

SEVEN DAYS [10.03.12]

Born to Run

Theater review: *Kimberly Akimbo*

BY **ERIK ESKILSEN**

It's the rare — and possibly deranged — American teenager who laments that the awkward adolescent years are flying by too fast. *Oh, why must I get my driver's license? Can't I use my learner's permit for another blissful year?* Playwright David Lindsay-Abaire's 2000 *Kimberly Akimbo* features just such a rare specimen of youth culture. But her motivation to savor age 16 is physical, not psychological. The Kimberly (Levaco) of the play's title suffers from a rare progeria-like disease that causes her to age rapidly. By the time we meet her in the first scene, she already inhabits the body of a postmenopausal, middle-aged woman.

In the 2nd Act Productions rendition of the show currently running at Burlington's Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, directed by Richard Waterhouse, that body belongs to actor Noni Stuart. The juxtaposition of Stuart's physical presence with Kimberly's teenage emotional and intellectual maturity sets an odd tone for the play, which gets odder when we realize that Kimberly is, in most other respects, the most normal character in this story's world.

The center of that world is Kimberly's dysfunctional, blue-collar New Jersey home. Her father, Buddy Levaco (Andrew Butterfield), works at a gas station and boozes too much. Her mom, Pattie Levaco (Dawn Kearon), is pregnant with her second child but still smokes cigarettes, doesn't turn down a drink and imagines herself afflicted with cancer and diabetes — all to feed an insatiable self-absorption. While the Levacos aren't abusive to their daughter, their ineptitude approaches serious neglect. They're the kind of parents who leave their kid waiting for hours to be picked up after an activity, who forget her birthday, who need to remind each other to ask her how her school day went — not out of sincere interest, but because Kimberly seems to like being asked. In light of the girl's medical condition, such insensitivity often plays as casually cruel.

While specific events in the play trigger more volatile responses, an undercurrent of anger in the Levaco domicile gives an unpleasant subtext to nearly every utterance. Somewhat surprisingly, this underlying tension only rarely appears to be linked to Kimberly's tragic medical condition. Waterhouse directs his cast skillfully in their allusions to other preoccupations — the family's dirty secrets. Early in the play, the plot mainly concerns day-to-day life in the Levacos' Bogota apartment; only hints of what happened back in their former Secaucus home threaten to undermine this already-damaged domestic scene.

The chaotic quality of Kimberly's home life sometimes produces dark comedy. Daniel Sparling's set design — a simple eat-in kitchen at stage right, Kimberly's small bedroom at stage left, a movable table and bench to suggest a library or car — creates an inconspicuous background against which character interactions stand out in absurd relief. (The spinning hands of a clock above the fridge remind us of Kimberly's overarching predicament.) Though Sparling's set is a bit cramped for the Off Center boards, a sense of physical confinement reinforces the metaphorical ruts in which the characters are stuck. The particular manners in which they spin their wheels generate the play's laughs.

Perhaps to simulate the viewpoint of the play's title character, Lindsay-Abaire has given only the youthful characters in *Kimberly Akimbo* any semblance of reliability. Stuart's Kimberly endures her parents' perpetual disappointments with equal parts resignation and teen angst. While Stuart may underplay some moments calling for higher emotion, her Kimberly's occasional detachment helps maintain the play's sharper, contrasting focus on her emotionally unhinged parents.

Kimberly's counterpart and classmate, Jeff McCracken, played with geeky self-consciousness by Tyler Ogden, offers a similarly clear-eyed look at this world of feral adults, including one or two from his own family to whom he refers. Jeff befriends Kimberly after she agrees to let him interview her for a science-class project on a disease of his choosing. Throughout the play, this unlikely knight lightens dark moods with his wide-eyed earnestness, obsession with forming anagrams, and other nerdy asides — all showcasing local high schooler Ogden's keen comic timing. Jeff and Kimberly's bond adds dashes of sweetness to this tart play.

Playing Kimberly's mother, Pattie, Kearon is the definition of high maintenance. Even her child's kicks in utero are an inconvenience to her. The stuffing under Kearon's blouse could look more realistic, but her glassy-eyed gaze conveys credible, clueless delight in having a justification for sitting around while others attend to her needs. Pattie's primary activity is tape recording a message to her unborn child about the world outside her womb, including why the child — Pattie is sure it's a girl — should never listen to what others say about her mother.

As the nominal man of the house, Butterfield's Buddy is a complicated blend of rage, defeat and bewilderment about how his life veered so far off course. Butterfield turns in a well-nuanced performance as a character nearly as victimized by circumstance as his daughter is. The occasional tenderness he shows for Kimberly rings true, as does the fury he unleashes at those who would challenge his role as protector, however ill suited to it he may be.

Into this already unstable domicile crashes Aunt Debra — Pattie's sister — played with kinetic mirth by Cael Barkman. Following a period of homelessness, which was preceded by one of incarceration, Debra seeks out her relatives for shelter — and for accomplices to her next crime. Barkman's turn as this live wire with nothing to lose combines a nervy, menacing energy and a coarse sense of humor. Besides being the funniest character in *Kimberly Akimbo*, Debra is an important link to a past about which Buddy and Pattie Levaco hoped Kimberly would never know. Debra's arrival brings bad tidings — in other words, the truth.

What transpires from this turning point makes *Kimberly Akimbo* much more than a portrait of family dysfunction. Like Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, the play strikes hopeful notes about breaking destructive patterns and finding peace amid turmoil. It's far from a love letter to working-class New Jersey. But in this committed production, Lindsay-Abaire's arrangement of characters does not spell utter doom — anagram: duet motor — for hope.

PERFORMING ARTS



Courtesy of 2nd Act Productions

Noni Stuart, Tyler Ogden and Andrew Butterfield