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In 'Kimberly,' heartbreak, humor are never far apart

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Descriptions can be deceiving.

Take this synopsis of Stray Cat Theatre's *Kimberly Akimbo*, which is appearing in most theater calendars around town:

"Kimberly is a teenager with a rare condition (progeria) that causes her body to age faster than it should. When she and her family, which includes a rarely sober father and hypochondriac mother, flee under dubious circumstances, Kimberly re-evaluates her life."

Looking for a definition of "downer"? That should do it.

"No, no, absolutely not," says Ron May, Stray Cat's artistic director. "It's this fantastical, weird, absurdist comedy. It's very, very funny."

When *Kimberly Akimbo* made its debut on the coasts, both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* hailed David Lindsay-Abaire's play as one of the best of the year. And there's Arts4All .com, a Web site that tends to be devastatingly honest about theatrical pieces. Its take:

"*Kimberly Akimbo* is one weird show. The way this harrowing and hilarious work continuously shifts from satire to black comedy to realism could never work anywhere but the stage. It is theater at its most original."

Good choice, then, for Stray Cat, a troupe where the words "black comedy," "satire," "edgy" and the like are engraved on the foreheads of all who toil there. It's hard to come up with another company that would consider a piece in which the 16-year-old heroine isn't worried about becoming pregnant by her first boyfriend because she underwent menopause four years earlier.

Such outré plotting is familiar territory for Lindsay-Abaire. His comedies have always been off-kilter, often aggressively so. In *Fuddy Meers*, a woman with terminal amnesia can't remember what she did the day before; in *Wonder of the World*, which was staged by Stray Cat to great success a few seasons ago, the heroine flees to Niagara Falls in search of answers to the mysteries of her life.

Damon Dering, artistic director of Nearly Naked Theatre Company, the Valley's other major alternative group, remembers the Stray Cat production of *Wonder of the World* as being "so funny, I almost peed on myself."

There was no way he could resist May's offer to move over to Stray Cat to direct *Kimberly Akimbo*.

"It's the kind of challenge a director lives for," Dering says. "It's hysterically funny, but it's also a play about a girl who has progeria - and that's not funny."

Faced with that complexity, the first thing he did was get a "dynamite cast that knows when to go for the drama and when to go for the laughs."

The casting was complicated by the fact Lindsay-Abaire requires Kimberly to be played by an actress in her 60s. Why is that tricky? The play's most emotional moment comes when the "16-year-old girl" gets her first kiss from a boy her own age.

Jacqueline Gaston, one of the Valley's leading talents, has taken on the role. Lisa Fogel and Christopher Mascarelli, two other local stage veterans, play Kimberly's parents. Sean Rhys-Gilyeat, a Valley Youth Theatre regular, makes his move onto the adult stage in the role of Kimberly's boyfriend.

"I don't want to imply that's all about the laughs," Dering says. "There are serious moments. . . . It can be heartbreaking. It's a delicate balance."

That may be why May, ever the producer, insists on the last word:

"Just remember that it's a lot more farcical than it is a docudrama on progeria."

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