

Hearts in Darkness, Flights of Fancy

By [David Templeton](#)

There is no doubt that hapless inventor Walter Griffin is headed for a crack-up in *Up*, the bitterly comic, confidently layered new



play by Bridget Carpenter. Based loosely on the real-life crises encountered by Larry Walters, the flight-obsessed truck driver who, in 1982, tied weather balloons to his lawn chair and went for 16,000-foot flight over Southern California. In 1993, unable to recapture the peculiar success and the instant celebrity of his famous aeronautical stunt, Walters finally shot and killed himself. In Carpenter's play, it has been 16 years since going vertical in the lawn chair, and now Griffin (Richard Howard) spends his days drawing out plans for inventions that will never take off while his wife Helen (Terri McMahan) pays the bills as a mail carrier. After years of waiting for Griffin to roll his 15-minutes of fame into some kind of steady paycheck, Helen is losing patience with her husband's aimless dreaming. Their teenage son Mikey (John Tufts), meanwhile, is withdrawn and unpopular at school, as rudderless and unfocused as his father, until he meets Maria (Christine Albright) a beguiling, conspicuously pregnant sophomore who lives with her slightly-seedy aunt Chris (a hilarious Robin

Goodrin Nordli). Encouraged by Maria to test his own potential, Mikey takes a job as a telemarketer selling office supplies from Aunt Chris's apartment. Before long, he's made more money than his father has earned over the last 16 years, and the shift in balance, along with Helen's growing insistence that her husband stop dreaming and get a job, sets the stage for a catastrophic clash between clear-eyed practicality and head-in-the-clouds idealism.

The clever direction, by Michael Barakiva, is inventive and smart, and the set by scenic designer Daniel Ostling--all sliding panels and sharp corners--is stylish and effective. The funny and knowing script, which strays close to the mystical in its final act, might--in the play's fanciful, bittersweet climax--a flashback to Griffin's life-changing flight in that chair--could be taken as a little too vague and metaphorical for some. What grounds the production is the raw believability of its cast, especially as played by McMahan and Howard.

With a breezy ease that almost seems effortless, Howard plays Griffin as a gentle child-man who, even as the story begins, has already become more absent from his home and family than anyone realizes. He has imaginary conversations with French tightrope-walker Philippe Petit (U. Jonathan Toppo), the guy who walked a rope between the twin towers in New York, in 1974. Petit appears above the set, trotting back and forth across a narrow beam as he offers Griffin wisps of advice and encouragement. *Up* is a play about walking a line, making breathtaking choices in a world where the dreams we love most dearly can end up taking us further and further away from those who truly love us.