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In a theatre weekend that found me attending a Rodgers & Hammerstein musical, a Kaufman & Hart play, a Shakespeare, and a *pseudo*-Shakespeare, I have to admit that, with the Riverbend Theatre Collective's presentation of *Kimberly Akimbo*, I was so psyched to see actors in modern dress screaming obscenities at one another that I could barely contain myself.

Happily, the production is damned fine in its own right, perhaps, in part, because the actors seem so delighted for the *chance* to wear modern dress and scream obscenities at one another. Four of the cast members - Aaron Sullivan, Denise Yoder, Jaci Entwisle, and Dustin Oliver - most recently performed with the classical-theatre troupe the Prenzie Players, and the

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fifth, Peggy Freeman, most recently appeared at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre as a harried senior citizen and a nun, and I can't recall ever seeing any of them as purely

comfortable

on-stage as they seem in

Kimberly Akimbo

. Even during the most manic highs in David Lindsay-Abaire's delirious black comedy - cheerfully directed by Allison Collins-Elflin - the performers exude relaxed, effortless confidence.

Kimberly Levaco (played by Freeman) is a typical teenage girl with one crucial difference: She suffers from a rare disease that's causing her to age four-and-a-half times faster than she should. As the play opens, Kimberly has just turned 16 - the age at which those with the disease tend to die - but incredibly, she has even *less* reason to celebrate, as she's also become the *de facto*

caretaker to her wildly dysfunctional family: a hugely pregnant, hypochondriacal mother (Entwisle); an alcoholic father (Sullivan); and an impulsively angry aunt (Yoder), recently released from prison. And yes, in case you were now thinking otherwise, this

is

a comedy.

Though Lindsay-Abaire gets a lot of early mileage from the dichotomy between Kimberly's elderly appearance and her youthful demeanor - and Freeman is hilarious when slouching like a sullen teenager or responding to an interruption with a petulant "I'm *on the phone!*" - neither the character nor the actress is ever used for cheap gags. Kimberly is funny because she's *real*

, a shy, sarcastic, easily mortified girl who's been living with her disease so long that, like everything else in her life, it's become a joke. (When her dad warns Kimberly against becoming too friendly with Oliver's potential beau, Jeff, she rolls her eyes and says, "Dad, I went through menopause

four years ago

.") Lindsay-Abaire ensures that we don't ever laugh

at

Kimberly, and Freeman, in a wonderful performance, plays her with inspiring honesty. Though the character has built-in pathos, the actress never seeks our pity, and Freeman delivers Kimberly's wisecracks with such nonchalance that they seem less like jokes than the natural results of an active, witty mind; she's a wrinkled Juno.

Someone Old, Someone New, Someone Borrowed Something Blue: "Kimberly Akimbo," at the Village Theatre

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