



Asner shines in San Jose Rep's 'FDR'

July 16, 7:30 PM · [San Jose Theater Arts Examiner](#) · David John Chavez

Ed Asner hit so many beautiful notes I could have been watching a symphony.

Asner, starring in the one-man show *FDR* at San Jose Repertory Theatre through Sunday, presented a story that mirrored the times we are in today. It is the story of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who has the honor of serving as the longest tenured US president in history, a whopping four terms, passing away during his final term in 1945 at age 63. In those four terms, he presided over anything and everything, from the Great Depression through World War II, all while dealing with Polio that ravaged his body.

Playwright Dore Schary's play is a dazzlingly juxtaposed piece that, despite moving slowly at certain moments, gathered plenty of thrill and steam at most others. It is a show that serves as a retrospective of FDR's career, and the people that shaped it. It is a piece so loaded with nuance, that only an actor as seasoned as Asner would have the wherewithal and skill to play it. While so much of the show is built on the knowledge and events of Roosevelt's life, just as much attention was paid by Asner to the physical nature of Roosevelt's illness.

Asner clearly understood that in order to reach the heart of the piece, he needed to put much stock into his body. Whether it was standing at the podium telling a hilarious story about three guys named "Martin, Barton and Fish," delving a huge heaping of concentration to stand unaccompanied for a few seconds, or discovering a terrible headache that signaled the end, it was clear that Asner paid close attention to these critical details.

Asner, who is still spry at 80-years-old, was able to exude a wonderful effervescence. The style of the show has him going in and out of both exposition, of which there was much, and direct conversations with many important historic figures. There are plenty of references to his wife Eleanor, a mention of his mistress Lucy Mercer, and the fascinating story of his fallout with William Bullitt, an ambassador who worked with Secretary of State Cordell Hull. It was Bullitt who argued that foreign policy advisor Sumner Welles, who solicited sexual favors from two African-American Pullman car porters, committed a crime through these actions. Welles resigned over the incident, and Roosevelt never forgave Bullitt for bringing down a good man.

The story itself is fascinating. Even more compelling was Asner's handling of this moment, with FDR sharing his wishes with Bullitt of guarding Heaven's pearly gates, and what he would tell both Welles and Bullitt when they arrived. Let's just say that Welles would be very happy. Bullitt, not so much.

The show is defined by two components – process and discovery. What is most fascinating about the piece is to see Asner's thinking process at work, which is what great actors do. It allows the audience to sit and watch him think through his actions, making wonderful, heartfelt and painful discoveries at each turn.

"Yesterday, December 7th, 1941 – a day which will live in infamy." This is where the show takes off like a rocket. What is so wonderful is the way Asner handles this moment. It is his process, his discovery, and ultimately, Roosevelt's finding of the right words, the right notes, to address the nation and declare war. Add in another slight touch of brilliance, when at that very moment FDR tells his secretary Grace Tully, "It's ok Grace, these are times for tears."

The show moves along briskly and it does not feel like 100 consecutive minutes. But then again, when you are listening to a beautiful symphony, it never does.



Ed Asner embodies the United States' longest tenured president in "FDR," running through Sunday, July 18th at San Jose Repertory Theatre. Theatre Guild, Inc. photo

San Jose Repertory Theatre and the Theatre Guild, Inc. present **"FDR"**

Written by Dore Schary

Starring Ed Asner

Through Sunday, July 18th

San Jose Repertory Theatre is located at 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

For more information or to purchase tickets, call 408-367-7255 or visit the Rep online at www.sjrep.com

David is a member of the Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle. Email him at dchavez04@att.net

Become a subscriber to David's theatre column by going to the top of the page and clicking "subscribe." Follow David on twitter at twitter.com/davidjchavez

Become a fan of San Jose Theater Arts Examiner on [Facebook](#).