

IN PERFORMANCE

Jane Alexander's Washington Homecoming

by Gary Tischler

Jane Alexander felt right at home at the Women's National Democrat Club historic digs on New Hampshire Avenue.

Lined along the walls in the halls of the Club were portraits of Eleanor Roosevelt, the spiritual leader of the Democratic Party and proactive First Lady to FDR's President of the United States. Alexander, in one of the highlights of her acting career, starred as the former First Lady in the hugely successful mini-series "Eleanor and Franklin" for which she won an Emmy.

It was in Washington where Alexander first made a name for herself in the theater in a landmark production of "The Great White Hope" at Arena Stage. It was in Washington, where Alexander met her husband director Edward Sherin. It was in Washington where she starred at the Kennedy Center in such productions as "Morning After the Miracle" as Annie Sullivan to Karen Allen's Helen Keller and in "First Monday in October," about the first woman named to the Supreme Court. It was in Washington where for years, Alexander fought a gallant rearguard action as president of the National Endowment of the Arts.

And now she was back again, starring as Mrs. Alving in Henrik Ibsen's "Ghosts" at the Shakespeare Theater, directed by Sherin.

So here she was at the Women's National Democrat Club, at a luncheon and being interviewed by Shakespeare Guild president John Andrews. Naturally, they reminded her that she

played a nervous *republican* in a small but memorable role in "All the President's Men."

Raised in Boston, she went to Sarah Lawrence and later moved to New York. "I auditioned twice for parts for Zelda (Fichandler) at Arena and didn't get them," she recalled, talking about her early forays into Washington.

"Somebody called me and said they were doing 'Saint Joan' and that I ought to audition. I said 'Zelda doesn't like me', but I went ahead. I auditioned for this young director Edward Sherin. He seemed smitten with me, in more ways than one. And I with him. A few years later we were married, and here we are."

Then there was "The Great White Hope" by Howard Sackler. It was long.

"Howard obviously loved to write," Alexander said. She ended up playing black heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson's ill-fated white mistress. "The original script was like seven and a half hours," she said. "When it was finally staged at Arena, it was over four hours. On Broadway it was two and a half hours. The movie was a little over an hour and a half. All the beautiful, lyrical speeches were cut." Both Alexander and James Earl Jones won Tonys on Broadway for their work.

She worked in film, ("Kramer vs. Kramer," "All the President's Men," "Brubaker"), television ("Eleanor and Franklin") and on stage in "Morning after the Miracle" and "First Monday in October." When Sandra Day O'Connor was named to the Supreme Court, she told Alexander that there was a real case of life imitating art.

In the 1990s she returned to Washington, serving for four years as chair of the National Endowment of the Arts under often trying conditions. "When the Republicans took control of Congress, they did not just want to cut funding, they wanted to eliminate the NEA," she said. "That was the attitude you were facing. You had to convince people that the arts were important, meaningful and that the funding had to be kept alive."

Alexander was at first nervous about her confirmation. "I had an interview with Senator Jesse Helms," she said. "And he turned out to be very gracious, courtly in that Southern manner."

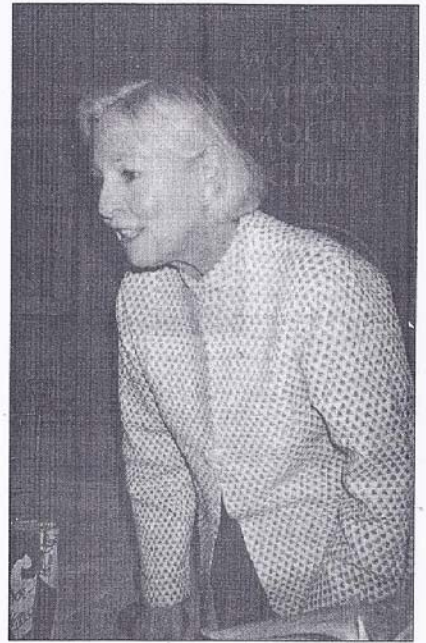
Now she's back in Washington in her first stage effort here since the 1980s. "Well, it's certainly good to be back. So much that is meaningful in my life has happened here," she said.

This production of "Ghosts" is not without its controversies, of the kind that have always haunted the play from its beginnings when it caused a furor.

Sherin's take is to update the play, move it to Maine and set in the 1980s.

Instead of suffering from inherited syphilis, Mrs. Alving's son, an artist in New York, is suffering from AIDS.

"I think it's an appropriate take on the play," Alexander said. "Ibsen I think might have approved."



Alexander's performance as the haunted Mrs. Alving has met with uniform praise. "A long time ago, I made a list of great parts I wanted to do," she said. "This was the last one on the list."

With her natural way of inhabiting a part, Alexander makes it a crown jewel.