

# Theater



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**DESK JOB** Taylor inhabits the governor's office.

## Ann of the hour

Holland Taylor pays tribute to a Texas governor in her new solo show. By **Kris Vire**

Ann Richards burst onto the national scene in 1988, when the Texas state treasurer gave the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. The 54-year-old divorced mother of four, with a shock of white hair, a string of pearls and a healthy drawl, won over the crowd with her down-home assessment of then-Vice President George H.W. Bush: "Poor George. He can't help it. He was born with a silver foot in his mouth."

Richards rode the spotlight into the Texas governor's office two years later. "When she won as governor, it was really a cause for rejoicing," says actor **Holland Taylor**, who might be Richards's biggest fan. "And it was so theatrical at her inauguration! I remember pictures in *Time* magazine of this really beautiful white-haired woman coming through this arch of swords."

Richards served just one term as governor before being defeated by George W. Bush; she went on to a life in New York City, where she worked as a consultant and was a regular guest on shows such as *Politically Incorrect* and *Larry King Live* until her death in 2006. It was in New York that Taylor met her, over lunch with their mutual friend, the gossip columnist Liz Smith.

Though that was their only meeting, Taylor was deeply saddened by Richards's death. "I just found myself unnaturally mournful for too long, as if I knew her," Taylor says at a Loop coffee shop last month. "I thought, She means something to me. As a creative person, I had a creative impulse to do something. I was driving to work one day when I was so struck by the idea to do it as a stage play. She was so alive, and she made a connection with the audience like nothing you ever saw."

Taylor threw herself into writing *Ann*, the Broadway-aimed solo show she premiered last year in Galveston, Texas. Taylor's years of research and interviews with Richards's friends and associates are evident in the encyclopedic knowledge she displays, passionately imparting details and nuances of the governor's life and career. "For two years, every single break I had from the television show, I traveled to Texas and

interviewed people or studied material from the archive."

The television show, of course, is *Two and a Half Men*, in which Taylor plays the mother of the characters portrayed by Jon Cryer and, until recently, Charlie Sheen. ("Charlie's departure is very sad for all of us," she says evenly, "but Ashton [Kutcher]'s presence is very joyful for all of us.") Though the 68-year-old Pennsylvania native calls theater "my preferred medium, my natural habitat," she has a long résumé of memorable

supporting roles in film and TV, often playing women in positions of authority, from Tom Hanks's boss on *Bosom Buddies* to a tough law professor in *Legally Blonde* to her Emmy-winning turn as a randy judge on *The Practice*.

She's the kind of character actor you instantly recognize, even if she's not a household name. "I'm never the star," she says.

That's borne out by the man who interrupts our interview to say he's a huge fan, though he clearly doesn't know her name. Taylor graciously thanks him, and exhorts him to come see *Ann*. But she'd insist she won't be the star there, either; Ann will.

**"I found myself unnaturally mournful for too long, as if I knew her."**



*Ann is at the Bank of America Theatre Sunday 13–December 4. See Touring shows.*

## Seascape with Sharks and Dancer



**Promethean Theatre Ensemble** (see Fringe & storefront). By Don Nigro. Dir. Beth Wolf. With Anne Korajczyk, Nick Lake. 1hr 35mins; one intermission.

When Ben rescues the bobbing Tracy from the ocean, he brings her to his beachside home to convalesce. Tracy quickly proves a nightmarish companion—snapping at Ben for rescuing her, for fixing her hot chocolate and for nearly every other accommodating deed he performs. Ben nonetheless tumbles headfirst into love, leaving us to watch the messy results, both on the evening they meet and—in Act II—several months into their relationship.

The results, in Nigro's 1985 play, are something of a marvel: one part Neil LaBute, one part Miranda July and zero parts enjoyable. Throughout, Tracy rails on Ben for his general ineffectuality. Though we slowly learn details from their histories, Tracy's nonstop invective largely stands in for present-tense plot development. Somewhat confoundingly, Nigro punctuates his angry dialogue with cutesy quips and platitudes: "I always know what I want. At all times and in all situations. That's my trademark." The vitriolic-adorable combination vexes on several levels.

Lake brings an appealing, low-key energy to Ben, while Korajczyk hits Tracy's needling notes precisely. Still, it's hard not to wish that Wolf had pushed (perhaps against the script) to expose überplacid Ben's rougher edges or Tracy's sweeter side. As is, the characters remain so emphatically themselves the production only achieves a pulse during the melodramatic physical flare-ups.—*Christopher Shea*

**WHINY DANCER**  
Lake and Korajczyk spar with smiles.



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