

Review: One-woman show '2.5 Minute Ride' bolstered by a winning performance and stylish production

ST. PETERSBURG — 2.5 Minute Ride is storytelling at its most seductive, full of contradictions and artful misdirection. On one level, it is an account by Lisa Kron that centers on a trip she took to Auschwitz with her father, whose parents were killed there, but for all its unspeakable subject matter, the play is also a warm, shrewd and often hilarious portrait of modern American family life.

The ride of the title is not directly about the Jews who were transported to the German death camps in Poland during World War II. Instead, it refers to the Mean Streak, a roller coaster at Cedar Point, an amusement park in Ohio that Kron's family visits every year in a pilgrimage from their home in Lansing, Mich. Sure, the connection sounds absurd — Holocaust and roller coaster — but in the end, it all makes brilliant sense.

Lisa Powers plays Lisa (there are a few Lisas to keep straight; the playwright sometimes does the role herself), the narrator in Kron's one-woman play, which is receiving a superb production at American Stage. Performed without intermission, it is structured as a slide show, as Lisa, equipped with a laser pointer, describes pictures of her father and family for use in a video documentary she is making. There are no pictures, only a series of blank squares that she points at, though live video of Powers acting is projected on the back wall.

As a narrative device, the slide show can be awkward, and the video gets distracting — should you watch Powers on stage or the projected images? — but director Todd Olson incorporates all the sensory activity in stylish, relatively seamless fashion. The design by Jerid Fox (set) and Phillip Franck (lighting) includes striking effects, such as the hanging light bulbs that come on during an epiphany.

At the center of it all is Powers, whose Lisa is a likeable, smart, funny woman, trying to find the feelings within herself to come to terms with her father's experience. The visit to Auschwitz is lightened by witty asides — there's a discourse on Polish pizza — but the heart of the story is bleak. "I'd been so afraid I wouldn't feel anything here," Lisa says. "I think that was my biggest fear. But when I enter the crematorium for the first time in my life I feel horror. Physical repulsion. I can feel my face contort, my lips pull back."

At one uncomfortable point, Lisa seems to break from the play as if she is lost — the scene is scripted — to speak directly to the audience, bewailing the futility of remembering the horrible history, berating herself: "I feel like a cliché." But she then relates a remarkable story that her father told about working during the war as a U.S. Army interrogator of a captured Gestapo agent, and how, in a deeply humane way, he identified with his fellow German. "I looked across my desk at this man and knew he could have been me," she recounts her father saying, though also acknowledging that he turned the agent over to a Polish liaison officer that likely had him executed.

What makes *2.5 Minute Ride* so distinctive, however, is the discursive detours that Lisa makes in the story, from a critique of amusement park food to the tale of her brother's wedding in Brooklyn. She is a lesbian, and the relationship between she and her partner and Lisa's family is amusingly portrayed, as in her description of "that kind of aggravated look that lesbians get in amusement parks in Ohio."

For longtime fans of American Stage, Powers' performance is an auspicious occasion. She was a favorite actor at the theater in the 1980s and '90s, and became artistic director for a brief tenure, but left under troubled circumstances in 1997 that were unfair to her. This is her first time back on stage with the company as well as her first professional acting job in a decade — she now has a career as a drama therapist and teacher — and her return is not just a sentimental coming of full circle but an artistic triumph. That she is so strong and assured and winning in this daunting role is amazing.

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