

Speaking the mind of Molly

Kathleen Turner stars in alumna Peggy Engel's *Red-Hot Patriot: The Kick-Ass Wit of Molly Ivins*, a one-woman play about the controversial columnist. Story by Dale Smith. Photo by Mark Garvi.

Peggy Engel is a decidedly big-time journalist. She reported for *The Washington Post*, helped create the Newseum and directs the Alicia Patterson Foundation, journalism's oldest writing fellowship program. But long before Engel, BJ '73, hit high-level journalism, she was a theater rat, acting throughout her teenage years in school plays. She enjoyed playing roles ranging from Tweedledum in *Alice in Wonderland* to chorus parts in *Bye Bye Birdie*. But perhaps her most memorable moment came during college in an absurdist one-act play called *The Lesson*, in which she played a piano student murdered on stage by her teacher. Engel resurrected herself and has haunted theaters on the flip side of the footlights ever since.

When in 2007 breast cancer claimed one of Engel's favorite writers, the famously sassy newspaper columnist Molly Ivins, the two threads of Engel's life soon came together. She was moved to co-write with her twin sister, Allison, a one-woman play, *Red Hot Patriot: The Kick-Ass Wit of Molly Ivins*, which the Philadelphia Theatre Company produced March 19–April 25. The headliner was none other than Kathleen Turner, a Tony Award and Academy Award nominee whose career on stage, film and television spans decades.

"She was our absolute first choice, our dream casting for Molly," Peggy says. "She has that same raucous spirit. They have a lot of the same personality traits — both are smart, funny, outrageous and unbelievably hardworking. And they look a lot alike."

But if Engel was at all star struck, Ivins is at the top of the bill. "We saw her as our era's Mark Twain or Will Rogers. When she died, we were upset that her voice was missing, and something told us to write a play. We wanted to hear her voice again, and we saw her as a larger-than-life theatrical character."

The play is a chronological account of Ivins' life, beginning in a privileged and conventional suburb of Houston, where she ran in the same social circle as George W. Bush, whom she dubbed "Shrub." She and Bush both were educated at pricey schools, but their paths differed. "A turning point in her life was going to great schools and being challenged, which made her examine her conventional upbringing and realize it wasn't for her," Engel says. "She got courage to speak out and live her own life by developing intellectual courage."

The show is about speaking out. "The theme deals with speaking truths whether or not anyone listens to you, and having the endurance to keep going at a time when your views might not be popular or acceptable. They might even be ridiculed. With all that, what keeps Molly at the typewriter doing the next story?"

Engel points out that, as a syndicated columnist, Ivins' waggish ways were partly what got her foot in the door with readers. Behind the folksy persona was a deep understanding of issues from Medicare to housing to banking and more. Ivins cut her teeth as an in-the-trenches reporter at the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Minneapolis Tribune*, now the *StarTribune*. In 1970, she became co-editor

of *The Texas Observer* and later worked for a period at *The New York Times*. Throughout her career, she believed in afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted. Politics gave her all the fodder she needed.

Ivins transformed political news into fine satire, Engel says, putting the columnist on a par with humorist Mark Twain. She took big, serious concepts and made them comic in ways that didn't rely on "in" jokes or cultural references. Instead, her work spoke to human nature, Engel says, and she took aim at the powerful.

One of Engel's favorite Ivins wisecracks concerns a Texas legislator. "He was truly a fool and got himself into trouble," Engel says. "Ivins wrote about how he blamed his problems on a satanic cult, then ran away and hid in mother's stereo cabinet." Ivins quipped that, "he had always wanted to be the Speaker."

With Ivins, as with Twain, humor was as much a social force as a foot in the door. Twain said it well in *The Chronicle of Young Satan*: "Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution — these can lift at a colossal humbug — push it a little — crowd it a little — weaken it a little, century by century: But only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand." ■

Kathleen Turner played newspaper columnist Molly Ivins March 19–April 25 in a play by Peggy Engel, BJ '73, at the Philadelphia Theatre Company.

