



LOCAL ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment

by Leigh K. Romero

What's Wrong With This Picture?

The Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys began a relationship with playwright Donald Margulies with its production of FOUND A PEANUT, reviewed in these pages last year. That play was a revealing memory play about growing up tough in an urban environment. It was touching as well as trenchant.

Now The Back Alley presents the West Coast premiere of a very different piece by Margulies. "What's Wrong with this Picture?" The play is a rollicking comedy - or is it?

It's funny, ethnic humor from the start. Mort (Allan Miller) and his wife Shirley (Phoebe Dorin) went out to a Chinese restaurant for dinner one evening and Shirley choked to death on a piece of moo shoo pork. Now the family has finished sitting Shiva. Mort's parents, father Sid (Sandy Kenyon) and mother Bella (Lillian Adams), along with sister Ciel (Patti Deutsch) are preparing to leave. The son, Artie (James Stern), is typically irreverent as would suit a 17 year old who is stunned by his mother's death. The jokes fly, and his wit is especially mordant. At typical exchange, Mort says, "My life is over." Artie retorts, "You have a good 25 or 30 years left." Mort: "That's all."

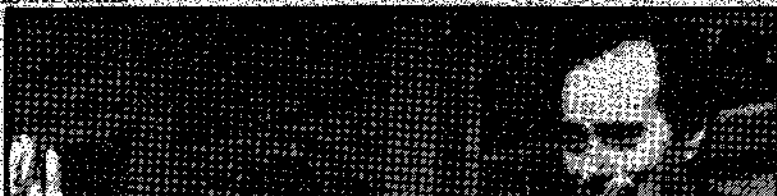
After the relatives leave, Artie and Mort are left with a silent apartment cluttered with the beginnings of Shirley's redecorating scheme. The conversation turns edgy. It's apparent that Mort will have a very different time adjusting when he asks his son to try on one of his wife's dresses, and Artie is, of course, horrified. In the midst of this, the doorbell rings. Enter the dead Shirley covered with mud. After a refreshing shower, she declares she's come back to finish the decorating. She's a restless soul and she can't stop cleaning and fixing. Mort is in heaven again. But the dream begins to unravel. He wants to take Shirley on that vacation they never had. But she protests she must stay at home. And she can't sleep. Never again to dream...

By the curtain call, we've realized that we've laughed our way to a realization about life and death, and that there is time for both, and especially, a time to let go, to move on.

An excellent cast guided by Stuart Damon of General Hospital fame gives equality to both the humor and the pathos of parting. The direction is notable for emphasis on the reality of the situation, rather than going for the laughs. Sensitive performances come from Allan Miller as the father and son, James Stern. Lillian Adams is a commanding Bella, and Sandy Kenyon as Sid has a lovely moment with Shirley as he remembers a dance long ago. Phoebe Dorin as Shirley didn't strike me as enough of an indomitable redecorator to warrant her return to this life, but it is a small quibble, for most of her performance is as warm as her hands are presumably cold.

The set by Don Gruber is a wonder of dimensional planning. It's perfect, right up to the Elvis Presley plate in the built in hutch. Other production elements are up to the Back Alley's fine standards. If you want to laugh and think at the same time, go see "What's Wrong With This Picture," continuing through March 20th at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys. Phone 780-2240 for time and days.

(l-r, standing) Phoebe Dorin & Allan Miller, (seated) James Stern in WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?



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