

# 'Found a Peanut,' but lost the fantasy, magic and audience

*Actors' playing kids is tough child's play*

By Richard Stayton  
Herald theater critic

There is Charles Schultz's Peanuts. And there is Donald Margulies's "Found a Peanut." Although one is a comic strip found in newspapers, and the other is a play at the Back Alley, both have something in common.

Each depicts childhood through an adult perspective. Schultz artfully satirizes grown-up behavior by having his colony of kids "act" like adults. Margulies audaciously casts his play's children as literal adults — full grown women and men behaving like kids which then becomes a metaphor for ... well, for what?

That's where Schultz and Margulies part company. In "Found a Peanut," Margulies shamelessly manipulates childhood for his own rather pedestrian political motives, injecting small-minded meanings into the mysteries of childhood. He exploits where Schultz celebrates. Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus, Schroeder — all are far more mature and believable, even in their two-dimensional comic strip form, than are Margulies' immature, didactic silhouettes. All that's missing from this play is poetry, wisdom, romance, fantasy, magic, (i.e. childhood).

Margulies locates "Found a Peanut" in "a state of mind called Childhood," (i.e. Brooklyn). It's the last day of a 1962 summer, one of those tense psychological crossroads when yet another classroom of strangers and another ominous teacher must be confronted. We're staring into a bleak concrete jungle of a backyard: broken chain-link fencing and trash and a pitiful patch of earth, all shadowed by apartment buildings. (The splendid set is by Rich Rose.)

Mike is chalking squares on the concrete patio for a game of "Skelly." Nearby, Jeffrey Smolowitz is bouncing a ball in a clumsy attempt to gain Mike's attention. Both are 11 years old ... but at the Back Alley we quickly see they're not. David O. Cameron makes Mike a rather plodding youth, a bit slow upstairs but an OK guy, the kind of kid who'll never excel or fail. William DeAcutis' Smolowitz drifts in-and-out of childhood mannerisms and accents.

In skips Mike's younger sister, Melody, and she's supposedly 8 years old. Her voice certainly has the

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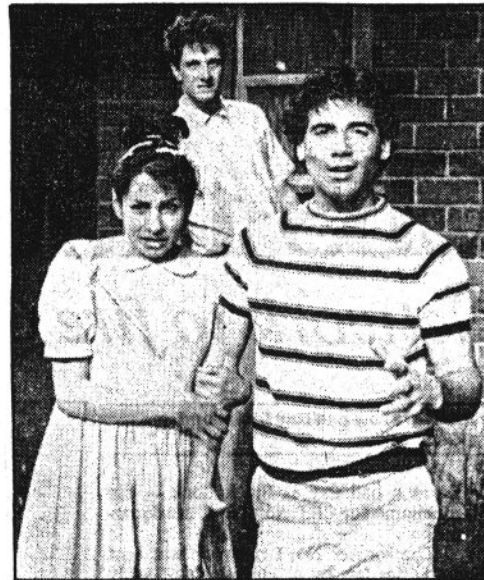
high, irritating pitch of a spoiled brat ... and that's about it. Lycia Naff very adeptly imitates the look of a little girl. She wriggles her nose, picks at her panties, rolls her eyes. But she, too, never quite convinces us that her character is more than caricature.

The same erratic mesh of mature and immature mannerisms blur the other roles. Sometimes they seem like children; at other moments they're adults obviously and awkwardly pretending to be kids. Winifred Freedman's Joanie, the fat outsider who's always the butt of cruel jokes, again looks like a child — until she walks and talks. Jeffrey Rogers' Scott has all the mannerisms of a 22-year-old gang leader while straining to be 12. It all starts to become an eerie, haunted house version of Mr. Rogers, when suddenly 5-year-old Little Earl totters into the back yard.

In Leslie Jordan's amazing captivation of childhood we can vividly observe just how distant "Found a Peanut" is from its subject. From one pocket of his baggy Bermuda shorts dangles a slinky, from the other rubber dinosaurs. A Band-Aid adorns his knee. What makes Jordan's Little Earl such a tour-de-force achievement is that, of all the adult faces on the Back Alley stage, his face is clearly the oldest in appearance. And yet it's delightful to watch Jordan's mannerisms. He inhabits childhood, becoming 5, taking us back to our own memories.

So we tend to watch only Little Earl while Margulies' tendentious plot crumbles around him. And that's one reason why Jordan's characterization proves so believable and the others so petrified: Margulies has left him alone. Like an overbearing parent, the playwright has burdened each of his characters with lessons and duties. Only Little Earl is free to imaginatively play on his own, freeing Jordan to explore his personal relationship to childhood.

All the others must dutifully perform their respective tasks, which here becomes a metaphor for



Lycia Naff, William DeAcutis and Jeffrey Rogers, from left, take to the stage in "Found a Peanut," by Donald Margulies.

Jewish history. You see, the gentile bullies, Ernie (Ben Mittleman) and Shane (Kenny D'Aquila), march into the Jewish ghetto like storm troopers, beat up the intellectual Smolowitz and steal Mike's money. In the process, their reign of terror creates dissension and the kids all start manipulating one another like shopkeepers.

Not only is the true path to wisdom lost, so is all verisimilitude. Forced to behave like didactic puppets, each becomes dull, dull, dull. Margulies knows his Marx but not his Freud, since he utterly neglects the budding sexuality so omnipresent in 12-year-olds while insisting that money is the root of all evil.

Michael Arabian has, alas, directed faithfully to the text. Sometimes directorial license can salvage a classroom exercise, or at least make it as enlightening as a cartoon strip.

**FOUND A PEANUT**, a play by Donald Margulies; directed by Michael Arabian; set by Rich Rose; lights by Leslie Rose; costumes by Barbara Cox; sound by Andrew McCarr; produced by Laura Zucker at the Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 8 p.m. Weds-Sundays, 3 p.m. Sundays, through August 10. Tickets: \$13-\$15. Information: 1-818-780-2240.

Mike .....	David O. Cameron
Shane .....	Kenny D'Aquila
Jeff .....	William DeAcutis
Joanie .....	Winifred Freedman
Little Earl .....	Leslie Jordan
Ernie .....	Ben Mittleman
Melody .....	Lycia Naff
Scott .....	Jeffrey Rogers

Theater  
Richard Stayton reviews  
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**FOUND A PEANUT**/Donald Margulies took a moderately interesting concept — adults playing children — but then manipulated the situation for his own private purposes. As art, this 90-minute, intermissionless day in the life of kids at the end of summer vacation falls somewhere in between the mature and the immature. Money is the root of all evil, says Margulies, but we wonder about childhood's magic and mystery, neither of which are in evidence here. There is a stunning, delightful performance by Leslie Jordan, but otherwise this is a didactic cartoon lacking the wisdom of Charles Schultz; 8 p.m. Wed-Fri & Sun, 3 & 8 p.m. Sat, through Aug. 10, Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, \$13-\$15. (818-780-2240) — R.S.