

# GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK

With her final project, Broadway's *Lucky Guy*, we get to fall in love with Nora Ephron one last time. *By Jesse Green*

Fresh out of Wellesley in 1962, Nora Ephron landed a coveted position as a White House intern under John F. Kennedy—not literally under him, she later made clear. If she was going to succeed in the world of men, she was going to do it more cleverly than that, and with compromises of her own choosing. When she got her first newspaper job, at the *New York Post* in the Neanderthal days of 1963, the gal reporters had to work twice as hard to get half as far, and even then were often expected to cover “women’s” subjects, be available



**LUCKY ONES** The late Ephron (top); Hanks (bottom), who brings McAlary to life

for nooky, and disappear once married. But Ephron was too smart, and too ambitious, to be limited by such expectations about the intersection of work and romance; instead, in essays, screenplays, a novel, and life itself, she made that intersection her permanent theme. For the next 50 years, no one told the story better, or with more good humor, than she.

Or almost told it. When she died last June at

71, shocking nearly everyone who knew her and paining thousands who didn't, she left at least one major work unproduced: a play called *Lucky Guy*. Opening April 1 on Broadway, it stars Tom Hanks as the real-life New York tabloid reporter Mike McAlary, who during the 1980s and '90s had a blast uncovering corruption among police, gangs, and gangsters, all the while outracing his demons, until colon cancer got him at 41. Still, that “lucky” in the title isn't ironic. Ephron was lucky too: born—to a working mother—at exactly the right time to get in on the ground floor of women's lib and watch it play out as her pencil flew. She knew what it meant to have exquisite timing, even when time was running out early.

But the play is more than a character study of a writer who breaks rules and gets the story no matter what. It's also the end of an evolution in Ephron's attitude toward women and work, which she often tried to combine in her rom-com plots. Her female protagonists all had careers: as booksellers (*You've Got Mail*), chefs (*Julie & Julia*), comedians (*This Is My Life*), or journalists like herself (*When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle*). But in *Lucky Guy*, there's no on-the-job romance, no attempt to break into a man's world; the job *is* the romance. And though there are women in the play—notably McAlary's wife, Alice, played by Maura Tierney—we are asked to see ourselves, regardless of gender, in the competitive, collaborative spirit of a boozy, rumpled brotherhood. “This is a story about guys, guys with cops, cops with guys,” says one female character. “You don't need me at all.... So kiss my ass.”

A proud advocate and icon of feminism, Ephron was too girly, and too interested in men, to get tangled in its orthodoxies. She found a way to be taken seriously while claiming the right to care about stereotypically feminine concerns like cooking, family, decor, and clothing. When I invited her to participate in a 2011 *New York* magazine round table about the greatest musicals ever, she responded within minutes of my e-mail: “Please please I would love to.” And a few minutes later: “Could I possibly have answered faster I wonder.” Her list, when it arrived—*A Chorus Line* through *My Fair Lady*—was alphabetized.

In the end, Ephron sailed right past the gender conflict that sank so many others. She was hungry and confident but quick with a recipe and careful with the details. That's what makes *Lucky Guy* so fascinating: Only she could have written a story about such slobs with so much love. Which—because we're all slobs—is also what made her so irreplaceable.