

THOUGHTS ON THEATER, as broadcast 2/2/84, on KCRW-FM,

by DON SHIRLEY

This is Don Shirley, with Thoughts on Theater. Today I'll take a look at "A Woman of Independent Means," at the Back Alley Theatre, and at Brian Friel's "Translations," at L.A. Stage Company in Hollywood.

First, "A Woman of Independent Means." This is a one-woman show, but don't be alarmed. I'm no fan of the solo effort as a dramatic form, but this one transcends its form. I can't recall a one-person show that I've liked more. For starters, this is not about a historical figure, so we don't have to ask any of those pesky historical questions; "A Woman of Independent Means" was adapted by Elizabeth Forysthe Hailey from her own novel. Secondly, the play uses the same form as the novel -- a series of letters written by the central character. Somehow it seems much less contrived to have an actor reciting her letters to us -- in more or less chronological order -- than it does to have a character simply rambling on about the highlights and lowlights of her life.

On the face of it, Hailey's character -- a Texas matron named Elizabeth Alcott Steed Garner -- is not as interesting as the great people whose lives are the usual subjects for one-person shows. But in fact, anyone can seem fascinating in the hands of a skilled dramatist who knows the character backwards and forwards. It might even be easier to delve into someone's interior life if there isn't a lot of hoopla going

on in her exterior life.

This is not to say that Elizabeth led a cloistered existence. She bore three children and temporarily took over an insurance company after her first husband's death. She traveled through Europe in high style -- several times. Throughout her life, she knew how to get what she wanted most of the time. And when she didn't, she knew how to cope. The only moment when her correspondence completely loses its customary cool is when Elizabeth thinks she is unfairly being shut out of her adult daughter's life. Though we never see her daughter except through Elizabeth's eyes, we do understand how it might be difficult for that daughter to become her own woman of independent means, with a mother like Elizabeth at her side.

Barbara Rush has the sort of role that actresses dream about, and she must be making the author's dreams -- as well as her own -- come true. She really saves the day in the second act, which covers much more territory than the first. In fact, the script for the second act might seem superficial and sketchy in the hands of another actress, but Rush knows how to fill in the spaces between the lines. And she does a great job in the aging department. Director Norman Cohen keeps Rush moving about the stage in a way that keeps us interested but never seems forced, and the design team has done first-rate work.

"A Woman of Independent Means" has been such a success that it's very difficult to get tickets. Probably your only hope is an extension of the run, so keep your eyes posted for

any word to that effect.

"Translations," at the L.A. Stage Company, is a lament for what was lost when the English established linguistic as well as political hegemony over Ireland. Set in 1833, the play depicts the cultural clash between the student body at a tiny Irish hedge school and the invading Britons, with a cross-cultural romance thrown in for what seem like perfunctory reasons.

Playwright Brian Friel is in a devilish position. He has to make us appreciate the glories of Gaelic, yet he has to do it through English -- the very language that usurped the Irish title away from Gaelic. The program for this production stipulates that the we're to pretend that the actors who speak English with an Irish accent are in fact speaking Gaelic, while those who speak it with a British accent are speaking English. Still, I couldn't help but think that the play would be infinitely more rewarding in a genuine Gaelic-English production. Of course, it wouldn't be done at the L.A. Stage Company if that were the case. But frankly -- considering the play's long-windedness, the predictability of its sentiments, and the half-baked quality of its narrative -- I would not regret the loss.

That's Thoughts on Theater for today. Join me again next Thursday at 1:50 or 6:55. Until then, this is Don Shirley.