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Out of Time

Kimberly's fine effects last

During a theater season filled with familiar pieces like *The Glass Menagerie* at the Willamette Rep and LCC's *Othello*, the Lord Leebrick's *Kimberly Akimbo* practically seems like a radical choice. And with its small cast, tight focus and edgy discussions of life and death, the play succeeds in portraying family dysfunction with an equal mix of humor, tenderness and anguish.

The story, such as it is, revolves around the characters almost completely; David Lindsay-Abaire's script never sacrifices his richly realized portraits of a crumbling family in order to further the plot. The play begins with Kimberly Levaco (Sharon Rosalyn Sless) waiting for her dad (Larry K. Fried) to pick her up from the skating rink. He's two and a half hours late, clearly not for the first time in Kimberly's life, and she's had to wait outside in the bitter cold of a (normal) New Jersey winter. In this scene, Sless portrays Kimberly as more of a grade-school kid than the almost-16-year-old teenager she is, but the theme is set: Dad doesn't care about Kimberly as much as he cares about going to the bar after work. And when they arrive home to a hugely pregnant mom, Pattie (Billi Veber), things don't exactly improve for Kimberly, who must serve her mother and deal with her parents' fights. And life isn't all roses for her anyway: She has a form of progeria ("without the dwarfism," one character says) and ages at about 4.5 times the normal rate. People with her condition, we find, rarely live to be older than 16. Her parents simply don't know how to treat her or deal with her or her disease, so they practice neglect. The only family member who remembers her 16th birthday is Aunt Debra (Marla Norton), a con woman who's been living in the library, waiting for Kimberly to appear so

Debra can track down the whole Levaco family. Why the family moved quickly away from Secaucus becomes one focal point of this mystery, as does Debra's fascination for Kimberly and her friend Jeff.

Jeff, played by South Eugene High School student Warren Kluber, brings needed



Kimberly (Sharon Rosalyn Sless), Jeff (Warren Kluber) and Mr. Levaco (Larry K. Fried) share a laugh

charm into the closed, weird family structure. Like many bright kids, Jeff enjoys anagramming everything, especially names, and he also plays a D&D dungeonmaster with the glee of any true geek. Oddly enough, Kluber, whose mobile features and body strengthened several key scenes, appeared too old for his role at first, even as Sless' voice and attitude sounded too young. But over the course of the first act, both Sless and Kluber more closely approached their characters' ages. Norton's pitch-perfect manipulative persona (her aggressive voice sets off alarm bells) balanced their hope and battered innocence.

Fried, a theater-experienced newcomer to Eugene, will be an excellent addition for many directors in town with his strong vocal abilities and his acting skills. Although his character is often drunk, Fried underplays this condition with welcome calm, a focus especially wonderful in contrast to Veber's Pattie, whose constant yelling and slapstick changes of pace overwhelm any sympathy the audience should feel for her character. Despite the need for Veber to show greater range, this cast of five is, in general, one of the most balanced to take the stage in Eugene. And the material with which director Benjamin Newman and the cast have to work mostly succeeds despite at times being over the top. Lindsay-Abaire shows the pathos of working-class parents (the dad, Buddy, works as a Chevron station attendant) stunned by too hard a lot in life and the guilt that they feel and push away through pathological self-hatred and alcohol abuse, but he doesn't skimp on the laughs. To judge by the reaction of others in the audience, some of the laughter may stem from the awkward agonies of teenage life and the running gag of Pattie's medical conditions, which serve to distract her from her daughter's plight. With a fine script, a strong cast, a set with subtleties that reveal themselves over time and a firm directorial hand, *Kimberly Akimbo* proves an outstanding choice to open the spring season. **EW**

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Opening Nights
BOOK OF DAYS
 Opens Friday, Jan. 19 at the Very Little Theatre. Lanford Wilson's story of small-town murder and betrayals set against the backdrop of a cheese plant and fundamentalist religion is said to be a mix of *Twin Peaks*, *Our Town* and *The Laramie Project*. Hm. Little town, intrigues, backstabbing city governments ... sounds like recent headlines of nearby Oregon hamlets, no? The VLT's notes say "Contains adult language and is not appropriate for children," which of course should make every middle- and high-schooler in town bolt for the box office. Show dates are Jan. 19-21 & 26-28 and Feb. 1-4 & 8-10. Call 344-7751 for tickets.