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Well

(Public Theater/Martinson Hall; 195 seats; \$50)

A Public Theater presentation of a play in one act by Lisa Kron. Directed by Leigh Silverman.

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

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Can you actually be allergic to your own family? The disturbing possibility is one of many questions raised by Lisa Kron's new "solo show with other people in it" at the Public Theater. The playwright and performer's perceptive, shaggy, achingly funny play doesn't exactly accomplish what it sets out to do -- or at least what Kron, narrating and appearing as herself, claims it intends to do. It is, in a way, about how life is too messy and complicated to be wrapped up in a neat little theatrical package.

As she firmly informs us in the opening moments, this is supposed to be a "theatrical exploration of issues of health and illness both in an individual and a community." Kron is haunted by the conundrum of her mother, "a fantastically energetic person trapped in an utterly exhausted body." Assailed by a host of generalized ailments she attributes to allergies, Lisa's mom has essentially been confined to a La-Z-Boy recliner for decades.

But how can this sad figure be the same woman who saved a whole neighborhood when Lisa was growing up? "When we were very young she decided she wanted my brother and me to be raised in a racially integrated neighborhood, and then she set about to create one," Lisa says. In East Lansing, Mich., yet. How can a woman who cured a whole community be incapacitated by a few spores?

This worthy blueprint, which no doubt sounded great on the grant proposal form, doesn't entirely fit the play that follows. Even as she stubbornly tries to keep it under control, Kron's exuberantly Pirandellian play wiggles firmly out of her grasp, to become a larger, looser -- uh -- theatrical exploration of issues of integration (or so you might put it on a grant proposal). It digs into the difficulty of reconciling art and life, black and white, the past and the present and any number of other apparent opposites.

Like, for instance, you and your mom. The destabilizing force in Kron's carefully ordered theatrical universe is -- who else? -- the play's subject herself, Lisa's

beloved mother Ann, who is found dozing in an easy chair at stage right when the play begins. Kron's delightful conceit is to upend the convention of the autobiographical-play form by having (or rather appearing to have) her actual, complicated, sweetly distracted, continually disruptive mother as a presence in the play. (This idea sets the mind traveling along interesting paths: What would Edward Albee's mother have had to say about "Three Tall Women"?)

The woman at stage right is not the usual docile theatrical simulacrum, sentimentalized or demonized by the all-powerful playwright, who can tell her what to do and what to say. No sirree, as Ann might say, in her sweetly Midwestern way. This lady's the real deal, and she isn't about to be lectured to by her smarty-pants daughter, much as she loves her. From the comfortable perch of her recliner, Ann regards the play as if it unfolds with an affectionate but skeptical eye, and isn't shy about imposing herself on the proceedings. She was there, too, after all.

"I'm going to be sorry I didn't wait till later to take that diuretic," she says early on, and later trudges upstairs to remedy the problem. (Allen Moyer's set depicts her cluttered living room, piled with gewgaws, as a kitschy barnacle on the pristine theatrical space that occupies most of the stage.) She offers sodas to the audience, and then the cast. She gives passive-aggressive bit of encouragement ("It's true I'm not really crazy about my living room ending up here but I know you need to do your work"). She interrupts Lisa's version of events to put forth her own: "Honey, just let me tell this story..."

The friendly woman in a baggy cardigan, nightgown and slippers is not actually Kron's mother, of course, but you might be forgiven for thinking it is, so astoundingly good is Jane Houdyshell in the role. The perfection of her performance is crucial to the play's success -- a note of falseness in its execution would send the play heaving into archness, or worse, cuteness.

The meta-theatrical techniques Kron is employing here are, after all, nearly a century old, and when the other actors drop their masks and begin to argue with the playwright, and bond with her sweet mother, these devices sometimes show their age, despite the brisk, bright fluidity of Leigh Silverman's production. (The flawless naturalism of Houdyshell's work also reveals the slight artifice in her colleagues' attempts to play themselves.)

But Houdyshell is so entirely at home in the character's skin -- and the character is written, not incidentally, with such vividness and compassion -- that her presence never feels like a mere theatrical device. Indeed, the play Kron purports to want to present, in which she and a quartet of actors re-enact scenes from her past -- her own stay in an allergy clinic, her childhood conflicts with the black kids in the neighborhood, her embarrassment and awe at her mother's activism -- gradually comes to seem the ineffectual theatrical gimmick. It's really just a sideshow to the main event, which is Lisa's sorrowful, exasperated, guilt-ridden reckoning with her mother.

Kron posits a few theses about how she herself escaped the family legacy of debilitation: By getting into therapy, by getting into theater, getting a girlfriend. And, just possibly, getting away from home: "I think I learned to be sick from you," she says, gently. But this implies that her mother's illness is a failure of her will, a self-imposed condition -- and that doesn't jibe with Lisa's admiration for her mother's spirit, one so healthy it helped blot away the pox of racism in a Midwestern town. And it certainly doesn't sit well with Ann: "Oh, Lisa. Did you really bring me out here to make people think I'm crazy?"

The play's poignant conclusion is emotionally satisfying, even if it is presented as theatrically unsatisfactory. Kron seems to give up on art as a force capable of reconciling life's contradictions. "You don't make sense as a character," she complains of her mother, as her play all but evaporates around her. But, as Kron's play so engagingly illustrates, art that embraces life's senselessness is really the only kind that makes perfect sense.

sound, Jill BC Duboff; production stage manager, Martha Donaldson. Producer, George C. Wolfe. Opened March 28, 2004. Reviewed March 27. Running time: 1 HOUR, 40 MIN.

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