

PLAY REVIEW. By Bob Keefer, The Register-Guard

There's exactly one show you have to go see this year in Ashland, and it's not by William Shakespeare. "Up" - a brilliant play by Los Angeles playwright Bridget Carpenter - is original, poignant, moving, sad and funny. I have rarely sat in a theater audience that laughed so hard at one moment and, at the next, sat so still you'd swear you could hear the actors' hearts beating together on stage. "Up," which opened last weekend at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, is built around the real-life story of Larry Walters. In 1982, Walters launched himself from a backyard in San Pedro, Calif., on a lawn chair suspended from 42 weather balloons. Walters, a truck driver, had dreamed his whole life of making this flight. It took him 16,000 feet above the city, earned him a spot on David Letterman and got him a citation from the Federal Aviation Administration.

In "Up," Walters has become Walter Griffin, family man and schlemiel, who 16 years after the famous lawn chair flight - he keeps the news clippings tucked in a box and the lawn chair hidden in the basement - still hasn't forged his life's dreams into any solid reality. As the play opens in the family kitchen, Walter's now just an unemployed inventor with a sullen teenage son, Mikey, and an increasingly desperate wife, Helen, who would love to keep supporting his dreams but grows more tired year by year of holding down the only paying job in the household. Into their lives steps Maria, a 16-year-old schoolgirl with a fey, worldly attitude and a six-month pregnancy. As she and Mikey fall sweetly in love, the characters in this odd foursome play out a complex set of variations on the irreconcilable tension between dreams and money, soaring love and humdrum reality.

Above them all - literally, above them on stage - walks a character named Philippe Petit. In real life, Philippe Petit once walked a high wire illegally strung between the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York. Petit, the character in the play, dances overhead as the embodiment of Walter's hopes and dreams. When he walked between the Twin Towers, Petit tells Walter, it was as if time itself stood still. Taxi drivers got out of their cabs and stared up into the sky. "Everyone on Wall Street stopped trying to make money," he says. Plays based on real life can feel cramped and literal. Carpenter has used reality as a springboard and then gone way beyond, making her play a reflection on the difficult place of inspiration in the everyday world. At one point, the action on stage becomes a four-part fugue, as Petit, Maria, Mikey and Walter are all engrossed in their own separate actions, from singing to high-wire walking. They all have impossible dreams. Mikey and Maria's love is as odd and breathtaking and, ultimately, as hazardous as that lawn chair flight.

The casting is terrific. Christine Albright, a newcomer to the festival, is electric as the pregnant and worldly Maria, oozing attitudinous charm and teenage wisdom. Richard Howard, a veteran of 18 seasons at Ashland, plays a perfectly shambling Walter, and Terri McMahon, is nicely ambivalent as Helen, the wife who struggles to hold the family together around Walters' dream - which was once, after all, her dream, too.

Barakiva directs with cool precision; in a play that soars so high off the ground, he manages to see to it that the lawn chair, this time anyway, comes most of the way safely back to Earth. The play's ending, while beautiful, comes across slightly muddled. "Up" is a play that will stick with you. It manages to take on big themes without once being ostentatious or preachy.

