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SF PERUSALS

Red Hot Patriot:

The Kick-Ass Wit of Molly Ivins

by
Margaret Engel
and Allison Engel

A Samuel French Acting Edition



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World Premiere Produced by
Philadelphia Theatre Company

Sara Garonzik	**Diane Claussen**
Producing Artistic Director	**Managing Director**

RED HOT PATRIOT was first produced by Philadelphia Theatre Company (Sara Garonzik, Producing Artistic Director) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on March 19, 2010. The performance was directed by David Esbjornson, with sets by John Arnone, projection design by Maya Ciarrocchi, lighting by Russell H. Champa, costumes by Elizabeth Hope Clancy, sound design and original music by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen. The cast was as follows:

MOLLY . . . . . Kathleen Turner
HELPER . . . . . Billy Kametz

CHARACTERS

MOLLY is a tall, brassy, middle-aged reporter.
HELPER is an impassive male copy clerk.

SETTING

The suggestion of a newsroom past its prime.

TIME

2007 and earlier

Scene One

(A desk with a typewriter and computer on it, along with newspapers, books, note pads, files, pens, pencils, cups, etc. The nameplate on the desk reads "Molly Ivins." Behind the desk is an old metal swivel chair on rollers.)

(The stage space is filled with empty desks and chairs, stacked at odd angles. There is an A.P. teletype machine.)

(At rise, **MOLLY** *is leaning back in the chair, her boot-clad feet crossed on the desktop. She's staring off into the middle distance. A long moment or two pass.)*

MOLLY. I'm writing.

This is what writing looks like.

I'm letting some ideas steep. Which is not the same as letting them stew. Every reporter with a brain – which is a subset of the profession and by no means the majority – knows that writing is seventy-five percent thinking, fifteen percent typing, and ten percent caffeine.

But have an editor pass by your cubicle and see you not pounding away at the keyboard, he'll stick his stubby little neck in and say:

"What's the matter, darlin', nothin' to write about? 'Cause if you got nothin' to write about, I'll give you somethin' to write about."

And you say sweetly back:

"Why, that is ever so kind of you, but I do in fact have something to write about, thank you, so you just go on back to that early retirement program you call your office and pop yourself another Pepto Bismol."

(looks at her desk, papers, typewriter)

Yes, indeed, I do have something to write about…

(puts on her glasses and peers at what she's written)

What've we got so far…?

(reads aloud)

"My old man is one of the toughest sons of bitches God ever made."

(takes her glasses off)

Well, that's it. Hell, it's a start. I should really think about that line, though. Take it out on the floor for a spin, see if it stays upright.

(glasses on again, reads)

"My old man is one of the toughest sons of bitches God ever made."

(Thinks for a beat; then she types for a few seconds, then reads aloud again.)

"I say this after second thought…"

(thinks some more, types some more, reads)

"…and I say it again after third thought."

(sits back, mock worn-out)

That was exhausting. Writing is hard!

If the truth be told – and wouldn't that be a novelty –

(MUSIC: Guitar strumming)

it's no small thing to write about a person, especially when that person is a relative, exceedingly so when he's your father, and damn near impossible when he's still alive, which – fortunately or not, depending on your point of view – is the case.

(MUSIC fades.)

My father's gonna read this no matter what, no matter how sick and worn out he is from this surgery or that treatment. My father would point out that I'm marking time here, using my well-worn rhetorical tricks to

string out sentences without saying anything. If he was here, he'd say: "Uh-huh, and what's your point?"

Well, sir. I am working on that.

(SOUND: harp glisse as visual of a newspaper library appears)

Oh, now isn't that a pretty sight? Some people like sunsets, a field of lilies, a baby's face. This'll do me fine. One of the nicer things about a newspaper office is that when you're stumped on a piece like I am today and there's a deadline starin' at you, every sort of resource you'd ever want is right…here.

This is the morgue. Not the type frequented by those who have passed over to a better world. This is where reporters go when their memories have been hazed-over by the effects of conviviality. The morgue is where the good stuff is kept – back numbers, clippings, photo files, dust that smells like honey. Pretty much every time I visited the morgue to find out the exact date of this kickback or the actual name of that stripper slash-legislative assistant, I'd end up drifting off into a sea of yellow newsprint describing the triumphs and follies of towering figures long ago cut down…

(SOUND: seagulls cawing)

(visual of Molly sailing)

I did not expect that to come out of the stack. That's me on the General's boat, in happier times, as they say. General Jim is what my dad is called. We had some good, well, moments on that boat. Of course, he was always the captain.

(visual of Ivins family portrait)

(MUSIC: "A Summer Place")

Now there's the whole crew. Mother, sister, brother, the General.

We were a very "good" family. Good schools,

country club, fancy summer camps, Europe. It was pretty swell…mostly…

*(***MOLLY** *refers to the portrait.)*

There I am. This is at a debutante ball or some such virgin sacrifice. Six feet tall with red hair and freckles. My mother said I looked like "a Saint Bernard among greyhounds." I was quick enough even then to know that was not a compliment. Not that my mother meant it unkindly. My mother tended not to think things through, which is not to say she was unintelligent. Mom was nobody's fool, just seriously ditzy.

But charmingly so, ditzy as a kind of social achievement. A lot of times recently, I wanna call her up and ask her something, about my father, about herself, even about me, but that window of opportunity has closed.

(SOUND: Drumbeats)

The Ivins are…were…are…a fighting family. At least when it comes to dinner table warfare.

Every evening at five fifty-five – the cocktail hour – my dad would turn our house into a war zone. Part of it was the lubrication, but he had a level of bile that could be triggered by a Shirley Temple. Every word bellowed across the china was a litmus test of what was goin' on in the wider world. Plus he couldn't hear very well, the result of standing too close to the 16-inch guns during World War Two. So everybody was always yelling at him just to be heard and he was yellin' at the rest of us because yellin' was what he did.

(A bell rings. Four times.)

*(***MOLLY** *looks over at the A.P. teletype machine as it chugs out a sheet of paper.)*

Y'all know what that is. That's the A.P. wire machine. Four bells means an "Urgent" message. Five bells means a "Bulletin." Ten bells is a "Flash." Ten bells is only for

very, very important news, such as, "The President has pronounced nuclear correctly."

(A bespectacled, nebbish-like **HELPER** *dashes on stage and rips the sheet of wire copy from the machine and hands it to* **MOLLY**. *She looks at us.)*

MOLLY. I didn't realize this gig came with a copy kid.

*(***HELPER** *exits.* **MOLLY** *calls after him.)*

Do you get coffee, too, or am I shit-out-of-luck here?

(looks at the wire copy)

What've we got? Somethin' to help me with this pitiful thing I'm tryin' to pound out…?

(reads)

…Hang on, this isn't news. This is old.

(holds up the wire copy for us to see)

"Elvis Presley Dies."

(looks at the machine)

I think the A.P. has a time-lag problem.

(looks at the wire copy again)

Why is a 30-year-old wire service obit comin' through to my…?

Wait. This isn't the A.P. obit. This is my obit. I mean, my obit of Elvis Presley. I wrote his obituary for *The New York Times*. The *Times* likes to say that it follows the Boy Scout motto, "Be Prepared." So, it's usually ready to go with an obit of any prominent person who might croak. But Elvis, you will recall, died untimely. On that fateful August 16th, 1977, the *Times* was not prepared.

A grave *Times*-ian panic ensued. The paper has music critics by the note-load: classical, opera, jazz, even rock; but it wasn't exactly the kind of paper where Elvis fans worked. Except for me. They knew I was one, see, 'cause I have this funny accent.

So I wrote Elvis' obit for *The New York Times*. I followed the bizarre *Times* practice of referring to him throughout as "Mr. Presley," as in: "Recently, Mr. Presley has been plagued with issues of 'caloric intake.' "

Mr. Presley also died while on the crapper, but the *Times* wouldn't go near that. The next day we sold more papers than we had since President Kennedy was shot.

Quickly waking up to the fact that a king had been reigning for 25 years and they didn't know it, the editors sent me to Memphis for the mass mourning. I was goin' to Graceland.

This was the same week the Shriners and the World's Largest Cheerleading Camp were in town.

None of it surprised me. I know from August. Reporters never take a vacation late in the summer. The news business lives for the weird, the astonishing, the absurd. Somehow, it all explodes in August.

The place was crawling with bald fellas wearin' they l'il red fezzes, ridin' up and down on they tricycles and tootin' they little horns. I was trying to sleep in a dormitory with a herd of teenaged girls who did handsprings end over end down the hall to the john and cheered while brushin' their teeth.

Shriners, cheerleaders, hysterical Elvis fans. You gotta love a culture that brings us all together.

(Bell rings. 4 times.)

*(***MOLLY** *looks over at the A.P. teletype machine as it chugs out a sheet of paper. She starts towards it, but the* **HELPER** *zooms in, tears off the wire copy and hands it to her. She opens her mouth to speak, but he zooms off again.* **MOLLY** *calls after him.)*

MOLLY. I'll take that coffee now!

(looks at the wire copy)

Oh, this my first piece for *The Texas Observer*. Ya'll subscribe to the *Observer*. You don't? You should.

A girlfriend sent me copies of the *Observer* when I was at Smith College. That's where girls of good families were sent to learn the classics. Reading *The Texas Observer* at Smith was like slipping a copy of *MAD* magazine into the Episcopal hymnal.

Back then, the *Observer* was a skinny political rag that was non-stop furious about the treatment of blacks. The *Observer* was my gateway drug. It gave me shouting points to use against the General. Reading it, I learned that Houston's Fourth Ward actually existed. That's the black neighborhood with no sidewalks or grocery stores. Houston's finest refused to acknowledge it.

Once you realize they're lying about race, everything else follows. Everything they – he – ever said to me came into question. He never thought that through. Should've.

The last summer I spent under the General's roof was when I came home from college and got my first job in the library – sorry, morgue – of *The Houston Chronicle*, also known as "the *Chronk*." The General thought it was low-class work, but that made me love it all the more, and I loved it from Day One.

(A visual of a newsroom, circa 1963. All the reporters are men wearing ties and white shirts.)

Now, what is wrong with this picture? That's right, they're all men. Actually I am in that shot. I'm standing behind the coat rack behind the water cooler behind the pillar with the naked cowgirl calendar. If you count the naked cowgirl, there are two of us.

In those days, at the legislature, the senate pages all were young women. One day one of these young ladies walked by, and the guy from *The Dallas Morning News* jabs me in the ribs and says, "Look at the ass on that girl!" Then *The Houston Chronicle* jabs me from the other side and says, "And look at that pair of knockers!"

It was at that moment, I knew I had become one of the boys.

It's not that the boys didn't hit on me, too, *au contraire.* It is just that no editor ever looked at me and said, "Oh, you poor, sweet, fragile little thing. We can't send you to cover a riot." It was always, "Ivins, there's a four-alarm fire at the grain silo, get your ass in there and interview the flames!"

I remember when a phone call came in about a domestic murder in the Fourth Ward. I stood up to go cover it but my editor stopped me. "Sit down. That ain't news. Those people are always killing each other. Cheap it out."

Cheap it out? That's newspaper code for one paragraph buried on the back page.

In Houston, even motorcycle gangs got better coverage. One time the city editor sent me to interview some Hell's Angels. When I got back, he said, "That's the first time in my life I've ever felt sorry for those bastards."

(visual of Molly in leather, astride a motorcycle)

(MUSIC: Motorcycle music)

I liked those fellas. Reminded me of me. They liked to ride fast and laugh loud and drink like a desert during a three-day rain.

Every man I ever spent time with drank a lot.

(visual of Jim Ivins)

The General.

(visual of Bob Bullock)

Bob Bullock.

(visual of Ann Richards)

Ann Richards…Well, Ann wasn't a man, but she drank like one.

Men drink for all sorts of reasons. If you're a Texas man, you don't need a reason. A reason would be a

waste of effort. But if you're a woman, well, it's like Ann's line about Ginger Rogers dancin' backwards in high heels: You gotta drink twice as much and carry it three times as well, and you damn well better be funny. Nobody likes a mopey, down-in-the-dumps drunk girl. They want Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*, wisecracks and snappy come-backs.

My first job, at the *Cronk*, we drank at The Press Club.

Second job, the *Trib* in Minneapolis, we drank at The Little Wagon. They had an open phone line to the newsroom behind the bar, so you could scurry back if an editor was lookin' for ya.

Third job, at the *Observer*, we drank in the office.

Best of that bunch? The *Observer*, hands down. For one thing, the *Observer* had an official office dog. Mine. Her name was "Shit." I always wanted a dog with that name, so I could go out back and scream "Shit" whenever the occasion called for it.

Shit's only interest in life was food. Naturally, she developed a fabulous impersonation of a starving animal, made more impressive by the fact that she was grossly fat. She'd pee on the rug, sit in cactus, steal steaks…I had that dog for 15 years. It seemed longer. When she finally got hit by a car, Shit was no mere dead dog by the side of the road. Nope. Biggest mess you ever saw, and I had to clean it up. With my pal, Kaye.

(visual of Kaye Northcott)

This is the other reason the *Observer* was the best of the bunch. Kaye Northcott. Man, did the two of us get away with some murder. Two Texas gals in our 20s, put in charge of the state's only independent political magazine. It wasn't easy keeping afloat. When you're anti-war liberals in oil country, advertisers are scarce.

Our salaries made us eligible for food stamps. We stole our pencils from the governor's office! After every issue was put to bed we'd have a Final Friday party.

Cold beer and hot food make up for a lot. But hell, we had a voice. Kaye Northcott. What an editor.

Mutt and Jeff. Kaye's 5 feet short, doesn't drink, thinks tobacco's evil and, worse yet, she's tidy. Which, I will admit, did come in handy *vis-à-vis* that mess on the road formerly known as "Shit."

(MUSIC: Canned Heat)

Kaye and I traveled the state on a kinda progressive underground railroad. Some of our best stories came about 'cause of where our car would happen to break down.

(MUSIC ends)

As for food and lodging, we'd get a list of the *Observer*'s subscribers in whatever direction we were headed, then when we'd get within local rates, we'd find a pay phone, call 'em up, and they'd say, "You're from the *Observer*?! Come on over…Stay the night!" By the time we rolled up to their front door, they'd have called the other liberal in town, and the four of us would have one whale of a party.

Everything at the *Observer* was sweat and scramble, but it was worth it because…because so many of our readers looked to us for help, for a connection. And we could do that.

I loved working at the *Observer*. Best six years of my life. And then I left. Why?

The glittering prize. *The New York Times.*

(MUSIC: "New York, New York")

The Holy Grail of news hounds.

(visual of Molly wearing Statue of Liberty hat)

So from the *Observer* I did go – to the Big Apple, where I was miserable at five times my previous salary.

The New York Times, where they didn't allow dogs or bare feet in the newsroom. *The New York Times*, where my copy got de-clawed and neutered.

Example. Here's what I wrote: "The fella has a beer gut that belongs in the Smithsonian." Here's what they ran: "The gentleman has a protuberant abdomen." *(feigns sleep)* Well, you know editors: They're mice training to be rats.

Their first move was to exile me…to the briar patch – but it was wunnerful.

I was named chief of the *Times*' Rocky Mountain bureau, staff of one. I got to roam the West, hunting for news. I could breathe easier out there, but the food! I am a Marlboro and beer girl, but I did miss eating anything green. This was meat-and- potatoes country. I'd a given my left butt cheek for a salad.

One time, in Montana, my steak arrived with a tiny sprig of parsley on top, and I wolfed the parsley down and left the meat. The waitress looked at me with what I think was pity and said, "Goddamn, honey, if I'd knowd you was going to eat it, I'd of washed it."

Another time, I was covering a chicken killing festival in New Mexico. They sit around and drink a lot of beer, listen to music and pluck chickens. So, naturally, I called it a "gang pluck." I knew it wouldn't make it into the paper, but I liked to make the rim rats on the copy desk spit up their coffee every now and then. My editor in New York, Abe Rosenthal, called to read me the riot act. I tried to explain it was a good play on words, but he wasn't having any of it.

"Gang pluck is an allusion to gang fuck. You were trying to get our readers to think of the word 'fuck!'"

"Damn it, Abe, you are a hard man to fool."

The *Times* hired me because they wanted to spice up their good gray image with some pungent prose and snappy patter, so I did what I do. And they did what they do: They fired my ass.

My epitaph should read: She Never Made a Shrewd Career Move.

(MUSIC: Guitar strumming)

I wish I could say I write and do these things because I can't help myself, but most of it's just back-talk I wish I'd said to my father. The French call it *esprit de l'escalier*, the brilliant zinger you think of just a little too late.

(MUSIC fades)

I'm complaining, aren't I?

*(***MOLLY** *goes to the desk and looks at what she's written. She rushes through the lines we've heard before.)*

Old man, sumbitch, second thought, third… *(types)* "I have known him for 53 years, and I've never heard him whine or complain about anything…He is a stoic to the bone."

This kind of creative angst is not my norm. I am known for my *joi de vivre*, as we say in Waco, especially the *joi* associated with my chosen profession. And it's not because we win so much of the time. Mostly, we're spitting in the ocean. The best you can do is puncture some balloons, make the assholes sleep a little less at night, make 'em look in the mirror and know they are frauds.

(MUSIC: Guitar strumming)

I suppose those little victories are a thin kind of blanket to cover me for not having a husband, kids, money…pretty much all the things most people want.

I did have Hank Holland. The first love of my life. He crashed his motorcycle. For a long time, I died there with him.

Then there was my sweet biologist. The draft board grabbed him before he could line up his teaching job. He hated the war, but he must have wanted to go on some level. We fought about it. After he shipped out, I watched the news every night – thinking I might see him. Isn't that crazy?

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