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A One-Woman Show Learns to Share

Lisa Kron Lets Her Mother Onstage, but the Story Is Still Her Own



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Lisa Kron as herself and Jayne Houdyshell as her mother in Ms. Kron's play "Well": Exploding the conventions of the solo act.

By JESSE GREEN

FOR anyone who has seen Lisa Kron's work, it may come as a shock to find that her new play features a performer who is not named Lisa Kron. Acclaimed for her autobiographical one-woman shows, the 42-year-old writer-comic-actor has always kept other characters at bay, preferring to report on their doings like a correspondent just back from the war zone of her own life. Sometimes almost literally: in her Obie-Award-winning "2.5-Minute Ride," about a trip she took with her father to the concentration camp in which his parents were murdered, her father never even appears, and the slides purporting to document their journey are completely blank. Life as we experience it, that play seemed to demonstrate, is not a documentary: all we have is our own point of view and our own story.

But in "Well," now in previews at the Public Theater, where it opens next Sunday, the first person seen onstage is an older woman snoring in a recliner. When Ms. Kron herself — trim, restless, hyper-alert — shows up in a spotlight to deliver her opening monologue, she is vaguely annoyed to find this woman, who turns out to be her mother, plopped down in the middle of her play.

Not actually her mother, of course; the woman in

the La-Z-Boy is an actress, Jayne Houdyshell, who uncannily channels the flat Lansing, Mich., accent and impish warmth of the real Ann Kron. (When I later call Mrs. Kron to talk, I have the odd sensation that *she's* the one doing the imitation.) Neither is the character of Lisa to be taken for the writer, though they dress alike: trousers, tailored shirts, more rings than fingers. In "Well," the author cannily drags her unwitting stage persona (and the whole genre of the one-person show) out of the land of interior narrative into the much more complicated, and even dangerous, drama of community.

And that's before the four other actors show up. "One-person shows are an expositional nightmare," Ms. Kron told me recently, "because human beings are not independent agents but part of a system. First, there is the question of the narrator, who if she's not unreliable in some way is suspect. Then there's: 'What happens? What's the action?'"

These are questions Ms. Kron has been asking herself with ever more urgency throughout her career, which began amid the typical hopelessness and humiliations of moving to New York City to act. Pretentious headshots, bad summer stock, getting cast as inanimate objects in inert plays: "The forms of theater I was working in were pretty lifeless," she said. What awakened her to new possibilities was the electric topicality and shoeing inventiveness of the lesbian fringe that sprang up in the mid-1980's at places like the WOW Cafe on the Lower East Side. After an impulse performance in a variety night there — she

sang one of her audition songs and tap-danced — Ms. Kron was asked to put together her own evening of entertainment. "I didn't really prepare," she told me, "but just got up and did a series of funny anecdotes I'd been honing for my own pleasure for years, plus five songs whose lyrics I taped to the upstage side of the piano. The reception was fantastic and I thought: 'I'm a genius. I don't even need to rehearse!'" Turns out she did; her next show was a bust.

"I had to consciously study how to make my kind of storytelling work onstage," Ms. Kron said. "I mean, I'd always been funny, because I was driven to not be ignored but had no access to being acknowledged in the way girls are usually acknowledged. I wasn't pretty, had no feminine wiles, partly because my mother discouraged them. So comedy was a way of getting there. But there were a lot of things I did not want to be as a performer, chief among them pretentious." Indeed, Ms. Kron only knew what she wasn't: a stand-up comic, a sketch comedian, an avant-garde performance artist, a dramatic playwright, a character chameleon like Lily Tomlin or Sarah Jones. So what was she?

Searching for an answer, Ms. Kron trained like a vaudevillian — tinkering with her first-person monologues in front of audiences anywhere she could find them, gauging their reactions, recalibrating her approach — for about seven years. Hundreds of gigs later, she had mastered the witchcraft of holding an audience absolutely, not by lunging for their throats

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but by ruthlessly cutting back the distracting vanities, slurry diction and muddy thinking that so often come between autobiographical storytellers and their quarry. Watching Ms. Kron remember an incident, you felt you could actually see the thoughts forming like bubbles on the surface of simmering water, and emerging (unlike in life) perfectly clear.

But emotional transparency — knowing what she was feeling as opposed to what she was thinking — was another matter. By Ms. Kron's own account, her early work tended to cruise past sadness and deep confusion, saluting it with a wave or an attitude but leaving it essentially unexplored. She remained in control, even in a 1991 show called "Facing Life's Problems," which was about the crisis (she now laughs to recall) of turning 30. "I looked at a video afterward and was so humiliated," she said. "I'd thought I was so frank and funny, but really I was totally protective. That's not what's supposed to happen in the theater. You're supposed to think you're going from A to B and then get sidetracked from A to P. But how do you do that: give it coherence while still acknowledging the messiness of life?"

In humiliation Ms. Kron found the answer. It's not enough that the actor tell the story, she discovered; the story has to "tell" on the actor. Her next piece, "101 Humiliating Stories," took that prescription literally, portraying her slapstick adventures with pantyhose and temp jobs. But she soon realized that the humiliation could be intellectual or spiritual. In "2.5-Minute Ride," the narrator's train of thought gets progressively further derailed as her father fails to have the expected response to Auschwitz. The more he loves and feels at home in the Germany that tried to destroy him, the less the character of Lisa Kron feels comfortable in the world she thought she knew.

"Well" is both a logical next step — switching focus from her father to her mother — and a wild leap forward. Not just formally, though Ms. Kron has a blast exploding the conventions of the one-person show. Reading from an index card like an anxious graduate student, she keeps insisting to the audience that what they are watching is a "theatrical exploration of issues of health and illness both in an individual and in a community." But the playwright, or the character at any rate, almost immediately starts losing control over her thematic itinerary: she gets sidetracked from A to something not even in the alphabet. Trying to tell the true story of how a grass-roots organization, led in part by her mother, stabilized their racially integrated Lansing neighborhood in the 1960's — even as blockbusting and municipal neglect were in the process of destroying it — she finds her thesis undermined by characters who show up uninvited and refuse to substantiate her point. One even beats her up.

And then there's that story — also basically true — of individual health and illness. When she was in college, Ms. Kron, suffering from feelings of exhaustion and disorientation, checked into the allergy unit of Henry Hospital, in Chicago, for a regimen of tests that supposedly confirmed her reactivity to wheat. In the

play, which dramatizes that bizarre episode in pungent detail, Ms. Kron questions the purely somatic origin of her illness; she now considers herself well. The character of her mother — who, like the real Ann Kron, has been incapacitated for decades and continues to attribute the problem to allergies — watches these scenes with growing alarm, finally realizing, with a muted sense of betrayal, that her daughter has rejected the family diagnosis.

"It was very hard reading the script," Mrs. Kron told me, on a day when she felt that mold and atmospheric conditions were exacerbating her symptoms. "I still feel frustrated that Lisa simplifies it so much. There's no explaining what this overwhelming exhaustion is like to anyone who hasn't experienced it. Even to myself," she adds plaintively. "Is she saying that because she's not sick, I'm not either? If I believed that, I'd probably change my name and leave the country." She chuckles. "And there have been many times in Lisa's career when that has seemed like it might be the appropriate course of action."

But Lisa Kron compensates as a playwright for any disloyalty as a daughter. Though she initially plays her mother's illness for laughs, reflecting a child's typical annoyance at a parent's limitations, she gradually allows the character of Ann Kron to seem better adjusted and more productive than herself. In another subversion of the form, she has

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the other actors break character frequently to demonstrate their preference for the woman in the La-Z-Boy; instead of index-card nostrums, she offers them soda and a hug and an attentive ear. By the end, Ann is the beloved star, and Ms. Kron's original argument — her concept of what makes you healthy, and how much you can really understand about another person's well-being — is in tatters.

Of course, this process, presented as if it were happening spontaneously at each performance, was meticulously worked out over three years of workshops and rewrites with Ms. Kron's director, Leigh Silverman, and dramaturge, John Dias. Also carefully wrought, but much less obviously, is the universal story of growth and individuation that gives the material its emotional urgency. However it happened that Ms. Kron got well — whether because of psychotherapy or because she left Lansing or because she was never really sick in the first place — it meant taking a fateful step away from her mother, just as, in "Well," she has taken a fateful step away from the kind of work that made her reputation. Accepting that you cannot control other people's reality (even, if you're being honest, in your own play) also means relinquishing the comfortable excuse that they control yours. In life, there may be no such thing as a one-person show, but perhaps you should worry if you don't at least have top billing. □