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## [In Arts & Entertainment](#)

Ann Landers, Plaid Dinner Jackets fill major stages



◀ Laura Gordon plays Ann Landers in "The Lady With All the Answers."



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Special to OnMilwaukee.com

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Tags: [ann landers](#), ["lady with all the answers"](#), [skylight opera](#), [plaid tidings](#), [forever plaid](#)

Welcome to the season of good cheer. Theater companies have learned, sometimes the hard way, to avoid scheduling shows of great heft this time of year. Death, politics and cussing are out of style until Jan. 1.

Milwaukee's two largest theater companies, the Rep and the Skylight Opera Theatre, are reflecting that and the live-within-your-means economic mood with a couple of newly-opened shows featuring small casts boasting large entertainment value.

Rep veteran Laura Gordon is the only actor on the Quadracci Powerhouse Theater stage in "The Lady With All the Answers," which could be subtitled "A hundred minutes with the late Ann Landers." Gordon plays Eppie Lederer, the feisty Iowa native who wrote the Ann Landers newspaper advice column for 47 years until her death in 2002.

Deftly written by David Rambo, "The Lady With All the Answers" mirrors the experience of reading Landers' columns. It's a fizzy cocktail of three parts amusement and one part poignance, and Gordon's performance, directed by J.R. Sullivan, contains just the right amount of spunky buoyancy. Audiences receive a sampling of some of the actress' finest work in her more than 15 years with the Rep.

Dramatist Rambo places Lederer on a set divided between her home office and her upscale traditional living room. "What kind of a nut writes to a newspaper columnist for advice," she asks with typical bluntness in one of the show's early lines.

Lederer then answers her question. Thousands of persons poured out their hearts and souls to her because they had no one else to turn to. Life and death issues, heartbreaking tragedies and the emotionally trying years of adolescence were recounted in letters folded into envelopes and sent off to the columnist's Chicago headquarters.

A few of those are read by Lederer as she culls her collected correspondence in search of material for a book she is writing. But a large part of the time is devoted to the loony letters mailed to Ann Landers.

A woman wonders if doing housework alone in the nude with the curtains drawn is morally deficient. A controversy over the proper way to load a toilet paper holder draws 15,000 responses from readers. All of the letters read in the play are genuine.

Lederer polls the audience on some of the questions raised in her columns. Get ready for indicating if you would marry your spouse a second time, given the chance to reboot your life.

"The Lady With All the Answers" is framed by a single letter that is the elephant in the room. Lederer breezily chats with us while painstakingly composing a letter to Ann Landers readers revealing that she is getting divorced after nearly 36 years of marriage. She is ignoring her own advice, because she has always counseled those struggling with marital woes to work out the problems and reject divorce.

Lederer challenges us to find a single time she told someone otherwise. But her beloved businessman husband, about whom she will not utter a negative word, confessed that he had been carrying on a long affair with a woman younger than their daughter, and although he wants to stay married, the columnist doesn't.

Never say it won't happen to you is the advice she gives each of us.

This news is delivered by Lederer with the same penchant for the slightly smart alecky quip that peppers her entire conversation with us. She assumes that tone in discussing her twin sister, who started the competing Dear Abby column after Ann Landers became popular. Lederer comes across as a tough cookie here.

The public knew Lederer's appearance by the helmet-hair headshot published with her daily column, and the Rep's costume department has given actress Gordon a superb facsimile of that to wear.

"The Lady With All the Answers" runs through Dec. 20.

**Return of the plaid:** The Skylight has entrusted its traditionally lucrative Cabot Theatre holiday slot to four fellows wearing gaudy dinner jackets. "Plaid Tidings" is the Christmas version of the "Forever Plaid" musical revue that mixes super silly comedy with sweet four-part harmonizing on such old standards as "Sh-Boom" and "Strangers in Paradise." The quartet wears plaid.

Persons familiar with "Forever Plaid" will notice similarities between some of the material in its first act and Act 1 of "Plaid Tidings." The show's premise -- the Plaids were a guy singing group killed in a traffic accident in 1964 before being called back to Earth to perform -- remains. Christmas songs are injected, sometimes in bite-sized pieces, into a song list that includes such non-holiday numbers as "Besame Mucho," "Mambo Italiano" and "Come On-A My House."

Act 2 received a complete retool for yule from creator Stuart Ross, with the traditional carol "Joy to the World" mixed with such secular holidays hits as "Mr. Santa," "White Christmas" and "I'll Be Home for Christmas." Depending on how you like your humor, the show may strike you as being overly foolish, but director Bill Theisen and a sterling cast provide some fine moments that don't rely on the comic shtick.

Chicagoan Scott Stratton is magical in a clever and charming tap routine accompanying "Let It Snow." The Plaids thwarted desire to sing backup for Perry Como is assuaged when a video screen drops from above, and we see a film clip from Como's old television show.

The boys lie on the stage as if they were on their family room floor, and with heads propped up by arms, they croon along. It's cute.

Paul Helm, Joe Fransee and Marty McNamee round out the cast, and with Stratton they blend their voices

beautifully.

"Plaid Tidings" continues through Jan. 3.

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