

# ELEANOR ROOSEVELT: ACROSS A BARRIER OF FEAR

Jane VanBoskirk returns to Eugene to play the first lady in a benefit for Planned Parenthood one night only at the Wildish

“Eleanor Roosevelt is someone who has really infiltrated my life,” Jane VanBoskirk says. “It’s helping me deal with Trump, hearing what she went through and all the troubles she had.”

On Thursday, April 20, the Portland actor, who has made a career of one-woman shows about strong women, comes back to town for a single performance of *Eleanor Roosevelt: Across a Barrier of Fear* at Springfield’s Wildish Theater.

All proceeds from the one-woman production, which is sponsored by *Eugene Weekly*, go to Planned Parenthood of Southwestern Oregon.

VanBoskirk, 69, jokes that her resume is a “suitcase of dead women,” having done shows on such figures as Oregon suffragist Abigail Scott Duniway, labor organizer Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, Catholic missionary Mother Cabrini, pioneering woman physician Bethenia Owens-Adair and Florence Reece, the miner’s wife who penned “Which Side Are You On?”

Eleanor Roosevelt was perhaps the strongest-minded of any of the women on VanBoskirk’s list. The wife of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, she was an outspoken first lady who advocated for human rights and racial equality. After Franklin Roosevelt died in 1945, she was named a delegate to the United Nations, where she had a key role in drafting the U.N.’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

VanBoskirk has long been a fan of the Roosevelts. “When I was a child, my parents were Roosevelt freaks,” she says. “We listened to her on the radio. So I have the dialect down.”

The physical presence is more challenging. Eleanor Roosevelt was a bit stiff in real life. “I am a looser person than Eleanor was, physically,” the actor says. “You know,

her mannerisms — she spoke with her hands, and then kept them clasped at times. And she had so much dignity and integrity!”

VanBoskirk has studied films of Roosevelt speaking to be able to portray her presence accurately on stage.

While researching Eleanor Roosevelt for the show, VanBoskirk also paid attention to contemporary strong women here in Oregon, from former Portland police chief Penny Harrington to former Gov. Barbara Roberts.

One thing the play doesn’t touch on is Roosevelt’s sexuality. She and her husband were romantically estranged early in their marriage because of his affair with Lucy Mercer, Eleanor’s social secretary, but remained friends and political allies throughout their lives.

For her part, Eleanor had intense personal relationships with a number of women — including aviator Amelia Earhart and Lorena Hickok, a reporter who covered her for the Associated Press — but kept that part of her life out of the public eye.

“I don’t bring up the lesbian aspects at all,” VanBoskirk says. “You want to keep private things private.”

The play, which runs for just an hour, was written by Portland playwright Sharon Whitney. She is also the author of a 1986 biography of Eleanor Roosevelt for young adults as well as an ensemble play about the young Eleanor.

Though she’s spent her life as an actor, VanBoskirk is no stranger to politics. Before moving to Portland in the early 1990s, she lived in Eugene with her husband, Tim Sercombe, then city attorney for Eugene and, since 2007, a judge of the Oregon Court of Appeals. They remain active in civic affairs.

While living here, VanBoskirk was a co-founder of Oregon Repertory Theatre. She also has performed with

JANE VANBOSKIRK AS  
ELEANOR ROOSEVELT



Northwest Children’s Theatre, New Rose Theatre, Artists Repertory Theatre in Portland and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland.

VanBoskirk has performed *Eleanor Roosevelt* about a dozen times around the country in the past year after taking a five-year hiatus from acting.

So how, we asked, would the former first lady have dealt with someone like Donald Trump?

“She would be appalled, just appalled,” VanBoskirk says. “There was so much dignity for her in the office of the president.”

And what would Roosevelt suggest we do?

“Eleanor would say, ‘Get active in small places. Start in your own community. If you want to make a difference, you have to make a difference where you live.’” — *Bob Keifer*

*Eleanor Roosevelt: Across a Barrier of Fear begins at 7:30 pm Thursday, April 20, at the Wildish Theater in Springfield. Tickets are \$20 at WildishTheater.com, with all proceeds going to Planned Parenthood of Southwestern Oregon.*

## IT’S CURTAINS FOR YOU

Cottage Theatre scores a big hit with Kander and Ebb’s musical murder mystery

There’s always something a bit queasy about the prospect of a community theater taking on a big and bouncy Broadway musical: Despite the best intentions, the inherent limitations of local theater, compounded by the complex requirements of such shows, often lead to a production that is uneven at best, disastrous at worst. Fiasco is forever waiting around the corner.

This, delightfully, is not the case with Cottage Theatre’s current production of *Curtains*, a John Kander and Fred Ebb musical with book by Rupert Holmes (yes, the “Piña Colada Song” guy). Featuring strong leads, a lavish set and song-and-dance numbers that exceed all expectations — not to mention a live orchestra — this is one of the most solid, and solidly fun, shows of the year.

Written by the same team that created *Chicago* and *Cabaret*, *Curtains* is Kander and Ebb’s love letter to musical theater itself, a show that exuberantly celebrates (and sometimes thumbs its nose at) the hard-earned flamboyance of a fantasized lyrical life. Using the classic “show within a show” trope, this musical farce centers on a series of stage-bound murders that threaten to halt an already doomed production of a ridiculous musical based on the Robin Hood tale.

Director and choreographer Janet Rust takes hold of this wild and somewhat ridiculous whodunit, with its huge cast and elaborate numbers, and shapes it into something pretty remarkable. It all works. From the chorus-line routines to the slapstick comedy to the difficult musical transitions, everything flows smoothly in a show that is at once endearing, diverting and tartly funny.

Merely holding the reins on such an abundant production would be impressive enough, but Rust and her production crew have assembled an exceptional cast here, especially in *Curtain*’s key roles. As Lieutenant Frank Cioffi, the theater-loving detective tasked with solving the string of murders, Joel Ibanez is appropriately charming and abashed; Ibanez brings old-fashioned noir smarts to the role, sly but slightly bemused — a starstruck Philip Marlowe enthralled by the enticing understudy (and murder suspect) Niki Harris, well-played by Sophie Blades.

Unfortunately, all of the strong performances are too numerous to mention here among such a large and talented cast, though a handful really stand out: Larry Brown as the snobby, put-upon British director Christopher Belling; Kim Fairbairn as the tough-love co-producer Carmen Bernstein; Tracy Nygard and Mark VanBeever as the divorced songwriting team of Georgia Hendricks and Aaron Fox.



VanBeever, who seems to make magic wherever he goes, also deserves a nod as the production’s vocal director. *Curtains* is full of great songs (standouts are “The Woman’s Dead,” “He Did It” and “It’s a Business”), and each is performed with uncommon zeal and precision. And, as mentioned, Rust’s choreography is fluid and engaging, a spectacle to match the show’s sonic prowess.

Any way you cut it, Cottage Theatre’s production of *Curtains* is a success — an eye-popping bit of controlled chaos that delivers on every difficult front. As the second-act song says, this one’s going to be a tough act to follow. — *Rick Levin*