoiding left turns at all costs.

Likewise, we share Elizabeth's sheer pleasure of grasping her husband's attention as she looks in his eyes and nestles in his arms for the last time. The props of Marcia Hinds' basic set of the Southern lady's study may help, as does the business that director Norman Cohen gives the actress, but the performance is essentially Rush's doing.

Moreover, the piece embodies an enormous breadth and depth of moods which Rush is the primary progenitor of, though she gets a boost from Pam Rank's lighting which closes down space in sorrow and opens it up in joy.

Finally, there's the transition from sly ingenue to addled biddy that Rush accomplishes virtually in terms of timbre, speech rhythms and a body that adds weight, then dwindles and bends before our very eyes. Though historically and psychologically accurate, Garland W. Riddle's hats and skirts are merely incidental in this regard.

Hailey's and Rush's "Woman" surely merits a voice beyond the Valley.

—Drew Casper