

The Arts

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THEATER REVIEW

Laughter And Horror In a Journey Of the Heart

By BEN BRANTLEY

Lisa Kron is not someone you would describe as the silent type. She is a lively, showy talker, a natural storyteller, and she has made an art out of being just that, with comic monologues about subjects like the horrors of high school reunions. It turns out, however, that Ms. Kron also knows about the holes in life that can't be filled by descriptive sentences and about the images that can never be captured in photographs.

In her remarkable new performance

2.5 MINUTE RIDE

piece, "2.5 Minute Ride," which opened last night at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, Ms. Kron serves up wonderfully evocative, and often seriously funny, strings of words. But it's the pauses around and beneath those words, those silences that are respectful to the point of awe, that set off the emotional vibrations that won't stop.

And though this family portrait of a monologue is accompanied by a slide show, what's projected onto the walls behind Ms. Kron are blank rectangles of light; that is not to say that they are empty.

"2.5 Minute Ride" boldly assumes the task of looking for the connections between two very different family outings: a recent trip to an Ohio amusement park and Ms. Kron's visit six years ago with her septuagenarian father to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where her grandparents were killed. There's no way you can draw a straight line between these excursions, and Ms. Kron doesn't try.

Yet by the evening's end, a wondering, ineffable sense of symmetry has emerged, a wry but reverent feeling for the patterns shaped by time. Directed with a sure and delicate hand by Mark Brokaw, "2.5 Minute Ride" puts Ms. Kron on a level with sterling monologists like Spalding Gray, autobiographers who combine novelistic complexity

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Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Solo: Lisa Kron in "2.5 Minute Ride."

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with stage-smart impudence.

The ground she covers in her 70 minutes of fragmented but fluid narrative is staggering. Her ambition is to create a picture, both for herself and her audience, of her father, who was evacuated from Nazi Germany in 1937 as part of the Kindertransport program.

She knows that any picture she provides will be incomplete, filtered through filial subjectivity and the incredulity that still overtakes anyone considering the Holocaust. Hence the "slide show" Ms. Kron uses in her performance, in which she alludes to visual images, even tracing photographic details with a pointer, when all you see is the light of the projector. (The expert lighting is by Kenneth Posner.)

"When I try to tell his stories, I begin to hyperventilate, and I don't know why," she says at one point of her father. "I can feel the myth, the awe creep into my voice, and it makes me feel sick because what does that have to do with him?"

She does conquer those reservations to deliver her father's first-person account of his experience as an interrogator with the United States Army in Germany. What's extraordinary about the anecdote is its narrator's sense of identification with the guilt of the person he is questioning. There are many things in Ms. Kron's performance that make you fall in love with her father, but none more so than this element of moral self-doubt.

2.5 MINUTE RIDE

Written and performed by Lisa Kron; directed by Mark Brokaw; sets by Allen Moyer; costumes by Jess Goldstein; lighting by Kenneth Posner; sound by Darron L. West; production dramaturg, Mervin P. Antonio; production stage manager, Bess Marie Glorioso; senior director, external affairs, Margaret M. Lioi; associate producer, Wiley Hausam; artistic associate, Brian Kulick; associate producer, Bonnie Metzgar. Presented by the Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival, George C. Wolfe, producer; Rosemarie Tichler, artistic producer; Mark Litvin, managing director. At the Shiva Theater, in the Joseph Papp Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, East Village.

The vignette comes late in "2.5 Minute Ride," which though anything but linear in its chronology is as carefully plotted as a historian's time chart. Ms. Kron leapfrogs from droll observations about her family's life in Lansing, Mich., where she grew up and her parents still live, to sharp and sorrowful accounts of her trip to Germany and Poland to a description of her brother's recent wedding at a Jewish center in Canarsie, Brooklyn.

That these shards of history coalesce into an illuminating whole has much to do with the accumulation of seemingly incongruous details, which come to echo off and enhance one another. The image of Ms. Kron's father's diminishing eyesight, and of the array of glasses he uses to correct it, acquires increasing resonance. So does her mother's refusing to be photographed after a certain age, and the affection of her father,

who has a heart condition, for roller coasters that set the heart leaping and the teeth chattering.

The 2.5 minutes of the play's title are a reference to the length of one of those rides. But I don't want to say much more about the show. Much of its impact comes from the ways in which Ms. Kron stealthily plants her seeds of disparate images in your mind and lets them grow organically.

I should say that those who know Ms. Kron as a hilarious satirist, from such pieces as "101 Humiliating Stories" and her work with the Five Lesbian Brothers, won't be disappointed. She offers witty, brightly sardonic descriptions of everything from a 24-hour superstore in Lansing to the culinary fare of Poland to the assorted aches, illnesses and eccentricities of various family members.

Yet there is never condescension in her humor. It is simply a crucial part of her navigational equipment in finding her way through life's absurd course of non sequiturs.

Toward the end of the show, Ms. Kron describes the emotional about-face she undergoes at her brother's wedding. She had arrived expecting to mock. But then, "an unexpected thing happened," she says. "I became enchanted."

Ms. Kron has steered us so gently and expertly to this point that we understand her response exactly. A lot of elements feed into that sense of enchantment, many of them sad. It is nonetheless a soaring feeling.