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THEATER REVIEW | 'THE LADY WITH ALL THE ANSWERS'
BY CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Dear Ann Landers: What's a Girl to Do Now?



Theatergoers with a nostalgic affection for ye olde 20th-century customs like letter writing and daily newspaper reading are the obvious audience for “The Lady With All the Answers,” a chatty solo play by David Rambo that gives us a chance to get up close and personal with Ann Landers, also known as Eppie Lederer, played with properly big hair and matching big style by Judith Ivey. For almost half a century Lederer dispensed friendly wisdom about love, marriage, sex and other vital issues, like the proper way to hang toilet-paper rolls, through her syndicated newspaper column.

Lederer, who died in 2002 at 83, was not the first Ann Landers, as she freely confides in the play, but Lederer’s tenure brought the column to a mass audience, and eventually author and pseudonym became virtually inseparable. At the height of her popularity Ann Landers was read by some 90 million people. Her column, along with that of her twin sister (Dear Abby), was a significant national forum for the discussion of manners and morals that readers found hard to broach with intimates, religious advisers or the neighbor over the fence.

Set in Eppie’s plush, traditionally furnished living room on a late night in 1975, the play, at the Cherry Lane Theater, finds her eyeing her electric typewriter as if it were a rattlesnake. As Eppie ominously lets on in the show’s first few minutes, she is preparing to write the “most important column of my career.” But like many another journalist facing a deadline, she insists on exhausting all forms of procrastination before settling down to crank out her copy.

Hence the play. Instead of rapping out those few momentous paragraphs, Eppie entertains us with cozy tales of her colorful history, interspersing these with readings of some of her favorite letters, which she is filing in various folders to prepare for a book.

Ms. Ivey, a veteran actress with an appropriately warm and bouncy presence, appears in a hot pink frilled blouse and a Chanel-type jacket in the first act, a shiny, deluxe housecoat in the second. (At 1 hour 40 minutes the play doesn’t really need an intermission, but apparently Eppie needs a bath.) Atop her head is a swooping pile of dark auburn hair shaped into a giant meringue, a formidable hairdo that might upstage lesser performers, but one that Ms. Ivey carries off with aplomb.

As with many other audience-with-the-famous-dead plays, “The Lady With All the Answers” does not probe deeply into the psyche of its subject, who is mostly chipper and friendly as she regales us with stories of her rise from happy Midwestern housewife to national celebrity. Born in Sioux City, Iowa, she ditched a fiancé to marry a man she met when shopping with her sister for bridal veils for their planned double wedding. (Jules W. Lederer was the salesman.) Dabbling in Democratic politics while she lived in Wisconsin, she met various party bigwigs. When the family moved to Chicago, she contacted an executive she knew at The Chicago Sun-Times, volunteering to help sort the letters for the advice column.

She was informed that the first Ann Landers had recently died. “Can you believe that luck?” she marvels, graciously thinking to add, “Not her luck, I mean.” A career was born.

Eppie’s flowing stream of reminiscences, told in a nasal Midwestern drawl, finally slows down when she at last confesses the subject of the column still idling in the typewriter. After 36 years of marriage, Eppie’s husband, Jules, has confessed he’s fallen in love with another woman. And after decades of advising readers to soldier through their problems rather than divorce, Eppie must announce that she has decided not to take her own advice.

Ms. Ivey plays this emotional turning point with touching authenticity. Eppie’s twinkly, inquisitive eyes suddenly stop searching the audience for responsive affection, and the bubbles go out of her convivial chatter, replaced by awkward pauses and fumbblings. But the tenacious Eppie is not one to dwell long on misfortune. The roses soon bloom again on her cheeks, and she picks up the thread of her mostly privileged history again.

Has she told us about the time she went on television to discuss “Deep Throat” — the movie, that is — with Linda Lovelace? Or the thousands of letters she got when she broached the issue of consensual bondage in her column? Eppie has some generous words for Pauline Phillips, her sister and rival, but a few sharp remarks too, couched in cutesy colloquialisms. “She must have mashed her molars when I made the cover of The New York Times Magazine,” Eppie says with a delighted smile. More soberly she tells of her pioneering advice to a teenager who had written to her in desperation, confessing his homosexuality. “Dear Hampton, Va.,” she replied. “You are not alone.”

Mr. Rambo’s writing is breezy and fluid, although you can often hear the punch lines coming a few beats off. Fleetly directed by B J Jones, the play is a genial primer on a genial subject, but not much more. We never really learn the details of the juicy drama at its heart — how and with whom did Eppie’s husband fall in love? “The Lady With All the Answers” is sweet, frothy and insubstantial, like the Fresca that is Eppie’s beverage of choice. (Jules preferred whiskey — a portent?) If you expect a more trenchant portrait or a fully developed drama, well, bub, as Eppie would say, you’ve got a geranium in your cranium.

THE LADY WITH ALL THE ANSWERS

By David Rambo; performed by Judith Ivey; directed by B J Jones; sets by Neil Patel; costumes by Martin Pakledinaz; lighting by Nicole Pearce; sound by Kevin O’Donnell; wig design by Paul Huntley. Presented by the Cherry Lane Theater, Angelina Fiordellisi, artistic director; James King, managing director. At the Cherry Lane Theater, 38 Commerce Street, West Village; (212) 239-6200. Through Nov. 29. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes.