

Inside BayArea.com - Oregon Shakespeare Festival's 'UP' defies gravity, By Adina Kletter, CONTRIBUTOR

ASHLAND, Ore.

BRIDGET Carpenter's "UP" tells the story of Walter Griffin, an inventor who wants to fly high — but not in the usual ways. Based on the true story of Larry Walters, the Lawn Chair Pilot who tied 42 weather balloons full of helium to a lawn chair, "UP" expands the concept in a "what if" experiment that explores the myth of the American Dream: What if the man in the flying lawn chair had a wife and kid to support? And more importantly, what happens next?

Carpenter answers part of the question by setting the pivotal event 16 years in the past. In the production now on stage at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, we meet Walter (Richard Howard) and his wife Helen (Terri McMahon) testing one of Walter's latest failures — oops, make that inventions — before she leaves for her mail carrier job and 15-year-old son Mikey (John Tufts) leaves for the first day of school. Walter hasn't progressed much beyond his climactic flight, and Helen is still dreaming about her "real husband," though the joke has lost much of its humor over the years. Mikey is the typical teenager ("school sucks") with low self-esteem. Carpenter successfully creates characters that possess truth and depth, avoiding shallow stereotypes. Each follows his or her own development arc, a journey of self-discovery and disillusionment. The Festival describes their dreams as being "— like the balloons that carried Walter away from reality — big and powerful, yet fragile and easily broken. Bridget Carpenter's bittersweet work examines the value of following one's dreams and the dangers of not being able to let them go." Added to the mix are Maria (Christine Albright), a free-spirited new transfer student in Mikey's class, and her wacky Aunt Chris (Robin Goodrin Nordli). They provide spice and act as catalysts for unpredictable changes in the Griffin family life. Tightrope walker Philippe Petit (U. Jonathan Toppo) makes periodic appearances as Walter's metaphorical confidante and philosophical mentor, daring him to pursue his impossible dreams.

Astute direction by Michael Barakiva and consummate acting by the entire cast paint an empathetic portrait of a typical dysfunctional American family — "contemporary, bittersweet, funny, ironic, poetic, and true," according to dramaturge Lue Morgan Douthit. We sympathize with Walter and want him to succeed. He wants to invent, not be trapped in the usual rat race, a slave to the dollar. Reality intrudes on his inner world.

What goes up must come down, and Walter did come down from his exhilarating and successful flight, both physically and metaphorically — but perhaps not entirely. A tragic hero, Walter struggles with being earthbound after his fleeting taste of freedom and fame. As his efforts to capture those feelings continue to meet with failure and his life crumbles around him, Walter lives more and more in his memory of the perfect "high." His family tries to support him, but the mythic powers that be seem to be conspiring against them. When their lives finally crash irreparably, Walter is left with his one sweet memory of pure happiness. The flexible set design by Daniel Ostling, supported by James Ingalls' lighting, allows the space of the play to change effectively, morphing from typical reality into emptiness. The "window" space above the earthbound set represents inner worlds — not necessarily where the characters are but where they want to go. Petit and his wire inhabit this space admirably. "UP" sticks with you long after the theater goes dark. Carpenter and this stellar production challenge the audience to think about the characters, their motivations, their relationships, and their futures.