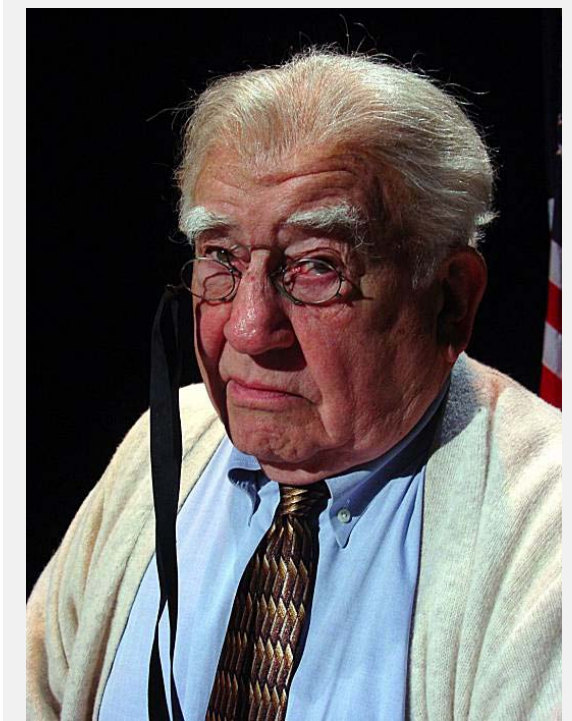




Clumsy script, lack of drama undermine 'FDR'

[Robert Hurwitz, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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The Theatre Guild, Inc.
Ed Asner turns in a slow, shambling performance.



FDR: Solo performance. By Dore Schary. Performed by Ed Asner. Through Sun. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. One hour, 40 minutes. \$45-\$74. (408) 367-7255. www.sjrep.com.

If you're thinking Ed Asner is one of the last people you'd cast as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, you're probably right. But miscasting is not the worst problem with "FDR," the tedious historical outline that opened Wednesday at San Jose Repertory Theatre. The script by Dore Schary ("Sunrise at Campobello") is essentially a laundry list of names and events.

Flashes of the great president's wit occasionally light up the proceedings, and Asner is a deft hand with a joke. The rest of the show does no favors to the memory of either FDR or Lou Grant.

Co-presented by the historic Theatre Guild, "FDR" follows the shopworn solo pattern - presumably not yet threadbare by Schary's death in 1980 (an earlier version was filmed for TV with Robert Vaughn in '82) - of having the subject reminisce about his life in public for no apparent reason. In this case, that's a huge amount of life to sum up in 100 minutes, even without an intermission.

The text runs from FDR's struggle with polio through elections as governor of New York and president, battling the Great Depression and the Supreme Court, his decision to seek a third term and on

through World War II to shortly before his death. With the exception of a few moments - deciding to run for governor, Pearl Harbor - few incidents are dramatized.

Asner handles those few well enough, infusing a little drama into a campaign speech or the immediate aftermath of learning about Pearl Harbor. But it's hard to identify the pugnacious persona onstage with the patrician Roosevelt.

For the most part, Asner turns in a slow, shambling performance in an absent-minded, where-was-I? mode that underscores the thinness of the script. Too many events are cited without being explored. Too many are left out. Eleanor merely rates a few obligatory mentions.

Names are dropped with such profusion - key players such as Harry Hopkins, Sumner Welles, Louis Brandeis, Henry Morgenthau - that they become mere window dressing, and awkwardly arranged at that. It's hard not to laugh when this FDR picks up the phone and says, "Oh, Secretary of State Cordell Hull."

It's a sadly wasted opportunity for a man of Asner's progressive politics with a subject such as this in times like these. If FDR's willingness to battle for his principles strikes some current public policy notes, the lack of any material about government programs to put people back to work seems incomprehensible.

As the songwriter might've said, Where have you gone Franklin Roosevelt? A nation turns its lonely eyes to you.

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