

'What's Wrong With This Picture?' is funereal humor, not black comedy

By TOM JACOBS
Daily News Theater Critic

The new offering at the Back Alley Theatre is called "What's Wrong With This Picture?" But a better title might be "My Mother the Corpse."

Donald Margulies' play is pure TV sitcom; it takes an important issue and trivializes it through clichés, one-liners and one-dimensional characters. It's about death, but it can't be described as a black comedy; it's too lightweight and superficially jokey to earn that designation.

What's wrong with this play? Nearly everything.

The setting is the attractive apartment of a nice, middle-class Jewish family in New York. As the lights go up, Mort (Allan Miller) is mourning the death of his wife Shirley (Phoebe Dorin), who



Phoebe Dorin, James Stearn, center, and Allan Miller perform in "What's Wrong With This Picture?" at the Back Alley Theatre.

choked to death on a fatty piece of mu shu pork at a Chinese restaurant.

Mort's grief is so total he's practically catatonic. In contrast, son Artie (James Stern) is nonchalant about the whole thing, spending his time juggling bagels.

That is, until there's a knock at the door. Surprise! It's Mom, a little pale and kind of dirty, but otherwise none the worse for wear.

After a quick shower, she resumes her two favorite activities — cleaning the house and making snappy comebacks.

Ah, but she's not the only one in the family with a quick wit. When she asks what her services

were like, Artie replies: "It was the worst funeral you ever had."

Like sitcom mother, like sitcom son.

So it goes for two 40-minute acts. Margulies apparently wants to say something about dealing with death, but he doesn't even come close to doing so. There is one nice piece of writing, where Artie's senile, forgetful grandfather (a clichéd character) recalls the moment many years ago when he made a pass at Shirley.

There's no question here of creating interesting characters, but some of the actors do better than others adopting convincing New York Jewish accents. Most successful are Lillian Adams and Patti Deutsch (a good comedic actress wasted in another clichéd role — the unmarried sister).

The most fully realized facet of the production is Don Gruber's splendidly detailed set. The many nice touches, such as the folding chairs placed around the dining-room table, supplementing the wooden ones, give the production a feel of authenticity.

Too bad that disintegrates the moment people begin to speak. Donald Margulies proved with "Found a Peanut" that he is capable of writing serious, provocative plays. But here it looks like he's bucking for a job with "Gimme a Break."

THE FACTS

- **The play:** "What's Wrong With This Picture?"
- **Where:** Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.
- **When:** 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays, through March 20.
- **Starring:** Allan Miller, Phoebe Dorin, Sandy Kenyon, James Stern, Lillian Adams and Patti Deutsch.
- **Behind the scenes:** Written by Donald Margulies. Directed by Stuart Damon.
- **Tickets:** \$13.50 to \$17.50. For more information, call (818) 780-2240.
- **Our rating:** D.