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THEATER IN REVIEW

One of Those Lightning Strikes That Happen in Los Angeles

'Squeeze Box'
Acorn Theater

For struggling performers there is an advantage in doing that first one-man or one-woman show in Los Angeles, rather than in New York. Movie stars sometimes show up. It happened for Nia Vardalos back in 1997, when Rita Wilson and her husband, Tom Hanks, came to see her unknown production, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding."

It happened for Ann Randolph two years ago when Anne Bancroft and her husband, Mel Brooks, popped into the Court Theater to see "Squeeze Box."

Now "Squeeze Box" has come to New York, and it's clear what Ms. Bancroft, now the show's producer, saw in it.

This is the story of Ms. Randolph's \$8.60-an-hour job at a California homeless shelter for mentally ill women, which isn't nearly as depressing in the telling as it probably was in the living. Ann thinks she may not really be cut out for this job. She makes things up for the residents' progress charts, and she believes Brandy, a paranoid schizophrenic crack addict, when she says that she lost her government check while running away from a mad gynecologist who got friendly while doing a Pap smear.

The show, directed by Alan Bailey, peaks when Ms. Randolph picks up a guitar and sings in the voice of a new resident, Irene, a minister's wife from West Virginia who shocked the churchgoers one Sunday by performing a number about her husband's unnecessarily frequent house calls to



Carol Rosegg

Ann Randolph, the writer and performer in "Squeeze Box."

certain female parishioners. ("He tends to the needs of the church/ While sometimes neglecting the needs of our marriage/ But that's O.K., really it is/ That's O.K., I'm not complaining.") The lyrics become more explicit.

It's not that Ms. Randolph is the next Barbra Streisand or even Jessica Simpson. It's that when she sings, she lets everything go with her wildly expressive face and her deadpan demeanor in a way that she doesn't otherwise.

Ms. Randolph's characters are entertaining when they're speaking, too.

The best is Julie, who has come to the shelter from her old job at Christ the King Salvation Center and dismisses women from self-esteem class for using coarse language. Julie explains to the residents that she understands homelessness because "I was locked out of my house one night; talk about terrifying!"

"Squeeze Box," playing through Oct. 17, never ridicules the mentally ill women, but the supposedly sane characters are fair game.

The play's title refers to the musical instrument played by Ann's new boyfriend, Harold, whom she met on the Internet. She's appalled, at first, since she considers the accordion "as low as you can go" but changes her mind.

Ann doesn't tell Harold what she really does for a living because it always turns people off. Eventually she decides to quit, but her retirement doesn't go according to plan. In real life, chances seem good that Ms. Randolph, who has a definite talent for sketch comedy, will now be able to make a better living.

ANITA GATES