

This Girl's Sweet 16 is Bitter Old Age

THEATRE REVIEW

By BEN BRANTLEY

THE INGÉNUE OF THE YEAR IS 62.

Marylouise Burke, who has seen six decades come and go, is turning in the freshest, most enchanting portrait of a bittersweet 16-year-old since Molly Ringwald seduced America in the John Hughes film "Sixteen Candles" in 1984. And in an unusual instance of just desserts, the ingénue of the year is appearing in what promises to be the comedy of the year, David Lindsay-Abaire's haunting and hilarious new play, "Kimberly Akimbo," which opened last night at the Manhattan Theater Club.

Of course Ms. Ringwald, who turned into a grown-up when no one was looking, has since gone on to steamy adult roles like Sally Bowles in the revival of "Cabaret." Ms. Burke, on the other hand, is demonstrating that onstage at least, the right actress in the right role can turn a clock way back without bending its hands or an audience's trust. Such musings about time are pertinent to "Kimberly Akimbo," a play in which a star-shaped, classically suburban clock is nearly always in evidence, chopping off the minutes at an accelerated speed. In considering the plight of a girl afflicted with a disease that ages her at four and a half times the usual rate, Mr. Lindsay-Abaire, who became a playwright to watch closely with "Fuddy Meers" three years ago, has taken on the weighty and weary subject of the stark brevity of life.

Yet there is nothing at all weary about "Kimberly Akimbo," though it has far more weight than David Petrarca's deceptively breezy staging might first lead you to think. On one level the plot does evoke that of "Sixteen Candles": a levelheaded, lonely girl in a frantic family finds that her parents are so preoccupied with themselves that they have forgotten her crucial 16th birthday.

For Kimberly Levaco (Ms. Burke), however, the stakes are much higher. According to the cruel arithmetic of Kimberly's disease, which is described blithely as being "like progeria without the dwarfism," 16 is the age at which most of its victims die. And questions that might in other contexts seem frivolous take on a thundering importance: Will Kimberly find a boyfriend? Will she experience her first kiss? Will she get to visit the Great Adventure theme park?

If you're starting to think, "Uh-oh, sounds like a disease-of-the-week movie to me," don't. Mr.

Lindsay-Abaire is an expert at tweaking, skewing and finally inverting established formulas. And his plays, even his less successful ventures like "Wonder of the World," tend to slide right out of predetermined pigeonholes.

"Kimberly Akimbo" is at once a shrewd satire, a black comedy and a heartbreaking study of how time wounds everyone. And while its tone initially suggests a dysfunctional family sitcom à la "Married With Children," the production keeps confounding your expectations of how you're going to respond to a given scene.

Like Robert Brill's fluidly shifting sets -- paneled in a sunny plaid that brings to mind, as one character says, "a giant thermos" -- the show keeps changing emotional perspectives even as it moves straight ahead in telling its tartly picaresque story. And in like manner, Ms. Burke seems to keep turning from a teenage girl into an old woman and back again, suggesting the trompe l'oeil illusions of allegorical paintings in which you glimpse the skull beneath the skin from certain angles.

Those unfamiliar with Ms. Burke (she was the memorably aphasic stroke victim in "Fuddy Meers") may genuinely take her for a girl when they first see her here. And it's not the bell-bottom jeans and clamped blondish hair that are most important in creating the illusion. It's the actress's defensively hunched shoulders, her sullen tucking of her chin into her neck, her way of saying "Da-ad" as two syllables, equally redolent of affection and annoyance.

Dad is a beer-slugging blue-collar worker named Buddy (Jake Weber), and he and his wife, Pattie (Jodie Markell), are not exactly noble in dealing with their daughter's illness. Buddy stays drunk and away from the family's Bogota (pronounced buh-GO-ta), N.J., home as much as possible, while Pattie, who is pregnant with her second child, has convinced herself that she's the one who's dying.

Pattie's sister, Debra (Ana Gasteyer), is a former convict who has been living in the public library and seems to hold the key to why the Levacos left Secaucus, their previous place of residence, in such a hurry. She may also present a chance for escape for Kimberly and her new friend, Jeff (John Gallagher Jr.), the nerdy, anagram-loving student from



Kimberly's biology class.

By crafty degrees Mr. Lindsay-Abaire makes the case that all of the grown-ups suffer from a more leisurely form of Kimberly's disease: that is, plain old mortality. "My whole life has been later," says Debra when it's suggested that she delay a get-rich-quick scheme. Buddy, wondering how he wandered into his dead-end existence, says, "It makes things easier in a way not to have any choices, I guess."

Then there's the way Pattie keeps talking into a tape recorder in a message to her unborn child, like some Chekhov character who sees hope only in a future that doesn't include her. And when the characters all play Dungeons and Dragons (except Buddy, who smells satanism), the game's capricious twists and turns take on a warped metaphorical resonance.

The supporting cast members are terrific, finding familiar humanity within their characters' surface grotesqueness. While Ms. Gasteyer (of "Saturday Night Live") has the most ferocious comic presence, with her priceless deadpan vulgarity, Mr. Weber provides the evening's most surprisingly shaded interpretation, revealing a core of conscience and fractured love beneath Buddy's pickled exterior.

It is Ms. Burke, however, who leaves you with moments that will keep coming back to you, from the luminous ecstasy on Kimberly's face as her father teaches her to swing dance to the image of her increasingly hobbled walk up and down the stairs as the illness takes its toll.

Above all there's the moment when Kimberly, for complicated plot purposes, dresses up as an old lady. When Ms. Burke steps onto the stage -- with sensible shoes, a turban and a cane -- you may find that there are tears in your eyes.

"I look O.K.?" Kimberly asks apprehensively of a dumbstruck Jeff. "It's just for a little while." And suddenly she becomes all the people who have looked into mirrors and been shocked at the sight of old faces that simply don't match the way they feel inside. ■