

## Family Structuralists

Two Jewish-family plays fall apart, but *Well*, the wiser, does it deliberately and elegantly

by Michael Feingold

April 6th, 2004 11:50 AM

[alert me by e-mail](#) [e-mail story](#)  
[write to us](#) [printer friendly](#)

One reason not to trust the pedantic jargon of "performance studies" departments: Look hard at the newest theatrical forms and you find, essentially, good old theater in updated clothing. Here's Lisa Kron, a noted explorer in solo performance and collective creation. And here she is turning out, in *Well*, an absolutely traditional scripted play—delightfully scripted, as it happens—that thrives by cunningly pretending to be almost anything but. The resulting game, which Kron plays vivaciously and with honor, was perfected by Pirandello about a century ago. Its tricks, staples in the workrooms of such continental playwrights as Frisch and Anouilh, were the daily bread of early-'60s Off-Off writers like Ronald Tavel, Lanford Wilson (who still employs them), and Rosalyn Drexler. If you see *Well*, which I enthusiastically recommend, you can gauge the extent of its pedigree from the remark that a character in one of Drexler's early plays made on meeting an author: "I've always wanted to write myself—but then, I've been written already."



Kron and Houdyshell in *Well: Our Mothers, our plays*

photo: Michal Daniel

### Well

By Lisa Kron  
Public Theater  
425 Lafayette Street  
212.239.6200

### Sarah, Sarah

By Daniel Goldfarb  
Manhattan Theatre Club Stage II  
131 West 55th Street  
212.581.1212

I certainly don't mean to accuse Kron of concealing her play's origins, any more than I would accuse Drexler of plagiarizing *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, probably the first popular work in English to be built on the premise that the elements of a play are arbitrary and rearrangeable at will. The exhilarating feel of such plays, as in *Well*, comes from their liberating individualism, their teasing dialectic between the impulse of the moment and the demands of dramatic form. Precedents notwithstanding, every such play is its own template; Kron's play is especially so, because its endlessly disruptive form is the aesthetic equivalent of its content. The story of a daughter's struggle with her mother's enfeebling reliance on psychosomatic illnesses, and the mother's simultaneous struggle to avert her crumbling neighborhood's decline, *Well's* moral is that people can solve their problems best, even the most grievous ones, just by talking openly and candidly to each other. Since such candor in confrontation is the essence of drama, a play could have no better moral engine.

Kron's wit lies in making her mother, rather than herself, the repository

of this moral, and hence the antagonist to the laboriously controlled piece of "performance art" that "Lisa Kron" herself is purportedly trying to create. "This play is not about my mother and me," Kron warns us at the start. But her mother (played with adorable slyness by Jayne Houdyshell) thinks differently, and Kron's mock-rigid, image-by-image, artsily "downtown" scenario soon gets tossed aside, in increasingly uproarious ways, by the encroaching life impulses that her mother stirs up—literally so when another character, who Kron insists isn't even in the play, scatters the author's note-card script in every direction. At the climax, Kron virtually resigns from her own work; those having too good a time at that moment to recall Pirandello's Dr. Hinkfuss can consult any standard modern drama textbook when they get home for proof that Kron is squarely in the great tradition.

The passion and ingenuity bound up in Kron's writing are for the most part subtly supported by Leigh Silverman's astute production, to which Christopher Akerlind's lights make an especially incisive contribution. Silverman's direction goes wrong, I think, only on two counts: The first scenes with the supporting ensemble are played in an overstated, cardboard style that too easily reveals them as the setups they are. And the nebulously written male roles—one of the script's few shortcomings—are made worse by weak casting. But it's right that a play by a woman, celebrating a conflict of female viewpoints, should have its strongest performances in the female roles, and Silverman has shaped four superb ones: In addition to Kron and Houdyshell, Welker White is heartrending as a female allergy patient, while Saidah Arrika Ekulona's portrait of a nine-year-old hellion provides a perfect balance of the horrific and the hilarious. (Both women also play, with skill, numerous other roles.)

Beyond Kron's formal playfulness, her love of truth, and her compassion for sick and injured souls, *Well* offers something bigger. It's political in a sense rare nowadays: as a model of conduct. Kron shows us her mother working democratically (and lovingly) to undermine a false structure that could only function at the expense of the people it purports to represent. At a time when every part of life's fabric is under threat, when lies and spin make up the bulk of our political discourse, and when our current administration will do anything to avoid speaking the truth on any subject, it's vital to be reminded again how much can be accomplished by a little calm, honest talk between humans. I hope some of next fall's candidates take the hint.

Few hints of any kind can be gotten from Daniel Goldfarb's *Sarah*, *Sarah*, a family drama stretched so sliver-thin that it hardly seems to have any content beyond its gimmicks. Even what's left then is improbable, starting with a tyrannical Jewish matriarch ostensibly born in Poland in 1921 but raised in a Siberian orphanage, a story so

Ads by Goooooogle

#### **Scripts, Musicals & Plays**

The Internet Theatre Bookshop Virtually every Play in the World

[www.stageplays.com](http://www.stageplays.com)

#### **Drama Plays**

Discount new & used items. affil Search for drama plays now!

[www.eBay.com](http://www.eBay.com)

#### **Scripts for High Schools**

Original playscripts for High School drama groups

[www.theatrefolk.com](http://www.theatrefolk.com)

#### **Brooklyn Publishers**

Contest-winning plays and monologs for schools world-wide!

[www.brookpub.com](http://www.brookpub.com)

factitious you'd think the playwright must have been drowsing rather than listening at his grandmother's knee. Even the enchanting J. Smith-Cameron, working hard at the head of a capable cast, can't pull any magic out of this tenuous item.

#### More by Michael Feingold

##### **Hard Core Orthography**

Like many of the words its characters spell, *Spelling Bee* seems to have no particular use  
*The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*

##### **Arthur Miller, 1915-2005**

##### **First Served in 1931, This Spicy Plateful of Rice Proves it's Still Full of Beans**

*Counsellor-at-Law*

##### **Boroughing in the Past**

*Brooklyn Boy* shows how a playwright's autobiography can be a rather novel experience  
*Brooklyn Boy*

##### **Help Me Ponder**

If this is as good as the "Vibrations" get, how bad must the intentions have been?  
Richard Dresser's *Good Vibrations*