

# Stage: Barbara Rush In 'Independent Means'

By FRANK RICH

**I**NTO every Broadway season, a little total insanity must fall, and this season's quotient has just fallen, with a thud, at the Biltmore Theater. It is there that brave souls can encounter Barbara Rush's recital, "A Woman of Independent Means" — a one-performer show that makes last fall's stultifying "Peg" look like a Knicks game.

In this amateur theatrical — billed as "a play" and adapted by Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey from her own popular novel — Miss Rush spends over two hours reciting letters attributed to a fictional Texas matriarch named Bess Steed Garner. Bess is a selfish but persevering woman whose life extends from 1899 to 1977. During that span, she marries twice, raises several children, travels abroad, celebrates every holiday and witnesses the births, deaths and weddings of many loved ones. She also cultivates a fortune that requires her to attend endlessly to the fine details of stock transactions, insurance policies and estate planning. At one point, Bess almost goes broke — but it is the evening's principal tragedy that she is never so impoverished that she must forgo postage stamps.

Mrs. Hailey apparently sees Bess as a representative figure — a vaguely pre-feminist American woman whose life is both heroic and foolish, giving and selfish. If the letters were written by a writer as trenchant as Willa Cather or Ring Lardner, the various ironies of Bess's existence might be meaningful and

## Letters From Bess

**A WOMAN OF INDEPENDENT MEANS**, by Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey, based on her novel; directed by Norman Cohen; incidental music by Henry Mancini; scenery by Roy Christopher; lighting by Martin Aronstein; costumes by Garland Riddle; sound by Jon Gottlieb; stage manager, Warren Crane; production associate, Karen Leahy; associate producers, Robert Michael Geisler and John Roberdeau. Presented by Robert A. Buckley and Douglas Urbanski and James Hansen, with Della Koenig, Sandra Moss and Warren Cowan. At the Biltmore Theater, 261 West 47th Street.  
WITH: Barbara Rush

dramatic. But the life that unfolds in "A Woman of Independent Means" is instead an avalanche of unexamined trivial details, now and then punctuated by melodramatic events and observations seemingly culled from greeting cards. ("Life is our only defense against death" goes one typical homily.) We never hear the letters that Bess receives from her various correspondents — and, worse, Mrs. Hailey utterly fails to make those friends and family members come alive in the heroine's own epistles.

Miss Rush, a Hollywood veteran, is a handsome woman who tries terribly hard to be ingratiating, models a wide variety of hats and, at the end, affects a stilted walk and thick voice that are supposed to indicate Bess's passage into old age. The performer holds forth from a heavily draped salon that looks like the front office of a Beverly Hills funeral parlor. There are many recorded sound effects to indicate that Bess is traveling by train or boat and, in the tragic passages, that her child has been hit by a car or that her house has burned down. The incidental music, assem-



Martha Swope

Barbara Rush in the play "A Woman of Independent Means."