

Well
By Lisa Kron

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A STUDY GUIDE
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I. THE AUTHOR. There's something strange about producing a biography for the author of an autobiographical play – indeed, all of Kron's work draws on her life experience and her perspectives as a perennial “outsider.” Her faculty page at Yale Drama, where she serves as Lecturer, lists only the programs in which she teaches (BA, Playwriting). If you go to www.lisakron.com, her own website, she has created a section called “biography.” But rather than sharing the story of her life, it shares the story of her work, her plays, her companies, her awards. Is this another of her telling juxtapositions (my life *is* my work), or is she merely avoiding retelling her life story in a form less riveting than her own plays?

Some of the things we know about Kron's “real” life include:

1. She was born in Ann Arbor, MI and grew up in Lansing.
2. Her mother is indeed Ann Kron, who did indeed start the Westside Neighborhood Organization in Lansing.
3. Lisa did indeed attend a predominantly non-white school as part of her parents' early and sustained commitment to integration.
4. Ann converted to Judaism when she married Lisa's father, Walter Kron; Lisa was raised Jewish.
5. Her father, Walter Kron, escaped Nazi Germany as a child; his parents were murdered at Auschwitz. (Lisa's play *2.5 Rides* tells, after a fashion, the story of her father's response to his parents' fate.)

6. Lisa is a 1983 graduate of Kalamazoo College and has studied further with Chataouqua Professional Actors Studio and the British European Studies Group.
7. She moved to NYC in 1984 and has been involved in theater ever since, first with the WOW Café Theatre and later both independently and through her partnership *The Five Lesbian Brothers*, a group of five women who “create provocative lesbian theater for the masses through the fine feminist art of collaboration” (www.lisakron.com).
8. Lisa is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Cal Arts/Alpert Award, an NEA/TCG playwriting fellowship and grants from the Creative Capital Foundation and New York Foundation for the Arts.
9. Lisa’s major works include *Well*, which opened on Broadway in 2006, garnered significant critical acclaim as well as two Tony nominations, and was included in several listings of best plays in the years around its creation; and *2.5 Rides*, which received an OBIE Award, Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle nominations, an L.A. Drama-Logue Award, and the GLAAD Media Award for best play on or Off Broadway and was named the best autobiographical show of 1999 by New York Press.
10. Lisa has written or collaborated on at least nine other plays; she currently teaches playwriting at Yale Drama School.

II. THE SETTING. *Well* takes place here and now, in the theatre in which it’s being performed. It has to. (See “The Plot.”)

Part of the stage is devoted to Ann Kron’s living room, complete with clutter and detritus of life; part of it is devoted to neighborhood and Allergy Unit scenes. Interestingly, the stage directions ask for the physical setting to reflect the derailment of the plot – scene changes should not be quite completed, scenery might malfunction or break – the trappings of the theater here are designed to bring us into an illusion but then to make us see that illusion for what it is.

An important device in this play is the “special light” into which Lisa steps for private introspection and conversation with us, her audience. Even that improbable sanctuary, which we’d normally accept, gets split open later in the play. It’s part of the humor of *Well* that we’re first invited to believe that people sharing the same stage can’t hear someone who’s standing in a special square of light, and then later our foolish belief is exposed – of course they can hear her! We’re doubly goofy and we don’t know where to stand.

III. THE PLOT. Lisa Kron, the character in *Well*, describes the plot of the play in her opening lines:

“This play that we’re about to do deals with issues of illness and wellness. It asks the question: Why are some people sick and other people are well? Why are some people sick for years and years and other people are sick for a while but then they get better?...This play is *not* about my mother and me...It’s not about how she’s been sick for

years and years and years and I was sick as well but somehow I got better. It's not about how she was able to heal a neighborhood but she's not able to heal herself. It's not *about* those things but it does use those things as a vehicle for 'a multicharacter theatrical exploration of issues of health and illness both in the individual and in a community'."

Her insistence on what the play is and is not about suggests, of course, that it's really about all those things, or any of those things. More than that, it suggests that her idea of what it's supposed to be about has been challenged by past audiences or readers – maybe she doesn't have as firm a grip on this whole thing as she thinks.

Kron's play *2.5 Minute Ride* is often introduced with the epigram: "the first time you tell a story, it's fact. The second time, it's fiction." What Kron does in *Well*, then, is to take facts from her life and tell us their stories, by showing us how they live on in complicated ways, and how their retelling can break open the people and their stories to reveal new possibilities. Put more simply, it's about how a woman's retelling of her life story gets challenged, complicated, and spun in different ways by the people around her.

Despite the fact that Kron's plays are autobiographical, or at least use her own stories as starting points, her plays are generally considered to be not about the stories behind them. Instead, they tend to be about the process of writing and performing plays, about the spaces between the reality, history, and theater. Kron's early work was largely improvisational; she wanted to "learn to make an authentic connection with an audience, to feel and shape the energy in a room." But as she began making longer, more complex solo plays out of her stories, she "stumbled on the inherent flaw of the solo play – it's very difficult to create dramatic action when there is no second character onstage to provide an obstacle to the agenda of the primary character." Her solution: "to locate the action of the play not in the events of the stories being told, but instead in the very act of telling a story."¹ So her characters are also, in some cases, her actors, which complicates her plots. And her plots get derailed, and people walk off the stage. There are rules to drama, and she uses drama to explore and undermine those rules.

Indeed, that whole sense we have of expecting something routine and not getting it, of understanding some of the rules only to watch the play break them, is part of the point, for Kron. She describes learning from her work at WOW, where, she says, she saw "a series of the most extraordinary, appalling, entertaining, *dynamic* moments, which left me eternally fascinated with what happens on a stage when you put someone there who does not know the rules. It began to seem to me that this was a key to viscerally feeling the power of theater."²

Kron describes the plot of *Well* as

"driven forward by the narrator, 'Lisa', whose plan is to present a coherent performance in which she can make her points about illness and wellness. But the structure falls apart

¹ *Well*, author's preface

² *Ibid.*

and in the fissures that rip through the planned play, authentic, unplanned encounters erupt instead. It feels like the entire play has gone off the tracks, but, in fact, the more things fall apart in *Well*, the more they are actually coming together...both the form and the content of the play have all along been about making room enough to allow life to spill over in all its contradictory messiness.”

But there are simpler ways to approach the plot: it’s about Lisa retelling her story and her mother interrupting; it’s about her mother’s character as an exhausted victim of lifelong allergies, but who has the energy and compassionate force of will to integrate a neighborhood and love the entire cast into submission. It’s about Lisa’s own youthful experiences with allergies and exhaustion and her efforts to sort those out. It’s about a childhood friend who can’t stop showing up on the stage because, like all the ghosts of our pasts, she still has something to say. It’s about a cast of characters who want to tell a true story and who want to like each other but who aren’t sure the play will let them do that. And of course it’s about efforts to be well, as individuals and as groups. As Lisa says in one of her repeated explanations of her purpose: “I was sick and then I got well...the neighborhood was sick and got well...”

IV. THE CHARACTERS. There’s a pretty standard arrangement in the theater: characters are written into the play and are represented by actors. But Kron follows an interesting tradition of questioning and complicating that arrangement. Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello created a play in the 1920s called “Six Characters in Search of an Author,” in which six characters break into a rehearsal of a proper play in order to convince the director to write them their own play. They explain that they carry a play within them, but since it hasn’t been written down, it cannot be performed, and they are tormented by their incapacity to live out their destinies as characters. (Of course, once actors start playing them, they are irritated by the dissimilarities – the actors are not, and simply cannot be, the characters themselves!)

Kron’s work is both more mundane (a play about a mother and daughter trying to remember shared and different pasts seems somehow less obvious than six stray, unwritten characters) and equally “meta-theatrical” – both plays use the gap between character and actor to bring attention to the tools and tricks of the theater. Actors are of course never their characters, but most theater depends on its audience accepting the actor as the character. Kron’s play depends on us accepting that at first, but then she undoes that easy acceptance by allowing the actors to step outside their roles. As Ben Brantley writes, Kron uses “autobiography to point out the limitations of the artificial forms we naturally impose upon memory.”³

If you found that trick unnerving, by the way, you aren’t alone: most of us find that our appreciation of cultural work (art, plays, music, dance, whatever) is based on liking and comfort. To watch people dislike each other or hurt each other can be upsetting, and certainly watching characters get torn open to reveal their actors can be discomfiting. Pirandello, it’s worth noting,

³ Ben Brantley, “Lisa Kron’s *Well* Opens on Broadway, With Mom Keeping Watch,” Review, NY Times, Mar. 31, 2006.

was roundly booed with chants of “Asylum! Asylum!” at the first staging of his play in 1921 in Rome. But part of what’s charming about *Well* is that it seems to mock the very theoretical convention it uses: “as she pontificates on the nature of meta-theater, Ms. Kron seems too much the professorial buffoon, set up expressly to have the avant-garde stuffing knocked out of her.”⁴ The intellectual gimmick here is a trick played on her character even more than on us.

The cast list of *Well* includes Lisa Kron (the character), Ann Kron (her mother, who is both lethargic and energetic, ill and healing, and whose vibrant, compassionate spirit is the source of much of the play’s action), and four ensemble members. The ensemble characters are to carry their actor’s names, but they play various other roles as well within the play: nurses at the Allergy Unit, members of the neighborhood, and Lori Jones, a childhood bully who still haunts Lisa. The two driving forces of the play, however, are Lisa’s commitment to the play as she thinks it should be and Ann’s commitment to being who she is.

V. THE THEMES. This play explores some urgent themes, some of them obvious (illness and wellness, in the individual and social senses), some less so (power, knowledge, integration, and the purposes of art). It’s also about how a mother and a daughter remember a shared history (is it a shared history? Do different lives mean different stories?). And of course it’s about what happens when we try to tell our own story in defiance of the rules.

Illness and Wellness:

The whole notion of allergies in this play seems like a set-up for conflict: are these real illnesses, or is the whole thing a kind of psycho-somatic malingering? We can never be too sure, and the play draws our compassion first in one direction, then in another. Ann’s massive energy and caring seem inconsistent with the dozing, lumbering, grabber-using persona we see on the stage. And Lisa’s accounts of her time at the hospital raise more questions than they answer. The medicine behind the treatment seems sketchy at best, and the characters make us feel like we’re at the end of *The Yellow Wallpaper* (did that just happen? Are these people for real? Can we trust this account?). But later in the play, Lisa reveals more compelling stories of more convincing illnesses. Why, we wonder, did those not show up before? Are we being invited to sit in judgment of the “sick,” only to find later that we might have been wrong? Is this an elaborate ploy to highlight our arrogant tendency to decide for ourselves who does and does not deserve our compassion? Kay tells Lisa:

“People who are healthy think they know how you could get better, because when they imagine what your life is like they imagine having your sickness on top of their health. They imagine that sick people have all the resources they do and they’re just not trying hard enough.”

Sound familiar? There are parallels between the questions of sickness and what some people might call structural racism – the basic differences in what people have access to. If you don’t have health at the start, like Ann and Kay seem to argue, you have to deal not only with the

⁴ Ibid.

illnesses but with everyone else's judgments about the illnesses and about you, the sick person. Ann's work was always geared toward shifting that, surprising people, and creating a neighborhood where "you didn't have to extrapolate from abstract impressions of black people, because you knew actual people." Maybe wellness, here is about a willingness to look right at a person or a disease and to try to understand it for what it is, setting aside your prejudices and just talking to people.

The idea that well people and well communities are mutually dependent seems like one obvious lesson. The play seems to suggest that we can't be well if we live only in our version of the story; if we imagine our version to be the only one; if we pretend that our story doesn't overlap with or get challenged by the stories of others. But the play also shows us how "the sick" can be a force for healing. Wellness, here, is about integration, in the individual and in our communities.

Power and Knowledge:

It seems clear from the action of the play that both the power of the author and the power of the characters are emphasized, often through their conflict with one another. But there's a bigger way in which power shows up here: the capacity of life, of human energy, of history, to bubble over the rim of its glass, to exceed the rules. What rules? you ask. There are rules of theater, rules of history, rules of storytelling, rules of human interaction. The interesting questions are about who makes them, who enforces them, and who is subject to them. In this play, the rules are in force (generally) as long as the play is "on track." But the only person trying to keep it on track is Lisa, and she is no match for the combined power of the rest of the cast. When they want to, they stop what they are doing in Lisa's play and go listen to Ann. Lisa is left to change the scenery herself, to try dragging the cast back into the play, and ultimately to explain what was supposed to be happening (even though it's not). In one stark example, Lori Jones keeps appearing, despite Lisa's insistence, "You're not in this." The author, in this case, has very little authority.

Theorists describe two different kinds of knowledge: expert and local. Expert knowledge is the kind that comes with degrees, professional positions, and formal authority. Local knowledge is the kind that comes with wisdom, life experience, and relationships. Ann is a great example of the conflict between the two and the benefits of merging them. In both her allergy battles and her neighborhood battles, she believes in what is happening to her, and she trusts her instincts and experience. She is often told that she is "kooky," for wanting to integrate the neighborhood, for wanting to do it using social activities, and for insisting that she has allergies even if they aren't documented by the medical establishment. In the case of allergies, she keeps believing in them and keeps experiencing them. Ditto for integration: she believes in her vision of how the neighborhood can heal itself, and she makes the world match her vision.

Her integration strategy is the best example of expert and local knowledge colliding: people tell her that political power, not social relationship, is what saves neighborhoods; they tell her that it

doesn't make sense to ask people to give their time and energy to putting on potluck suppers and Fourth of July carnivals. She remembers:

“...people were always telling me that we should hire a midway, get gift certificates for prizes. But these old ladies would spend the whole year gathering costume jewelry and crocheting little purses and so forth to donate for the prizes, and it made them feel they had a stake in this neighborhood...And so then when we'd suddenly get a phone call tipping us off that city council was going to push through some big zoning change we could get a hundred old ladies to show up at the meeting that afternoon.”

As one character notes, she is something of a “housewife savant.” After her two year term is up, her neighbor Jim takes over leadership of the neighborhood association from her (his claim is that “Now that the Association has gotten some power, it's time for a man to take over”), “they went ahead and cut all the things that they thought were so frivolous – the door-to-door newsletter delivery and the holiday decorating and all of that – and at the end of the year all the power was gone and no one was even showing up for meetings.” The power really does rest in the people, in both Lisa's attempted play and in the play we watch; Ann has always understood that, even if it isn't the authorized view.

One interesting example of this knowledge issue shows up even earlier, at the start of the play, when Lisa is explaining to Ann what's going on here. Ann doesn't want to be in a play (“I'm not really crazy about my living room ending up here”), but she is supportive of Lisa's efforts to do her work, and so she acquiesces. Lisa, however, is doing more than she lets on, and she tells the audience about it. She has never broached these topics with her mom in real life, and we can assume she's afraid to and is using the professional space of the theatre to control the outcome of this difficult conversation. Her approach, she says, “will allow us to explore these issues in a professional, theatrical context. And it will also make the process much easier on her. Because she's not a theater person, you know, so she doesn't quite get that there's a plan in motion here.” Lisa is using her superior knowledge of theatrical convention to try and appropriate her mother's stories and talk over her mother's head. But her mother and the stories prove too magnetic, and ultimately the play is driven not by who knows the most about theater, but about who knows the most about people.

The Purposes of Art:

This play is of course a kind of art, and it's surely about the effort to use art for different purposes. We see Lisa use the play as a technique for drawing parallels between individual and social illnesses; as a retelling of her own past; as an exploration of theatrical form; as a shield against a really hard conversation with her mother.

At the same time, Lisa's play is proving that human likability is a powerful force, even across big differences. Art is a way, here, of moving past fear and difference and into fields of liking or at least understanding. Most importantly, perhaps, is Lisa's line toward the end of the play, when she confronts the fact that all her props are gone: she says, “Art makes sense of things, right? This is not about you and me talking. It's about a bigger sense of making things make sense and

finding a pattern that will make things make sense.” Art is the way of arriving at the pattern and at the sense.

The characters in this play, of course, get to participate in creating their work of art, which is this play – Ann/Jayne’s rewriting of the ending is a good example of her exercising artistic judgment. Ordinarily, only experts get to critique art and authors get to write it. Here, the character takes on both those roles to create more powerful and perhaps more honest art. Jayne accuses Lisa of turning the play “into a story that’s more comfortable for you” so she can have easy answers. Lisa agrees: “The purpose of this entire endeavor was to give coherence to things that are really confusing. Because otherwise it’s just too messy.” Two key purposes of art confront one another in this exchange: to solve the world and soothe our souls, or to expose the challenges, disruptions, and irreconcilability of experience. This play, somehow, manages to do both.

Integration:

Integration, and integrity, are both about creating a conjoint whole bigger than the sum of its parts. They are about living with commitment and conviction and not letting pieces of your values or spirit be left behind. What Lisa is trying to do in this play is to tell a story of integration but without, at first, a whole lot of integrity. The ensemble characters and ultimately Ann herself do act with integrity – they act out of a sense of responsibility but also out of their liking of one another and their commitment to act in accordance with their own values. Their choices to break the rules, in order to act with integrity, open up space for Lisa to confront some of the disparate pieces of her own agenda. And the result is an ending that unfolds the bigness and complexity of Lisa’s and Ann’s relationship.

The final passage of the play expresses more clearly and completely the notion of integration that undergirds the whole play. It’s from a note Lisa’s mother wrote for one of her Neighborhood Association meetings.

“This organization is about people. It’s about busy people and lonely people. Happy people and frightened people. Young people who want a good life for their children, and old people who want to know that somebody cares. People so busy that they don’t have time to wonder if anything they are doing is worthwhile, and people who face day after day of having nothing to do but wish that someone might need them. This is the purpose of integration. This is what integration means. It means weaving into the whole even the parts that are uncomfortable or don’t seem to fit. Even the parts that are complicated and painful. What is more worthy of our time and our love than this?”

Questions for discussion:

1. Why is the play called *Well*? Why not *Unwell*?

2. What effect does the plot disruption have on you in the audience?
3. Why would the author choose “allergies” and not some other kind of illness?
4. What is it about Ann that makes her so powerful? (Is she powerful?)
5. How do you feel about Lisa’s character?
6. There are moments in this play when a character describes the assumptions people make about others – that sick people are well people who also happen to be sick, or black people are white people who also happen to be black. What’s the basic attitude underlying those assumptions? How does this play explore and expose that attitude?
7. What does Lori Jones do for the play? For the characters? For you?
8. There are lots of people in this play who don’t follow the rules (and indeed the play itself doesn’t follow the rules). Who are those people? What rules do they break, and why?
9. Considering how much this play is about the power of ordinary people in the face of “expert” knowledge, is there any irony in reading a prepared study guide about this play? If you were writing it, what would you include or emphasize?