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In the Wake

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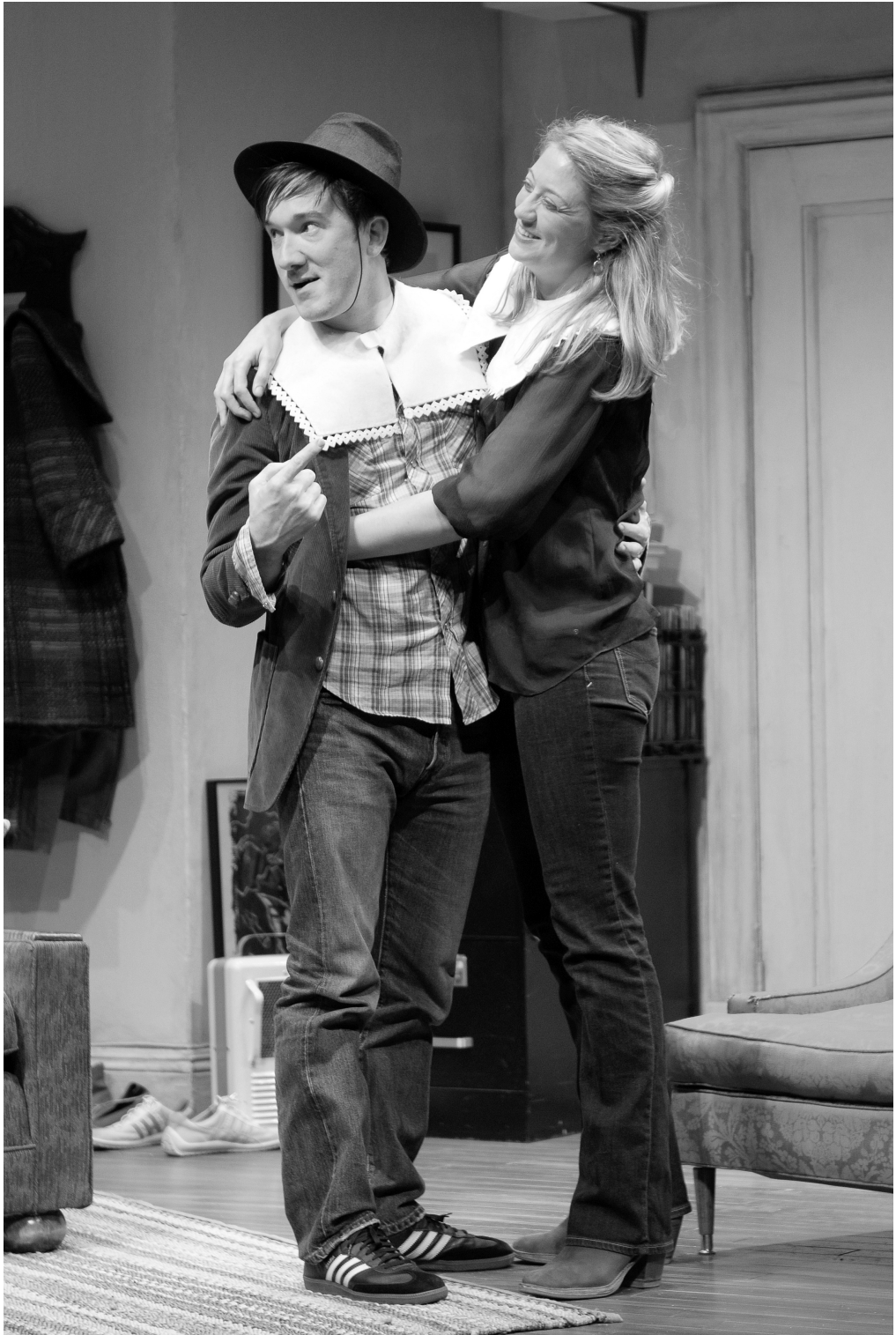
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IN THE WAKE. By Lisa Kron. Directed by Leigh Silverman. Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Berkeley, CA. 20 May 2010.

Lisa Kron is known primarily for her autobiographical performances and her work with the Five Lesbian Brothers. In her newest piece, *In the Wake*, which premiered at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Kron undertakes a different challenge: writing an ensemble allegory critiquing both the George W. Bush administration policies and US middle-class neoliberalism. The play tackles the impossibility of having it all, personally and politically, and the tension between striving for infinite expansion and maintaining current systems. The premise of the piece—that Americans as individuals and as a country are on an unsustainable trajectory—is smartly executed in this rich, layered play, which, with edits, could become an iconic representation of political and personal indulgence during the first decade of the twenty-first century. With varying degrees of success, the characters' relationships, the many interconnected themes of Kron's script, the set, and the acting demonstrate how difficult it can be to balance the personal and the political, enough and excess.



Carson Elrod (Danny) and Heidi Schreck (Ellen) in *In the Wake*. (Photo: kevinberne.com.)

Kron has a gift for writing realistic dialogue and engaging, multifaceted characters. Her protagonist Ellen, played with passion and honesty by Heidi Schreck, is a thirty-something New York writer who devotes an impressive amount of time to railing against Bush's policies, but believes that the fundamental infrastructure of the current political system is sound; the system just needs to be expanded to include everyone. Her partner Danny, played by the charming Carson Elrod, teases her about her commitment to politics rather than engaging in debates with her, and the dynamics between the two are sweet. When Ellen receives a telephone call from Amy (Emily Donahoe)—a girl she barely knew in high school—and the two women discover one night that they share a profound connection, she expands her life to include another romantic relationship. Danny allows her this freedom, saying it is important for her to actively choose him, rather than to stay with him as default. More than a year passes, with Ellen dividing her time between Danny and Amy, until Danny demands that she choose, and Ellen suddenly cannot have it all anymore. She is alternatively infuriating and endearing, and in her journey back and forth between these two emotional responses, audience members confront the implications of their own political views and personal choices.

Kron juggles a variety of themes in the piece, mostly to great effect. When the play begins, it is Thanksgiving 2000 and the US presidential election remains undecided. Ellen and Danny are joined on this holiday by Danny's sister Kayla (Andrea Frackle), her wife Laurie (Danielle Skraastad), and Judy (Deirdre O'Connell), a cynical aid worker who spends most of her time in refugee camps in West Africa. Although Judy's relationship to the rest of the characters is frustratingly unclear for the first thirty minutes of the play (she worked with Ellen at a human-rights organization), her brilliantly written and movingly delivered speeches directed at Ellen in act 2 provide the incisive critique at the heart of Kron's play: the idea that the system has a place for everyone is a myth. Kron skillfully connects Ellen's blind spots about her personal life to neoliberals' blind spots about policy, weaving together systems theory, negative space, and the tax code to demonstrate that the best intentions can cause catastrophic destruction. Ellen does not notice the damage she has caused until she has sufficient distance from the point of impact and can view the destruction in her wake.

The scenery, designed by David Korins, was a clever approach to a play that demands both a fully realized unit set and a series of other locations, and he masterfully balanced a variety of competing interests. The apartment—run down though filled



Emily Donahoe (Amy) and Heidi Schreck (Ellen) in *In the Wake*. (Photo: kevinberne.com.)

with books and artifacts seemingly from the couple's international travels—indicated that Ellen and Danny were slumming and enjoying the opportunities afforded them by their middle-class status. Images, designed by Alexander Nichols, of press conferences and news footage projected onto a thick, angular proscenium established the timeframes of upcoming scenes, and the distortion of the pictures as they spanned the angles of the proscenium paralleled the speakers' distortions. A long, white panel was lowered into this proscenium to create a downstage space that became the coffee shop where Ellen and Amy first connected with each other, Amy's bedroom, and other nonspecified locations related to the two women. This space smartly represented the liminal state of their relationship.

The direction and performances, on the other hand, while strong overall, were not consistently balanced. Although the performances were compelling and taut in act 2, the first act was sometimes overdone. Unnecessary stage business and unmotivated crosses distracted from the otherwise believable interactions among the performers. The physical comedy, which often provided vital relief from the serious themes of the piece, sometimes seemed awkward and failed to land. Nevertheless, director Leigh Silverman and the cast created powerful, complex relationships among these characters, and the actors balanced the dense, fast-paced dialogue with genuine affection and concern for one another. It was in the way they supported or judged one another that Kron's points about excess were made most poignantly.

In the Wake deftly demonstrates that the perpetual pursuit of more is an unsustainable project, both politically and personally. In the Berkeley Repertory production, however, the play fell victim to its own message—it needs to be cut and streamlined. The lessons Ellen learned in the second act would

have landed more effectively with a sparser first act, which was nearly two hours long and bogged down by lengthy political monologues and too many trips to the kitchen for more beer. Ellen's and Judy's more salient points about infrastructure, fairness, and the status of the American political system would have been more effective if they were shorter. Nevertheless, if Kron revises future incarnations of *In the Wake*, it stands to become one of the rare plays that adeptly balances political theatre with beautiful art, leaving us all questioning our desire for more and what we leave in our wake.

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