

'Found a Peanut' creator goes looking for a selling strategy

By Tom Jacobs
Daily News Theater Writer

Donald Margulies admits it: His "Found a Peanut," which has its West Coast premiere Saturday at the Back Alley Theatre, is a marketing nightmare.

It's a play about childhood, in which adult actors portray pre-pubescent characters. But it's also a serious work intended for a mature audience.

"How do you sell this play?" the native New Yorker asked with a frown. "I don't want to create the misconception that it's 'You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown.'"

"It's not a play for children. It's a play for all of us who have been children."

The 31-year-old ex-child took time to talk recently while in Van Nuys supervising a week of rehearsals. "This is an important production reaching an important audience," he said, adding that he wanted to be on hand.

He noted that "Found a Peanut" isn't any easier to stage than it is to sell. The actors can't play their young characters in an exaggerated or cartoonlike manner, though that might be their first impulse. Rather, Margulies insisted, the play demands "almost documentarylike realism."

The rehearsal process, he said, is fascinating.

'Primal experience'

"Without sounding too pretentious, I think it's a kind of a primal experience for (the actors) to re-create their own personas — to bend and shape their adult forms into their childlike forms. I've spoken to a couple of the actors, and it seems that it really is quite emotional.

"Everybody started out thinking they had grand, wonderful childhoods. Then, once they began doing improvisations, essentially re-creating their home life when they were children, it became quite upsetting and eye-opening. Things were not as pristine and magical as you sometimes let yourself believe."

Things are not at all pristine and magical in the world Margulies creates — or, in a sense, re-creates. The characters have their joyful moments, but they also experience terror and fear — particularly when two neighborhood bullies invade their back yard.

"For me, the play exists as kind of a Holocaust allegory," Margulies said. "An enclave is invaded by these interlopers. It's not heavy in that direction, but I

think that exists as one of the layers in the play. There's a sense of persecution of a community.

"It's also a political play, in that it examines hierarchies. It examines how vulnerable we are to be dominated. We need to pass the buck. We don't really want the responsibility for ourselves."

Adult themes, to be sure — and ones that underline Margulies' larger point, which is that this world is much like the adult world, and the kids react to it in much the same way they will as adults.

"I was ruminating once about a couple of people I've been friends with for about 20 years," he said. "The three of us relate to one another in precisely the same way we did when we were all 11.

"It made me realize that we are formed very early on. We don't really deviate much from our childhood states. We change, but it's always a struggle."

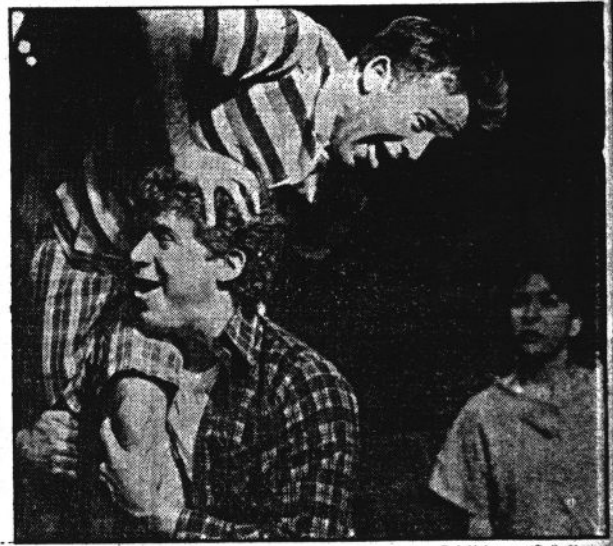
Writer's struggle

Making a living writing is a struggle as well, but Margulies seems to be succeeding at it; he has supported himself with his work for the past six years. Most of his money has come not from plays, but from other forms of writing, including comedy (he has written for Stiller and Meara) and television.

But he doesn't feel compromised.

"I've been fortunate, in that most of the television work I've done is work I've enjoyed. I was part of a pilot program at Embassy Television, which more or less invited me to create ideas for TV, which is a wonderful position for any writer to be in. I was given a lot of freedom to write about what I would like to see on television."

The result was a pilot for a situation comedy called "Danny," which is "about a young, single



Bob Halverson/Daily News

From left, Donald Margulies is writer of "Found a Peanut," and Leslie Jordan, Ben Mittleman and Lycia Naff (background) rehearse a scene.

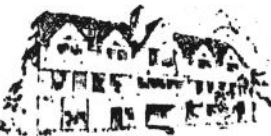
Jewish guy living in Manhattan who works as activities director at a community center. It's really about being single today. I created characters I would like to watch." Made for CBS, "it's supposedly being pushed around for mid-season."

While Margulies finds such work satisfying, his primary love is playwriting, and one of his primary thrills to date was the 1984 Joseph Papp production of "Found a Peanut" off-Broadway. Though it wasn't a smash success, the play found a cult audience in New York, he said.

STAGEVIEW

- The play: "Found a Peanut."
- Where: The Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.
- When: Opens at 8 p.m. Saturday. Regular schedule: 8 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, 3 p.m. matinee Sunday, indefinitely.
- Starring: Jeffrey Combs, William DeAcutis, Kenny D'Aquila and Winifred Freedman.
- Behind the scenes: Written by Donald Margulies. Directed by Michael Arabian.
- Tickets: \$13 and \$15. Call (818) 780-2240.

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