

LEGIT REVIEWS**A Woman Of Independent Means****(Back Alley Theater; \$10 top)**

Nothing in Barbara Rush's career, as durable and fetching as that has been, is indicative of her mesmerizing performance in Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey's adaptation of her own novel, "A Woman Of Independent Means."

Rush's lustrous persona (from such films as "The Young Philadelphians" and "Come Blow Your Horn" to the plays "Father's Day" and "Forty Carats," among work dating back to 1951) is not totally under disguise in this one-woman production. But this deepening, shaded, and varied portrait represents Rush's best performance ever in a play that is cleverly written by Hailey and deftly directed by Norman Cohen.

The character comes to life in that oldest of literary devices, from the reading of letters the heroine is writing to family and friends, stretching from the turn of the century to the woman's death, etched by Rush with artful craft, 68 years later.

Hailey (wife of playwright Oliver Hailey) first created the work as a novel, using letters written by her grandmother, published with acclaim five years ago. Rush began developing it as an actress last April, unveiled it with workshop previews Oct. 8, and opened it to critics last weekend. Plan is to tour the play early next year, with the first playdate in the drama's real-life setting, Dallas, and then to hit off-Broadway by the summer. In an intimate house, the play has commercial wheels.

Rush's stage creation doesn't always succeed at hiding expert technique, particularly in the swift character transformations that Rush must negotiate as she hurtles from one domestic crisis and time period to another. But she's no less than luminous in exposing the vulnerability and endurance of a privileged woman whose values and experiences, both personally and professionally, uncannily chart a great deal of American social history.

Rush, of course, would even look good brushing her teeth but in the second act, when the play really builds momentum, she blends into her character's advancing age with a subtle, crooked gait and vocal transitions that compensate for the lack of any aging makeup.

One device the production uses with aplomb is the ever-changing hats Rush mercurially adorns off assorted set pieces. Garland W. Riddle's costumes and Marcia Hinds' livingroom design, artfully enhanced by a curving, shingled, wooded design that is symbolically suggestive of a life's cycle, is indicative of the production's taste. Jon Gottlieb's sound and Pam Rank's lighting contribute further texture.

The Rush character, in real life born Elizabeth Alcott and twice married to rich husbands, refers at the end to a granddaughter named Betsy whose writer-husband is moving to the Yale drama school. "Betsy," of course, is playwright Elizabeth Hailey.

Hailey's epistle technique is tricky to pull off on stage — for one thing, the actress in the role has to dramatize language that is not ordinary dialog but the words of an educated woman carefully putting words to paper. Rush doesn't read the words but exhales them, and her ability to sustain interest under this circumstance is extraordinary. Another richness is the play's deceptive measure of creating characters never seen nor heard.

Director Cohen's staging is imaginative. Only one qualification mars the production — its two-hour playing time. The sheer bulk of material is unnecessary, pointedly some of the more mundane activities with the woman's children and family, and could be easily trimmed for a more taut dramatic experience.

Loyn.