

PLAY REVIEW:By FRANCES NICHOLSON
Area Theater Critic**It's the labeling
that isn't right for
'What's Wrong?'**

SOMETIMES billing can get in the way of a show. Advertising gives an audience preconceptions about what they will see onstage — and any deviation can leave them disappointed.

That may be a what's wrong with "What's Wrong With This Picture," currently at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys. Billed as a comedy, it falls more easily into the tragicomic mode of modern Neil Simon: serious home truths with a little laughter to break the tension.

Shirley has died, suddenly and much too soon. Her husband refuses to acknowledge her death; her son plays at amiable devil-may-care to counterbalance his overwhelmed father. Her mother-in-law behaves with total insensitivity. Nobody deals with the reality of loss.

So Shirley returns. Her job, once she herself understands it, is to push her family out of denial and into the next, healing process of grief.

The cast is well-known, and first rate. Phoebe Dorin gives Shirley a much-needed vitality. Allan Miller manages a drawn quality as Mort,

**Lillian Adams**

the husband, which plays well against all that vibrant energy.

James Stern makes the son likable and elastic, while Patti Deutsch gives Mort's sister a stifled quality, which explains Mort's own hesitancy. Lillian Adams is the ultimate managing Jewish mother, while Sandy Kenyon makes Mort's vague father one of the warmest characters in the play.

What they accomplish is funny, touching, thought provoking and heart catching by turns. There are no riotous laughs, just warm smiles and serious thought in this one.

"What's Wrong With This Picture?" plays Thursday through Sunday evenings, and Sunday matinees, at least through March 20. It is well directed by "General Hospital's" Stuart Damon. The theater is located at 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys. For information, call (818) 780-2240.