

The Idiolect

The language or speech pattern of one individual at a particular period of life

That's Nice, Mr. President

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THEATER REVIEW: SAN JOSE

Show #77: [FDR](#), San Jose Repertory Theatre, July 14.



Ed Asner in *FDR*. Photo by the Theatre Guild, Inc.

Ah, Abe, good to see you. C'mon in, take your hat off, have a seat. I'll tell you, Abe, it's bad, real bad. I was at the theater the other night—I know you've had bad experiences at the theater, so I hate to bring it up—but I have to say, this one was no picnic either. It was called *FDR* by Dory Schary. He wrote a Tony-winning play about President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but this isn't it. That one was called *Sunrise at Campobello*. This *FDR* is a one-man show that was originally a vehicle for Robert Vaughn in the early 1980s. After your time, I'm afraid, but you're not missing much.

Presented by the Theatre guild, Inc., this time it's a touring vehicle for another star, Ed Asner. You wouldn't know him, Abe, but if you did it would probably be as Lou Grant on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and his own spin-off show. A spin-off? You really don't want to know. Well, okay, it's when a supporting character from one show goes on to get his own show, kind of like *Merry Wives of Windsor* from the *Henry IV* plays.

Now, Asner doesn't look anything like FDR, and the thin white wig that covers his famously bald head doesn't help much. Nor does he try much to sound like Roosevelt after the first five minutes or so.

Anyway, it's one of those biographical one-man shows where it's near the end of a famous person's life and he's confiding all his private doubts and dreams to some unspecified crowd of people that's basically the audience. Well, that may sound novel to you, but I assure you it's not.

Lord knows there's a wealth of rich material in Roosevelt's life. Paralyzed from the waist down with polio, he was elected president an unprecedented and unrepeatable four times, although he died not long into his fourth term. He pulled the country out of the Great Depression and led it through World War II. But this play, which breezes through the period between his 1936 reelection campaign and just before his death in 1945, suffers from such disjointed storytelling that it's hard to tell when it's supposed to be at any given time.

It's also hard to follow the thread of what he's talking about, because he doesn't really talk about things so much as mention them. He'll say he's going to expand the Supreme Court to fifteen justices, but we never hear what ever happened with that—if you want to know, go look it up. The closest we'd ever get to a real story is the occasional droll anecdote about a colleague that doesn't have much to do with FDR at all.

He just goes on name-dropping a lot of aides, rivals and what have you without ever really explaining the significance of anyone—he just alludes to them as if you already know. And to be sure, a lot of people do know. My parents were infants when FDR was president, so what little I know about it was what came up in history classes, but I was sitting next to a woman in her 80s or 90s who kept saying "Ohhh yes" knowingly when names were mentioned, or would say "Ah, the such-and-such speech" in anticipation when he was getting to something significant. So for her the show was probably great.

For me it was more like being stuck in a room with a senior citizen who keeps talking and talking about people you don't know but not really telling you anything about them—just saying things like "And the fishing trip with Ted and Carol—ah, that was a time, wasn't it?" All you can really do is smile and nod and wait for him to stop talking.

It doesn't help that what little narrative thread there is keeps being derailed by conversations he pretends to have with invisible people. He'll invite them to sit down in one of the chairs he never uses and talks to them in the same rambling, unfocused way that he talked to us, making it unclear who he's supposed to be talking to at any given time. Either that or he'll field calls from various advisors and foreign leaders, because apparently he doesn't have anyone to answer the phone for him. The show always slows down considerably during these half-conversations, and the pace is pretty slow to begin with.

Oh, Rutherford, I haven't seen you in a dog's age. You know Abe, don't you? Please, join us.

What was I saying? Ah, yes. Asner has a likeable, folksy persona as Roosevelt, but he certainly does take his time. He often pauses as if trying to remember the thread of what he was going to say, which could be an acting choice but doesn't sound like it.

There's no director listed, and it shows. This production has possibly the least creative blocking I've ever seen. Well, I may very well *be* exaggerating when I say that, Rutherford, but it certainly strikes me that way. After an opening bit in a wheelchair to establish that he has polio, he switches to hobbling around with two canes. So he leans in front of the desk for a while, then slowly hobbles around to behind the desk and sits down for a while. Then he gets up, hobbles back around to the front, stands leaning on the desk again, then hobbles back around to the back and sits down, over and over ad over again. Except for a couple of times when he walked over to the podium to deliver famous speeches—easily the best part of the show—it was just from back to the front and back again for the whole show.

FDR is about an hour and 45 minutes with no intermission, and it could definitely use one. No, Abe, not to duck out of the theater, although you may have a point there. You know better than anyone that there are times when it's a much better idea just not to go to the show.

FDR plays through July 18 at San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. <http://www.sjrep.com>

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