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Lisa Kron as herself in the play "Well," which she also wrote.

THEATER REVIEW

A Mother Speaks Out, And Hearts Dissolve

By BEN BRANTLEY

When Lisa Kron walks out on her own play, the wonderful "Well" at the Public Theater, it appears to be in a fit of pique. And for the character Ms. Kron is playing, a writer and performer named Lisa Kron, the motivation is indeed that embarrassing, childish combination of sulkiness and exasperation that descends on people of all ages.

But what Lisa Kron the playwright is doing, when she stalks up the stairs and out of view of her audience, is an act of generosity and humility. She is letting a character other than herself control the stage: a woman who happens to be her mother.

WELL O.K., to be exact, it's an actress who's playing Ms. Kron's mother, the excellent Jayne Houdyshell. As Ann Kron, Ms. Houdyshell is a kibbitzer for much of "Well," which opened last night. Sitting on the side of the stage in a La-Z Boy reclining chair, in a well-worn cardigan and nightgown, Ann keeps correcting her daughter's distortions of fact and slips of memory.

It's all Ms. Kron can do to get on with the story of their shared lives, which includes Ann's energetic and triumphant years as the organizer of a neighborhood integration program in Lansing, Mich., as well as the paralyzing effects of her various and mysterious illnesses.

Ann is the archetypal parent who hovers in eternal rebuke and praise

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Mother Speaks Out, and Hearts Dissolve

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in so many adults' imaginations as a mythic and slightly grotesque nag and comfort. But when Ann is finally allowed to have her say in this ingeniously self-sabotaging memory play, something magical happens.

A flood of feelings that have been hammering at the door of "Well" for the previous 90 minutes break in to seize unconditional power. And as Ann speaks simply and regretfully about a daughter she thought she knew to her core, the whole play, as it has been presented up to that moment, seems to dissolve. So, it might be added, do the hearts of the audience.

Ms. Kron made her reputation as a monologist of wry, rueful wit and thorny eloquence. In shows like "101 Humiliating Stories" she transformed painful personal moments into achingly funny comedy. But unlike so many practitioners of the art of self-exposure, she has pursued a career that looks increasingly outward through empathy.

Her "2.5 Minute Ride," seen at the Public four years ago, was a lyrical attempt to understand her father, a child of German-Jewish parents killed in Auschwitz. Ms. Kron was as funny and articulate as ever, but she acknowledged that certain subjects are beyond the reach of words. "2.5 Minute Ride" was as notable for its resonant silences as for its inspired torrent of talk.

With "Well" Ms. Kron has ventured into even riskier territory. To create a portrait of her mother she has constructed a theatrical world that insists on interrupting and undermining the polished self-containment of the stand-up memoir. Her play systematically dismantles her own armor, from her self-consciously self-conscious stage persona to her carefully barbed phrasing. And to do so it enlists a full-dress, expertly assembled production, astutely directed by Leigh Silverman, with boundary-blurring scenery (Allen Moyer) and lighting (Christopher Akerlind).

The show's fine additional ensemble members — Kenajuan Bentley, Saida Arrika Ekulona, Joel van Liew and Welker White — are ostensibly on board to do Ms. Kron's bidding, to animate events in her life as



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From left, Lisa Kron, Saidah Arrika Ekulona and Jayne Houdyshell in "Well," Ms. Kron's new play about a mother-daughter relationship.

WELL

By Lisa Kron; directed by Leigh Silverman; sets by Allen Moyer; lighting by Christopher Akerlind; costumes by Miranda Hoffman; sound by Jill BC DuBoff; production stage manager, Martha Donaldson; managing director, Michael Hurst; associate producers, Peter DuBois and Steven Tabakin; director of production, Joe Levy. Presented by the Public Theater, George C. Wolfe, producer, and Mara Manus, executive director. At the Public Theater/Martinson Hall, 425 Lafayette Street, East Village.

WITH: Lisa Kron, Kenajuan Bentley, Saidah Arrika Ekulona, Jayne Houdyshell, Joel Van Liew and Welker White.

she would like to present them. But they have this tendency not to do what they're told.

The playwright's intention, she announces early on, is to consider "illness and wellness," and why some people who have been sick get well, while others do not. She goes on to say that her family believes, above all, in two things: allergies and racial integration.

So with her rebellion-prone company of actors, she sets out to portray her experiences as a 19-year-old patient at an allergy clinic in Chicago and as a little girl in a racially mixed neighborhood where her mother — a sort of "housewife savant," she says — reigned as a civic organizer. There is, Ms. Kron declares with shaky conviction, a connection between these two aspects of her life, though even as the play nears its end, she despairs of finding it.

It's hard to describe "Well" without making it sound like some arcane Pirandellian exercise. But whenever it creaks with intellectual preciousness, Ms. Kron applies the oil of self-deprecation. The show has a warmth and accessibility that make you want to recommend it to everyone, not just downtown hipsters who like to have

their theater and deconstruct it, too.

Rest assured that "Well" features plenty of the bright one-liners and self-contained narratives for which Ms. Kron is known. (Judaism, she says, "is viewed in the Midwest as a kind of accessory that you wear on top of your Christianity.") There are several priceless tales of embarrassment, including a delirious description of Ms. Kron's miscalculated attire at a children's costume party.

But at the same time "Well" underscores the limitations of such cleverness. Acting out Ms. Kron's memories, the other performers have the bright comic flatness of people compressed into amusing anecdotes. As the play progresses, they keep breaking character, commenting on the script's confusion and shallowness. In the meantime Ms. Kron's mother, as embodied by Ms. Houdyshell, unaccommodatingly takes on more and more complexity, until finally the whole play bursts open.

You could argue of course that since Ms. Kron is the author of "Well," she remains in manipulative control. But here, in her richest achievement to date, she finds such heartfelt theatrical forms for formlessness and confusion that you never feel hoodwinked or doubt her integrity.

And in accepting that it is impossible to know someone else completely, "Well" paradoxically leads you into believing that by the end you have come to know Ms. Kron's mother better than you do most people. By the way, the real Ann Kron (not just the actress playing her) is very much alive, and the last words in "Well" belong to her. They come from a speech made decades ago about civic responsibility. But in this context, they become poetry that defines the very soul of Ms. Kron's deeply affecting play.