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**A WOMAN OF INDEPENDENT MEANS**

Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey's play, based on her novel of the same title, was inspired by the life of her own grandmother, who seems to have been an inspirational creature indeed. Born at the turn of the century, a pampered girl very much used to getting her own way, she survived the deaths of her adoring husband and young son, the near bankruptcy of her husband's business and other personal disasters to become very much her own woman, a woman of independent means, both financially and in the deeper sense of having the inner resources to order her world pretty much the way she thought it ought to be. You may not always like her — at times her strong-willed temperament seems bossy and selfish — but you will certainly admire her, and perhaps envy her strength. I for one was encouraged, inspired by her story, reassured in the knowledge that it can be done, that life can be a victory of sorts for those courageous enough to face it head on and to make demands of it.

This is a one-woman show, a well-structured compilation of letters, notes and telegrams written by Mrs. Elizabeth Stead, who was a very prolific correspondent throughout her life. It provides an actress with a terrific chance to show her stuff, and Barbara Rush rises to the challenge quite impressively, aging from a young girl to an old woman during the course of two hours so convincingly that one is taken aback to discover at her curtain call that she is not, in fact, nearing 80. Director Norman Cohen has successfully managed to move the action smoothly through various times and locales on a single set.

Heartening though the show is, it is also a sad reminder of the demise of letter writing. Mrs. Stead writes "only in a letter do I dare express my feelings openly." Lacking the safety of the written word, how many of us never manage to express our feelings openly at all? Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; Tues.-Wed. & Sun., 8 p.m.; Sat., 3:30 p.m.; thru Feb. 29. Call 780-2240. (May be sold out.)

—Joie Davidow

**We also recommend the following productions:**

**Claptrap** at L.A. Theater Unit, **A Night at Harpo's** at the Cast Theater, **The Ritz** at the Variety Arts Center, **A Woman of Independent Means** at the Back Alley Theater, **227** at Crossroads Academy, **Alligator Tails** and **Close**, both at Factory Place Theater, **L'Amante Anglaise** and **The Nannies**, both at Stages, **Get Happy** at the Pilot Theater, **Last Summer at Bluefish Cove** at the Fountain Theater, **You Can't Get There from Here** at the Powerhouse Theater.