

THEATER Profile

Our advice? See Ivey as Landers.

By Scott Harrah

Photo by Carol Rosegg
Judith Ivey as Ann Landers

Ann Landers, who died in 2002, wasn't the first newspaper columnist to give advice in print — but her open-minded views on everything from women's rights to lighter topics like the proper way to hang toilet paper made her the most groundbreaking. That's one of the reasons two-time Tony winner Judith Ivey jumped at the chance to play Landers in playwright David Rambo's powerful one-woman show "The Lady With All the Answers."



"Ann Landers is iconic," Ivey said in an interview conducted before a recent morning rehearsal. "I grew up on her. I felt it was important to tell her story, and thought it would be real kick to try and mimic her and make her accessible to everybody. She was a real humanitarian. She really took her work seriously, and had a responsibility to her readers."

Ann Landers was a pen name for Esther Pauline Friedman Lederer, a Chicago housewife who took over the column in 1955 after the original "Ann Landers" died. Although "Eppie" — as family and friends knew her — had no formal training in journalism or psychology, an estimated 90 million readers devoured her no-nonsense advice in a syndicated column published in 1,200 newspapers nationwide. Her twin sister, Pauline Esther Friedman Phillips, was Dear Abby — but Ivey believes there's a reason why Ann Landers had more of a social impact than her famous sibling.

"The distinction was Dear Abby was much more frivolous; she gave a two-sentence reply [to letters] and never really dealt with the problems," Ivey says. "I think Dear Abby approached her column more as entertainment and didn't want to take on the big issues, while Eppie cornered the market on 'let's talk about this in a serious manner' instead of whitewashing things. She really was the first Oprah."

Landers was renowned for promoting tolerance. “One of the greatest subjects she championed was homosexuality,” Ivey notes. “She went to the experts and they said ‘this is not an affliction; this is who people are.’ She said [gays] can’t be treated as ogres or as someone who has a disease.” Raised in Iowa, Landers wasn’t always so progressive. “She was actually quite conservative at first and then she’d change her point of view when the times changed.” A devout Jew, she often received hate mail from anti-Semites, homophobes, and right-wing fanatics for defending minorities and women’s rights. At one time, she was against divorce and premarital sex, but changed her perspective when she faced a personal crisis.”

“The whole premise of the play is Landers writing a column about revealing to the world she’s getting a divorce [from longtime husband Jules] after she’d been such an advocate for staying married,” Ivey says. “She used to think all brides should be virgins and said that with the advent of The Pill, that battle is a loser because you can protect yourself, so she began to think differently.”

Landers wrote a brief letter to readers about her divorce, in which she said, “Not only has this been the most difficult column I have ever written, but it is also the shortest. I apologize to my editors for not giving you your money’s worth today. I ask that you not fill this space with old letters. Please leave it blank — as a memorial to one of the world’s best marriages that didn’t make it to the finish line.”

Why was that column so tough to write? “I think she was always in love with him,” Ivey says of Landers’s divorce from Jules. “He wanted to make it somehow an arrangement; he didn’t want to lose her, and they stayed friends. I think it broke her heart that he went off with someone else and didn’t stay true to her. She didn’t believe in divorce and when it reached a point where that’s what she had to do in her life, she changed.”

Playing a Southern belle on “Designing Women” came naturally to Ivey since she’s a native Texan. Portraying Ann Landers, however, required research. She studied videotapes of Landers to learn the columnist’s mannerisms and Midwestern accent. “She had kind of a funny speech pattern and talked out of the side of her mouth,” Ivey says.

Last year, when the show played in Landers’ home base of Chicago, audiences were amazed by Ivey’s authentic mimicry of the columnist — from her impersonation of the advice guru’s accent to the trademark Ann Landers bouffant hairdo. “People came up to me and said ‘Oh, you sound just like her. You are just like her.’ ”

Judith Ivey — who won Tony Awards for her performances in “Hurlyburly” and “Steaming”—will soon be taking on another iconic role, playing Amanda Wingfield in an updated off-Broadway revival of the Tennessee Williams classic “The Glass Menagerie,” opening in March 2010 at the Laura Pels Theatre.