

# arena's page

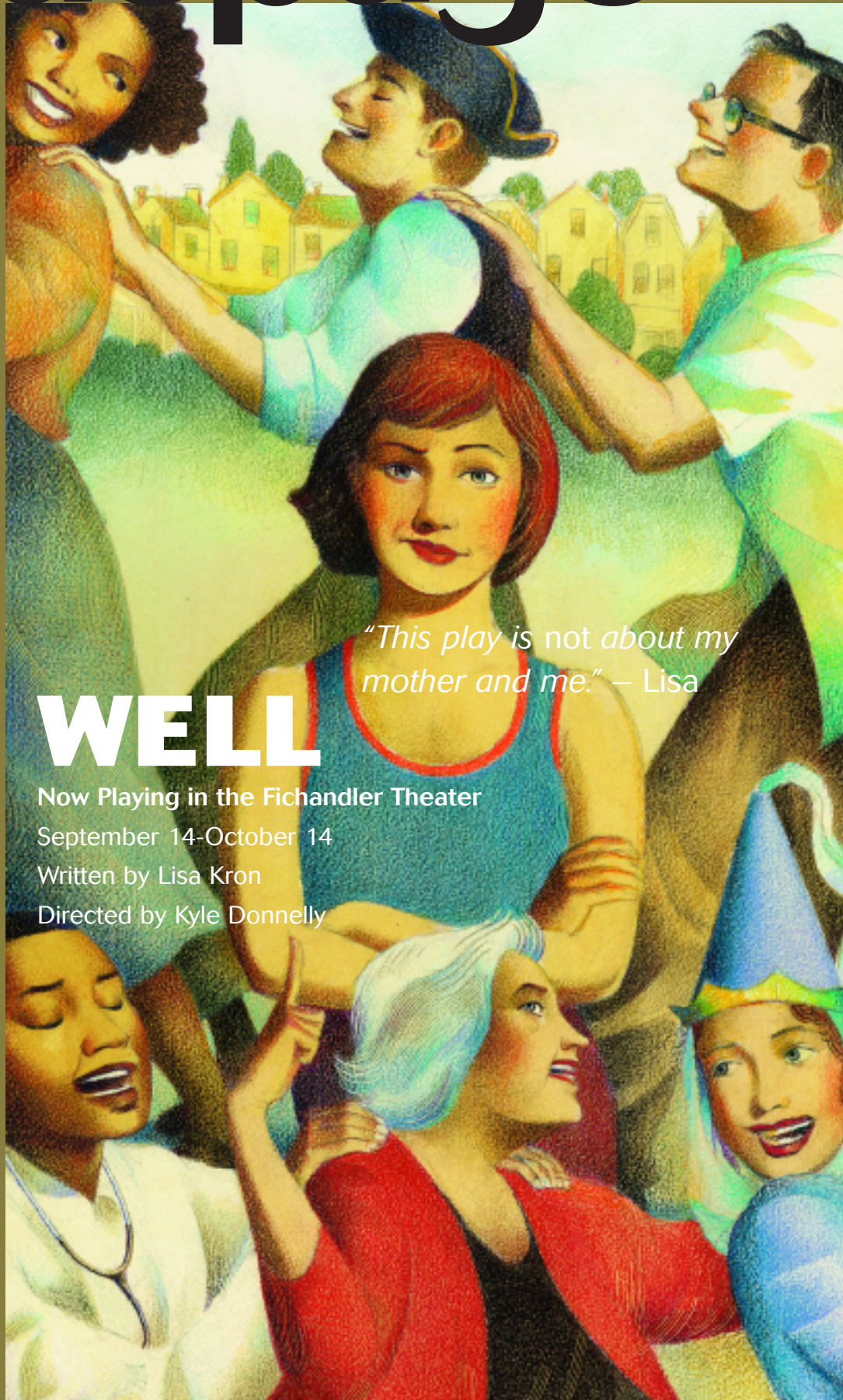
student study guide

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## the play

Lisa Kron is a playwright attempting to mount her newest work, a play that questions why Lisa recovered from her mysterious illness while her mother, Ann, could not. She asks why Ann could heal their Lansing, Michigan neighborhood by working tirelessly for integration but could not heal herself. Between her mother's constant interventions in the play and her actors' increasing qualms about the story, Lisa finds herself rapidly losing control over the production. In the end, the lines between reality and theater are blurred beyond recognition when the actors walk off the stage leaving Lisa alone, and her play becomes something quite different than she meant it to be.



*"This play is not about my mother and me." – Lisa*

# WELL

Now Playing in the Fichandler Theater

September 14-October 14

Written by Lisa Kron

Directed by Kyle Donnelly

## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



**Lisa Kron**

*Well* is Lisa Kron's third solo venture, though she has written and performed in many works with the **Five Lesbian Brothers**. Much of her work is autobiographical, focusing on major events in her life. For instance, one of her other major works, *2.5 Minute Ride*, mixes the story of visiting Auschwitz with her father (a Holocaust survivor) with scenes from family excursions to an amusement park and her brother's wedding.

The events described in *Well* are, for the most part, real-life experiences. Kron grew up on the west side of Lansing, Michigan in the 1950s, where her mother did, in fact, start a neighborhood association to prevent the neighborhood's decline and encourage integration. Lisa was also hospitalized for treatment of her allergies in college but made a full recovery.

■ **Five Lesbian Brothers**—a group of five lesbian women (Lisa Kron, Maureen Angelos, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell and Peg Healey) who write and perform plays that fight sexism and homophobia.

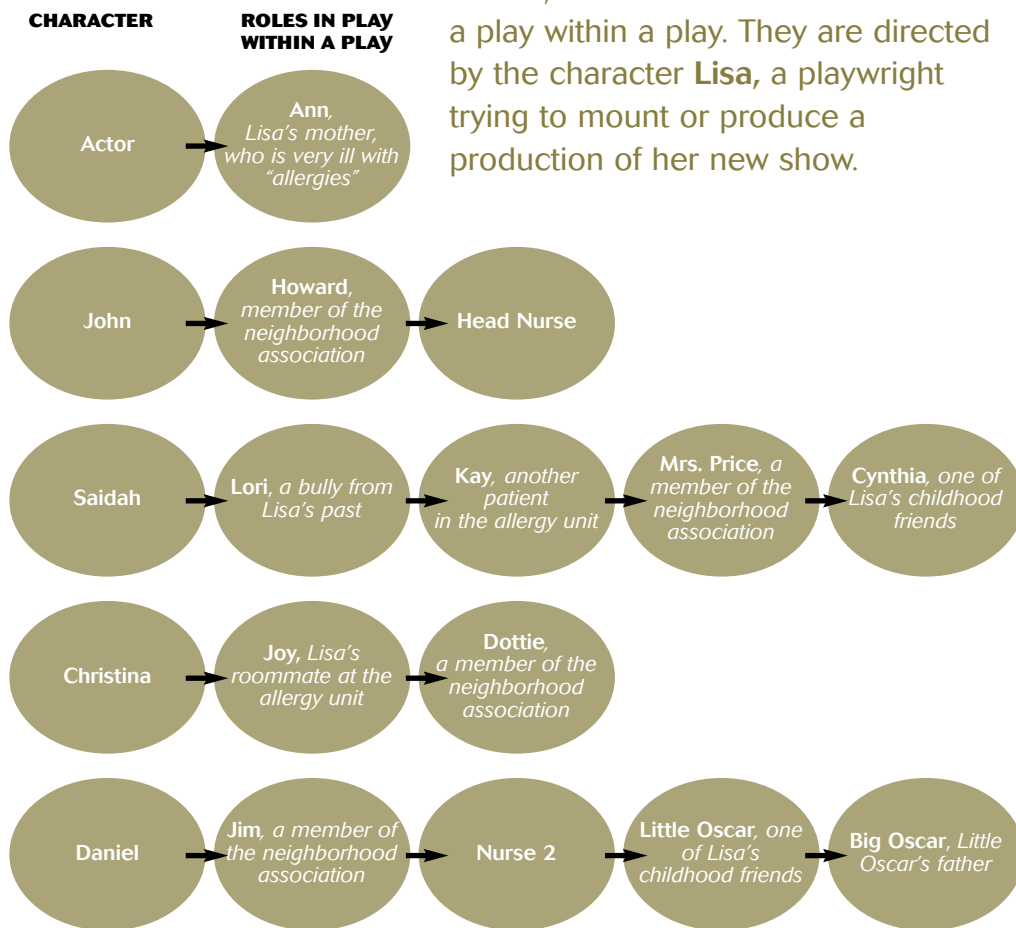


### Activity:

Playwright Lisa Kron wrote *Well* about her own experiences. If you were going to create a play about your life, which events would you write about? What kind of play would it be (a comedy, a drama, a musical, etc.)? Write a sample scene from your own autobiographical play.

# CHARACTERS AT A GLANCE

In *Well*, the characters are actors in a play within a play. They are directed by the character **Lisa**, a playwright trying to mount or produce a production of her new show.



**Activity:** Be the director! How would you distinguish between the characters of the actors and the various roles they perform in the play within a play? When you go to the theater, see how your solutions to this directing challenge compare to those of *Well*'s director, Kyle Donnelly.

## METATHEATER:

*"What is that thing about being around your parents that makes you act*

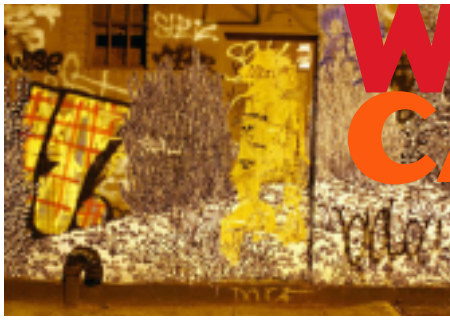
In *Well*, the characters are actors performing Lisa's play. One of her very first lines acknowledges this. She says, "The play that we're about to do deals with issues of illness and wellness." The characters continually refer to the play they are performing and discuss scene changes and acting choices.

This is a form of metatheater, a term coined in 1960 by playwright and dramatic critic Lionel Abel to describe theater that draws attention to the fact

that it is not real. It also refers to plays that, like *Well*, show characters performing other plays. Metatheater has been around almost as long as theater itself. Ancient Greek playwrights Aristophanes and Sophocles wrote metatheatrical plays in the 5th century B.C., and Shakespeare used the play within a play **convention** in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*.

In *Well*, the playwright uses metatheater to create a sense of instability. At first,





# WOW CAFE

In the 1980s WOW Café Theatre was located in the East Village in New York. As you can see from the variety of murals in the neighborhood, it is a haven for artists. Photo courtesy of Jake Dobkin.

**P**laywright Lisa Kron was influenced heavily by her work with WOW Café Theatre, where people with varying levels of theatrical training produced work that broke all the “rules” of theater. You can see this love for rule breaking in *Well*. The WOW Café Theatre began in 1980 as an international women’s theater festival. Today the **theater collective** welcomes a diverse group of all races, religions and sexualities. Their mission is to produce work conceived by women or **transgender** individuals and especially to support Lesbian artists.

■ **theater collective**—A group of theater artists formed to help one another. Sometimes members create works as a group and other times they work together to bring one member’s vision to life. The collective often has a particular focus or goal it wishes to achieve.

■ **transgender**—a general term including persons who do not consider themselves male or female, persons who consider themselves both male and female, and those who consider themselves members of the opposite sex.

**a!** **Activity:** In a small group, create your own theater collective. What kinds of artists do you want as members? What kind of shows do you want to make? Will you write plays together or individually? Create a set of goals and a logo for your collective.

# SOMATOFORM DISORDERS

**I**n *Well*, Lisa says her sickness is a result of spending so much time with her sick mother. Because all she saw was sickness, she believed that was how life was supposed to be.



Lisa discovers that her symptoms are a somatoform disorder, but that does not mean that all of the allergy unit patients have the same problem. She meets a man whose allergies force him to live in a trailer outside of his house. Many people suffer from Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (severe allergies to chemicals in the air) that prevent them from living at home, like this woman who is living in her van. Photo courtesy of Susan Abod.

It is not uncommon for psychological (mental and/or emotional) problems to affect a person physically. When someone suffers many physical symptoms (loss of focus, fatigue, nausea, etc.) over long periods of time without any apparent cause, he or she might have a somatoform (pronounces so-mat-oh-form) disorder. To diagnose someone, doctors test for all possible causes of symptoms. If they do not find a physical cause, it means that a person may have a somatoform disorder. People with somatoform disorders often become very worried about their health because they do not know why they are ill.

This does not mean the person is not really sick or is faking their symptoms, but rather that their emotions are so intense they cause the body to react negatively. To treat this kind of illness, doctors can prescribe medications or physical therapy to help ease a person’s physical symptoms. Therapy is also required to treat the underlying cause of the illness—the psychological difficulties.

# PLAY WITHIN A PLAY

*like a thirteen-year-old?* – Lisa

Ann and Lisa speak directly to the audience, an unusual choice in modern theater. Lisa controls and narrates everything the audience sees. Later, as the play begins to unravel, Lisa is no longer in control. She speaks less and less to the audience as she becomes wrapped up in conversation with her mother and her actors. As a result, the audience feels as though they are eavesdropping on something very private. It becomes hard to tell what is really happening and what is part of the

play, allowing the audience to both see and feel that things are coming undone.

■ **convention**—a standard technique or dramatic tool that is familiar to and accepted by audiences and artists.

**a!** **Activity:** As you watch the production, notice moments when you feel uncomfortable. What is happening in these moments? Why do you feel uncomfortable? Why is this important to the play?

# PLAY

## Audience Interaction

At times, Lisa and Ann speak directly to the audience. This is a convention of the theater known as an aside. Often, they explain what a character is thinking or feeling or what he or she is planning to do next. It is generally accepted that the other characters on stage cannot hear what they say. Modern playwrights do not often use this convention, preferring to allow audiences to interpret characters’ thoughts and feelings from the things they say and do. As a result, it can be very jarring to see a modern play in which the characters address the audience directly.

# INTEGRATION



**W**hen African Americans moved into Lisa's neighborhood, the government stopped funding its upkeep. Wealthy citizens started to move out, and the neighborhood was becoming impoverished and rundown. Under Ann's guidance, however, the Neighborhood Association promoted integration and won back lost funding. Throughout the United States, integration was a long and hard-fought battle.

In the early 1950s, wealthier, white citizens moved to the suburbs while poorer, minority citizens remained in the city center. Downtown, schools in white neighborhoods were under-enrolled and over-funded while their all-black equivalents were overcrowded. With as many as 700 extra students, children attended school in shifts, half taking classes from 8 a.m. to noon and the rest from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Some schools had three shifts.

Then, in 1954, the Supreme Court made a decision in the case of *Brown v. Board*

*of Education*. They declared segregation, the separation of white and black students into different schools, illegal in the United States. After *Brown v. Board*, schools in Washington D.C. were the first to be desegregated or integrated. New laws ensured diversity by requiring neighborhood schools to admit students of all races. In neighborhoods where students were all of the same race, laws forced schools to bus diverse students from other parts of the city.

Integration was not an instant fix. Busing programs brought diversity to schools, but also caused serious problems. Anti-integration protests distracted from school work, and conflict and violence were prevalent in classrooms.

Nonetheless, as Ann points out, integration is an important process that brings together people of different backgrounds and experiences to learn from one another. This kind of sharing makes a neighborhood healthier. Ann says, "You just don't imagine anyone else's situation is very different from yours unless you've been in a situation where you're different yourself."

**a!** **Activity:** When was a time that you felt different from everyone else? How did it make you feel about yourself? Did you try to change to fit in or did you like the feeling that you were different? Why? What did you learn from this experience? In a small group, discuss your experiences. Then, perform a scene presenting your experiences to other groups.

## Additional Resources

### BOOKS/PLAYS:

*2.5 Minute Ride* by Lisa Kron  
*Metatheater: a new view of dramatic form* by Lionel Abel  
*Five Lesbian Brothers: Four Plays* by the Five Lesbian Brothers  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare

### ON THE WEB:

WOW Café Theater: <http://www.wowcafe.org/>  
*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*:  
<http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html>

### VIDEOS:

*School: The Story of American Public Education, Episode 3: Equality*

What inspired the playwright?

What happens during rehearsals?

Get a behind the scenes glimpse of *Well* by reading the Arena Stage Blog, online at [blog.arenastage.org](http://blog.arenastage.org)

## Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers, and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!



1101 Sixth Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20024  
Phone: (202) 554-9066  
Fax: (202) 488-4056

Community Engagement  
Phone: (202) 234-5782  
Fax: (202) 797-1043

Written by Emily Denison  
Edited by Rebecca Campana  
and Chitra Kalyandurg

Illustration by Raul Colón

Visit [www.arenastage.org](http://www.arenastage.org) for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.