

'M.A.S.H.' vet stars in Laguna operation

Loretta Swit says she finds fulfillment portraying Eleanor Roosevelt in a one-woman show.

By JACKIE MOE
STAFF WRITER

Loretta Swit's current stage role differs greatly from her "Hot Lips" Houlihan days from the TV series "M.A.S.H."

The double Emmy Award-winning actress has taken on an intimate portrayal of former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt in one-woman play "Eleanor Roosevelt, Her Secret Journey," at the Laguna Playhouse through Sunday.

Swit said the role as the American politician and wife to President Franklin Roosevelt has been one of her most fulfilling undertakings as an actress.

"I admire this woman to no end and the more research I do on her, I'm flabbergasted at what she accomplished before feminism was even coined as a word," said Swit. "She was a visionary, so ahead of her time and such a remarkable partner for one of our beloved presidents, but she really exemplified the power behind the throne."

Watching videos of Eleanor Roosevelt on YouTube and the History Channel, and even meeting and chatting with one of Roosevelt's granddaughters, has helped Swit strengthen her portrayal.

"Her granddaughter came to see me in Chicago, and I was able to sit and talk to her about bits and



COURTESY OF LAGUNA PLAYHOUSE

Loretta Swit says she is humbled to portray the former first lady in "Eleanor Roosevelt, Her Secret Journey." "I'm flabbergasted at what she accomplished before feminism was even coined as a word," the actress says.

pieces I couldn't find anywhere. For instance, Franklin called her by the nickname Babs, which was confirmed by her granddaughter. I couldn't find any evidence of this anywhere except the book the play was based off of, so this confirmation from her family makes the show even more authentic."

She also observed Eleanor Roosevelt's fun side on a taping of a 1953 guest appearance on the television

show "What's My Line?" "The audience was so excited to see Eleanor on the show, and she was having a ball on there, disguising her distinct voice and having fun with the contestants. It really shed light on the human behind this icon," Swit said.

Written by Rhoda Lerman, who wrote the 1979 historic novel "Eleanor,"

the play is set in 1945, after Franklin Roosevelt's death, and opens with President Harry Truman asking Eleanor Roosevelt to participate in the peace talks in Paris and head the American delegation to the United Nations.

She initially declines the offer, explaining that her days of being in the public eye are over. This launches

a review of memories of when she was a young, unsure girl, to meeting and learning about liberty and politics from a female mentor, to her love and heartaches with Franklin Roosevelt, to her ambitions as a politician and ambassador.

Acknowledging this opportunity as a major step for women, she takes her time to make the decision

that ultimately landed her a world platform. Swit said that although she has spent several years learning about and researching Eleanor Roosevelt, she feels she can never become bored of the role.

"It's such a challenge to bring this person to life and fill in all the nooks and crannies, but everything I've found has been fascinating and inspiring," Swit said.

The play's setting is Eleanor Roosevelt's living room at Val-Kill in Hyde Park, N.Y. The simple set and story rely on her phone conversations and oral recollections of her life, with only one act and no intermission.

Swit said the play comes to Laguna at a perfect time, given the current political atmosphere.

"It's been a joy to present her spirit," she said. "Everything I've found about her is joyful and with the political election at bay, it would be very valuable for young people to see the production and learn more about someone who represents all of the good American values."

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