

# The family's ill, but the casual humor is healthy

**WELL.** By and starring Lisa Kron, directed by Leigh Silverman. Public Theater, Lafayette Street. Seen at Saturday afternoon's preview.

BY LINDA WINER

When Lisa Kron stands onstage at the Public Theater to deny that "Well" is a play about Kron and her mother, of course we know that it is.

When she insists, not quite winking, that the 100-minute piece is not an autobiographical play but a "theatrical exploration of issues of health and illness both in the individual and in a community," we get the joke. Oh, sure, we almost wink back, the autobiographical performance artist is *only* going to use details about her own chronic-invalid mother to explore universal issues about why some people/communities are sick and some are well, why some stay sick and some get well.

But there's an even better joke in the sly, good natured, almost brutally deceptive little work that opened last night with a large, lethargic, motherly woman dozing stage left in a ratty La-Z-Boy recliner. "Well" is all those things Kron claims it is, *and* everything she claims it is not.

It is also both lighthearted and deep. It seems to ramble but is extremely well organized. And, when it feels contrived, Kron is using the contrivance to blow



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**LISA KRON**, right, wrote and stars in "Well," at the Public Theater. The play also features Jayne Houdyshell, seated, and Saidah Arrika Ekulona.

up the conventions of the one-person show from the inside. Kron calls this, her first work with other actors, a "solo with other people in it." Thus, she gets to exploit the conspiratorial usefulness of those interior monologues in a spotlight while commenting on the limitations of the form.

"Well" is not as neatly compelling as "2.5 Minute Ride," her improbably funny, terribly wise, Obie-winning solo about making a video about her trip to Auschwitz with her father, a Holocaust survivor. Directed with an intentional messy self-consciousness

by Leigh Silverman, Kron is not just joined onstage by a maternal actress — the sweetly devastating Jayne Houdyshell. There also is a four-actor chorus to re-enact flashbacks of her childhood in a mixed-race neighborhood in Lansing, Mich., and her stay in a hospital that specializes in allergies.

There are stacy mutinies by the actors, and complaints about playwrights who simplify life into montages and metaphors. And there are knowing asides about the "culture of illness" by which her family has kept time through the years.

But, most of all, there is the genuine, if pretend, relationship between a woman and her mother. They share the "family diagnosis" that allergies are the explanation for all physical and emotional problems.

The experience is divided into three playing fields (designed by Allen Moyer). There is the sleek, clinical space where Kron's memories can be re-enacted in stylized exaggeration. There's the magic spotlight where Kron, as playwright and soloist, can try to control lives that refuse to be easily understood. And there is the slice of her mother's house, bits of carefully arranged clutter dominated by a woman in a housedress, struggling to stay awake.

We learn that, despite the "mystery illness" that unites mother and daughter, this woman — who believes in "allergies and racial integration" — worked to keep their neighborhood united against deteriorating into a slum. For all the seemingly casual humor, Kron — a founder of the delightful troupe Five Lesbian Brothers — concludes that the chronically sick are not necessarily like well people who are ill, just as Jews are not Christians who happen to be Jewish and blacks are not whites who happen to be black. The revelations are both graceful and awkward, subtle and obvious, elegant and confusing. Like life.

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