

Well

by [William Stevenson](#)



PS - Lisa Kron - Well

Describing Lisa Kron's *Well* makes it sound much less enjoyable than it is. "This play is about illness and wellness," Kron says in the beginning. Actually, she goes on to explain that it's a "theatrical exploration" rather than a play and that it also concerns her mother and growing up in an integrated Michigan neighborhood. In addition, *Well* is metatheatrical, with actors occasionally breaking out of character and discussing what's going on in the play. It might sound like high-falutin' avant-garde theater, but thanks to Kron's wry sense of humor it's also surprisingly funny.

Kron is an actress-writer-comedian known for her one-woman shows. Last year her 2.5 *Minute Ride*, also staged at the Public Theater, won critical praise. She describes *Well* as "a solo show with other people in it." Indeed, Kron starts out center stage describing her play while reading from index cards. But at stage left--reclining in a La-Z-Boy--is her mother, Ann (Jayne Houdyshell). Ann is surprised to find herself in the middle of her daughter's play, and none too happy about it. For her part, Lisa becomes more and more annoyed with her mother for interrupting the action and sometimes chatting up the other actors.

Lisa explains that her mother is an energetic woman trapped in an exhausted body. She finds it difficult to get up out of her chair, using a supermarket "grabber" to pick things up off the floor, and blames her exhaustion on allergies. When Lisa was a child, however, Ann used all her energy to head the West Side Neighborhood Association, which set out to unify the family's integrated Lansing, Michigan, neighborhood.

Lisa feels a mixture of sympathy and frustration about her mother's illness. But during college, she too had serious problems with allergies and had to check herself into a Chicago hospital. The gruesome details of life in an allergy ward are bitingly funny. Lisa's roommate, Joy (Welker White), has *really* bad allergies and resents Lisa for not being allergic to everything. "If you really love a food, chances are you're allergic to it," Joy says in her typically joyless manner.

While the scenes in the hospital ward are as strong as the scenes between Lisa and her mother, the portions of the play dealing with the community group are less engaging. That's partly because the neighborhood characters aren't as vividly written as Ann or the hospital patients and doctor (Joel Van Liew). The scenes of Lisa playing with her black childhood

friends (Saidah Arrika Ekulona and Kenajuan Bentley) are good, though, and Lisa tells a hilarious anecdote about dressing up as her idol, Laura Ingalls Wilder, in fifth grade. Needless to say, it turned out to be a huge mistake, and her school nemesis, Lori (Ekulona), teases her mercilessly.

Lori pops up repeatedly during the play, making fun of Lisa for not being able to dance and demanding to know how she takes care of her hair. She's a grade-school bully, and Ekulona is terrific at playing a bossy, intimidating child. Lori is one of the characters that take the play away from Lisa. Ann also interrupts Lisa's monologues, as well as a few scenes; at one point she even takes drink orders for the other cast members. Kron handles her increasing lack of control over the "theatrical exploration" with great wit. "This avant-garde metatheatrical thing will bite you in the ass," she says. And, stepping out of character, Van Liew apologizes to the audience for the fact that things have nearly ground to a halt.

At first the play's falling apart seems gratuitous. But in the end Kron succinctly shows how the comedy's chaotic nature echoes the theme of integration. She reads a letter from her mother that describes integration as "weaving into the whole even the parts that are uncomfortable or don't fit." Similarly, in *Well* the pieces don't all fit neatly together, and the story is complicated and messy--like life.

Although Kron asserts that this is not a play about her mother, it is in fact an affectionate portrait of Ann and their complex mother-daughter relationship. Ann is a lovable character, even if Lisa comes to believe that she's partly responsible for her own illness. Houdyshell, employing a dead-on Michigan accent, is absolutely believable in the role--so much so that you'd swear that she really is Lisa's mom. Set designer Allen Moyer's cluttered living room at stage left helps foster the illusion.

The rest of the cast is also first-rate. Ekulona shows remarkable range in several roles, with bad girl Lori the most unforgettable. White is hilariously deadpan as the sickly Joy, Van Liew has amusing moments as the doctor, and Bentley does well as a playful kid and his drunken father.

As for Kron's own father, he's barely mentioned in *Well*. Maybe that's because he was the focus of her one-woman *2.5 Minute Ride*. Parts of *Well* feel like a solo show, and Kron's observations are as sharp as her delivery. But the piece really comes alive when Kron interacts with the other actors playing characters drawn from her life. For future productions she might trim five or 10 minutes, since the play feels a bit long at an hour and 45 minutes without intermission. But Kron, her excellent co-stars, and director Leigh Silverman have made this comedy as entertaining as it is clever. If more conventional plays have left you feeling blah, *Well* offers a surefire cure.

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By Lisa Kron

Directed by Leigh Silverman

Public Theater

