

CALENDAR

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STAGE REVIEW

A WOMAN OF LETTERS WITH AUDIENCE APPEAL

By DAN SULLIVAN,
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Her old and new friends alike are cordially invited to meet Elizabeth Alcott Steed Garner this month at the Back Alley Theatre—if they can get in.

Your reviewer first met the purposeful Elizabeth in 1978 in the pages of Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey's novel-in-letters, "A Woman of Independent Means." At first, we weren't sure we liked her high-handed charm. In fact, we were quite sure we didn't. But by the last letter (Elizabeth an old lady now, learning to write again after having suffered a stroke), we would have marched through fire for her.

That's likely to be the reader's reaction to Barbara Rush in the new one-woman stage version of "A Woman of Independent Means" (also by Hailey) at the Back Alley. Rush picks up every trick, and leaves you a blubbing fool at the end. Unfortunately, enough people have already seen the show to send all their friends to it, and there are almost no tickets to be had.

Elizabeth, of course, would manage it. She would sit down at her graceful writing desk and compose

one of her unrefusable letters. "Dear Back Alley Theatre: How wonderful to learn that the Los Angeles theater renaissance continues, with yet another delightful—and original—play! Unfortunately, my husband and I will be visiting your city from Dallas for only a few days. Dare we hope . . .?"

Enclosed, the Back Alley would probably find a \$250 "donation." Rush reminds us that that's how Elizabeth got her son on the list at Choate. An unscrupulous woman? Certainly not. We see her sense of honor when she insists that her late husband's insurance company not default on its policyholders. She simply believes in "supervising" life, in so far as this is possible. Ultimately—this is part of her fineness—she knows that it's not.

It's delightful to watch Rush manage the world from her writing desk, not without hard feelings on the part of the managed, all the funnier for our having to imagine them. There's the time when she retrieves Mama's marriage bed from Papa and his new, young wife. Twin beds placed side by side, she assures them in her best smarmy Emily Post manner, give "entirely the

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Barbara Rush, "A Woman of Independent Means" at Back Alley.

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effect of shared repose."

When the bed is shipped to her with an eloquent lack of comment, she understands the rebuke, she prettily protests it, and she keeps the bed. To the victor, as they say . . . and Mama *wanted* her to have that bed.

But Rush's Elizabeth is no stereotyped Southern vixen. She simply sees other people's paths more clearly than they do. She learns, with humor, not to expect gratitude for that. She also learns to take life's defeats with dignity and courage—the death of her first husband, the death of her young son, and perhaps most cruel, the rejection of her adult daughter.

There's no help for these things but to swallow them and do the next thing. This takes more and more effort as one gets to be 70. What appalls her at the end is the "vulgarity" of old age. Finally, she's a child laboring to make her letters right.

There's nothing vulgar in Rush's performance. It exhibits Elizabeth's kind of toughness (more than two hours alone on stage) and her hand for the finely graduated detail, too, particularly as she declines into old age.

It could be that director Norman Cohen bustles his star around too much in the first part of the play, wanting to keep things from getting static. And the music cues are frankly corny, from the tinkly nursery tunes to "The Eyes of Texas" as J.F.K. starts his motorcade in Dallas. (Elizabeth lives to see that, and writes Jackie a condolence letter.)

No matter. Those who know "A Woman of Independent Means" as a novel will welcome it on stage. Those who see Rush in it will want to run out and buy the novel. If only Mrs. Garner could be prevailed upon to lengthen her stay in our city! But she is said to have engagements in Dallas and London.

Performances continue through Jan. 29 at 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays, with Saturday matinees at 3 p.m., through Jan. 29. Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys (851-9750).