

Revel in Ashland's new season,

By Karen D'Souza, Mercury News'

Walter Griffin (Richard Howard) once sailed high into the air on a lawn chair buoyed by weather balloons. It was the greatest moment in his life, the only time one of his wacky inventions ever made good. He never even came close to feeling that right with the world again. Putting food on the table was left to his hardworking mail carrier wife, Helen (Terri McMahan), while Walter's head remained in the clouds.

Veteran Oregon Shakespeare Festival actor Howard captures Walter's tragic whimsy, his aerial aspirations and his quixotic faith in himself despite all evidence to the contrary. McMahan uncovers Helen's strength one layer at a time. She's a rock, the foundation of their suburban San Pedro lifestyle, until the day Walter's fantasies finally come crashing to the ground.

“Up” soars on its ability to show us the inner workings of the creative mind, how closely eccentricity resembles delusion and how hard it can be for loved ones to tell the difference.

Playwright Carpenter cleverly jigsaws Walter and Helen's story with the romance between their shy son, Mikey (John Tufts), and the free-spirited new girl at school, Maria (Christine Albright). Not only has the playwright nailed the ultra-cool cadence of the next generation, but she also has captured an essential truth about the lure of the impossible dream, its freedom and its danger.

Director Michael Barakiva nimbly juggles all the elements of the production from the kitchen-sink family dysfunction to the surreal daredevil interludes (Walter's imaginary friend is the tightrope walker Philippe Petit). And did we mention the kickin' line dancing?

Ashland treasure Robin Goodrin Nordli has shed her usual ingenue persona here to play a low-rent, dyed-blond, chain-smoking Lycra-clad diva named Chris, who makes the bank by pushing office supplies over the phone by day and who cowboys-up at night. If Walter longs to soar far above this sordid little world, Chris is content to get her hands dirty right here. And boy, does she.

