

## Review: Asner's powerful turn as 'FDR' at San Jose Rep

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Happy days are here again. Ed Asner salutes the life and times of an iconic American president in the historical one-man show "FDR."

Written by playwright-film producer Dore Schary, this stirring, 100-minute solo show revisits some of the country's most desperate hours. Franklin Delano Roosevelt took the helm of a nation in tatters. Thirteen million Americans were unemployed, and many more were reduced to bread lines and soup kitchens from California to New York. Despite the hard times, FDR buoyed the nation with his unique brand of guts and pluck, inspiring everyday people to look ahead to clearer skies.

While the play also touches on the 32nd president's personal life, its most powerful moments are when Roosevelt grapples with watersheds of history from the misery of the Great Depression to the attack on Pearl Harbor and the carnage of World War II. Based on the '50s Broadway hit "Sunrise at Campobello," it's a timely reminder of a dark period in our history that gets more relevant every minute.

Asner, beloved for signature characters from Lou Grant on TV to Carl in the Pixar hit "Up," was born just weeks after the stock market crash of 1929, and he brings a lifetime of gravitas to the project. At Wednesday's opening night performance at San Jose Rep, where the show runs through Sunday, the actor had the audience eating out of his hand from the moment he wheeled himself onstage in an old-fashioned wooden wheelchair. Even wearing a white wig and bushy eyebrows, the actor looks nothing like the man he portrays. But that's no matter.

As craggy-faced and gruff-voiced as ever, Asner captures Roosevelt's grit, his stubbornness in the face of controversy and his fearlessness in the face of war. Frankly, his brand of crotchety charm is irresistible. Even when he muddles a line here and there, Asner knows how to spin a yarn and how to land a punch line with panache.

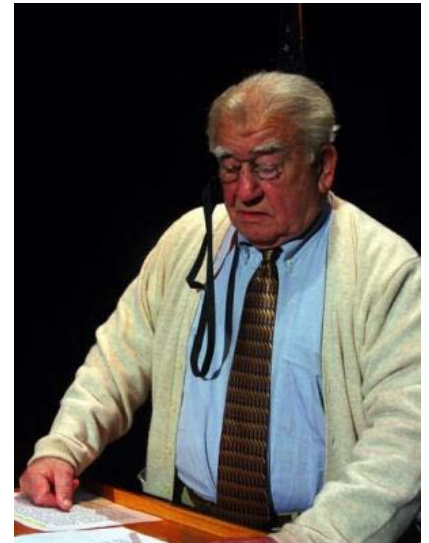
The actor wisely emphasizes the aspects of FDR's White House that resonate with today's controversies. Roosevelt may have been born into the upper crust, but he became a champion of the working class: He fought for such revolutionary policies as the eight-hour workday, Social Security pensions and the minimum wage. For his pains, he was branded by foes as a socialist, or "that man in the White House."

The twinkly-eyed Asner delights in capturing FDR's obstinacy. He was unafraid of making enemies, of sparking controversy and turning down mealy-mouthed compromises. Much of the play depicts FDR's struggles with the isolationists who wanted to keep the U.S. out of World War II at all costs. Another hot topic is the businessmen and bankers who greedily took handouts when times were tough and then proclaimed themselves rugged individualists as soon as the checks cleared.

If the show has a weakness, it is some slack pacing. Also, there are a great many references to people and things that only the most devout student of Americana will appreciate. In a tale that encompasses such colossal figures as Churchill and Stalin and Hitler, it seems unnecessary to dwell so long on mere footnotes.

Still, it's impossible not to be won over by Asner's indefatigably spry performance, as the actor nimbly bears the weight of the whole evening on his 80-year-old shoulders. He has what it takes to evoke FDR's fortitude, the courage that led him to overcome polio and paralysis, to stand up for himself, his country and his beliefs.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Check out her theater reviews, features and blog at [www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza](http://www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza)



Character actor Ed Asner will be holding court at San Jose Rep this summer in the one-man show FDR. It will run July 14-18. (News embargoed till 3/20 in print and online) ( The Theatre Guild Inc. )

"FDR"

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

Through: Sunday

Running time: 100 minutes (no intermission)

Tickets: \$45-\$74, 408-367-7255, [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com)