

# Glenda Frank in New York

Few thrills are comparable to watching the November wave of highly qualified women winning seats in federal and state governments. A Navy pilot, a woman who began her studies in a community college on a Native American reservation, young mothers, a former CIA office – these candidates came in all shapes and sizes. Is it surprising, then, that theatre-goers might expect a newly-buffed mirror on Broadway?

This autumn, several shows are paying homage to the older woman. The statistics remain alarming; fewer than one-third of all speaking roles (speaking, not starring roles!) are female. The number of these roles only shrinks for seasoned talent. Last season, Glenda Jackson won Tony and Drama Desk awards for her performance in Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women* at the age of 81. In the Spring, she returns to Broadway as King Lear.

Jackson is following in the footsteps of many acclaimed actors – among them Sarah Bernhardt, the protagonist of Theresa Rebeck's

*Bernhardt/Hamlet* at the American Airlines Theatre. The play opens when Bernhardt is 55 and broke, having lost over two million francs to star in Edmond Rostand's *La Samaritaine*. She is too old to play *ingenues*, and the roles are too confining. "I will not go back to playing flowers for fools!" she says. Rostand, her lover, is writing a new drama for her. Meanwhile, she is debating the high financial and professional risks of playing Hamlet, a bristles role that, in 1899, is shocking when a woman wearing tights is still a scandal.

Rebeck's play is funny, romantic, satirical, and very moving. Moritz von Stuelpnagel directs (Tony nomination for *Present Laughter*), often with tongue-in-cheek whimsy. The confrontations provide windows into the heart of a highly visible woman who has to remake her career. Actor Janet McTeer, 1.85 meters tall, plays Bernhardt (who measured 1.6 meters) as larger-than-life, at times sawing the air and chewing the scenery, ironically to great effect. We wouldn't dare to pity this Sarah! We admire her

intelligence, vivacity, and, even, her pigheadedness. She will not play Hamlet as a woman, she proclaims, but as herself – a very contemporary-sounding distinction. She also insists that the French translation reflect her version of the play, not Shakespeare's.

The most poignant scene is between Bernhardt and Rostand (Jason Butler Harner). Rosamond Rostand (Ito Aghayere) has visited Sarah to persuade her to read *Cyrano de Bergerac*, her husband's new script. Sarah learns new respect for this clever wife, but it is the script that convinces the actor that she must choose between romance and self-respect. She will not perform in *Cyrano*. Rostand argues. The new play puts her on a pedestal. But the male actor, she retorts, has all the poetry, the drama, and the action. There is nothing for her. We in the audience also understand that Rostand may love her, but he sees only his fantasy of her. Playwright Rebeck depicts this dichotomy with a precision Ibsen would have appreciated. "A woman of power is a freak," she observes.

Cast of *Gloria A Life with (r) Christine Lahti* as Gloria Steinem. Photo: Joan Marcus.





Lucas Hedges as Daniel, Elaine May as Gladys Green, and Michael Cera as Don in *The Waverly Gallery*. Photo: Brigitte Lacombe.

**D**owntown at the Daryl Roth Theatre, another legend is being celebrated in *Gloria, a Life*, written by Emily Mann and directed by Diane Paulus (who recently directed *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*). The energetic cast is led by the charming Christine Lahti (who played recently in *God of Carnage*) through the life and times of feminist leader Gloria Steinem. We are all invited to relax on the cushioned stadium seats while the actors, playing a variety of roles, enjoy the Persian carpets and hassocks on the stage. Projections (by Elaine J. McCarthy) of Steinem's life and her eruditely identify specific moments and set the mood.

Less a drama than dramatic and structured like a retrospective, *Gloria* touches on identity issues. We follow Steinem from a difficult childhood of being raised by a single mother who suffered from mental illness, to her early years as a journalist, when she was assigned "women's" articles and harassed. Her growing awareness of gender bias, her membership in activist groups, her founding of *Ms. Magazine* to give women a voice, and her late life romance and marriage to David Bale (father of actor Christian Bale) are more than steps in a journey. They are the little hooks that connect audience members to the woman on stage. At the end, there is a feedback session on what affected the audience. Women of all ages shared their stories.

*Gloria* on stage becomes what Gloria Steinem became: a unifying and clarifying force. Steinem is now 84. Does she look good? When she turned fifty and was complimented, she said,

shrugging off vanity, "This is what fifty looks like." Like the play, she transformed the personal into the political. "The human race is like a bird with two wings, and if one wing is broken, no one can fly", she wrote. *Gloria* has been extended through to March 31, 2019.

**A**nother legendary woman is back on the stage of the Golden Theatre in *The Waverly Gallery*, directed by Lila Neugebauer. Elaine May has worn many hats. She reached prominence early on as Mike Nichols' partner in improvisational comedy (1960 Grammy Award). Her play *Adaptation* won a Drama Desk Award. She was a screen writer, director, and actor. Now, at 86, she is playing Gladys Green – suffering from loss of hearing and dementia, but still running the Waverly Gallery. The exhausted family features Joan Allen as the daughter, David Cromer as her son-in-law, Lucas Hedges as her grandson and our guide, and Michael Cera as the young artist she befriends.

Playwright Kenneth Lonergan often writes meaty roles for actors, and Gladys is one of his best. Elaine May is consistently believable even as she navigates demanding transitions. Beneath the repeated questions, the retold reminiscences, and the panic attacks ("I've lost my keys" and "Where am I?"), an intelligent woman – who talks about returning to her law practice – struggles to make sense of what is happening to her. From time to time we glimpse past the detritus of disease; it is heartbreaking.

