

# Soap doctor Stuart Damon scrubs up for new director's duties

by Lenore Blossom

Life's a beach... and then you die, but if you're lucky General Hospital's handsome and stubborn Dr. Alan Quatermaine will bring you back from the dead! Daytime soap fans now have the opportunity to observe Dr. Alan (Stuart Damon) in a new role as director of the current production at the Back Alley Theatre, "What's Wrong With This Picture?" This comedy-with-a-heart by playwright Donald Margulies does, in fact, bring back the dead to help the living but is not a drawing room comedy piece of fluff as is Noel Coward's ever-popular and charming "Blithe Spirit."

Director Damon is a man enthusiastically immersed in his

directorial debut. "The play is about members of a Jewish family in Brooklyn in the late '60s and opens with them sitting Shiva in the Jewish tradition when somebody has passed away and you mourn for them, but as opposed to being depressing, it's hysterical."

Full of hope and upbeat describes Stuart Damon but it hasn't always been an easy row to hoe for this popular and successful television star. As a matter of fact, hoeing a row was the only reason he and his family survived at one point in his vacillating career.

After several years of starring in English television, Damon found himself out of work and his wife's garden behind their farm in Eng-

land was literally their only food supply one long winter.

"We had a farm and as opposed to being the squire of the land, I was the laborer and I fixed that farm up. My wife used to grow marrows, which are zucchinis; they're called marrows because they're giant, the size of watermelons, 15 or 16 pounds, and this is exactly what we ate for long periods of time... You could eat for three days on half a marrow. It was really hard for us, there were months in the course of the winter when we didn't have six pounds to pay for coal and it's really cold in England in the winter. Things got worse and worse.

"We then sold the farm to get

out of debt and a year and a half later, in 1975, a friend of mine from America convinced me to try and come back home. I did and two and a half months after I came home I was on 'General Hospital.'"

After this "marrowing" experience, it is easy to understand why Damon has no qualms venturing from his niche on "General Hospital" to direct the West Coast premiere of a new play, risky business at best.

"I have always wanted to direct, have always visualized totalities, entire pictures. In the course of working on G.H. some of the actors come to me and say can we try this or can we do this or can you help me with that and I've loved doing it... never had to work at doing that, it's just the way my mind works!"

Again, as luck would have it, Alan Miller, artistic director of the

Back Alley Theatre and a former acting instructor of Damon's, appeared on "General Hospital" as Quentin Quatermaine and approached Damon with the offer to direct "What's Wrong With This Picture?"

"I was very comfortable where I was, doing 'General Hospital' and playing golf and going home to my comfortable house. When I read the play I absolutely fell in love with it. It grabbed hold of me by the throat and never let me go!"

Risk-taker he may be, but Damon is also a pragmatist in his choice of theaters for a directorial debut. The Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys is an established little theater consistently offering Los Angeles excellent, professional theater.

Producing directors Laura Zucker and husband Alan Miller are

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# Damon

◀ 70

once again offering playwright Donald Margulies a West Coast premiere, having already successfully run his "Found a Peanut."

A boyish 33, Margulies seems almost too young to be a successful television sriptor and playwright. Following the premiere of "What's Wrong With This Picture?" at the Back Alley, Margulies' next project is already scheduled to run at the Los Angeles Theatre Center.

Technically, The Back Alley is offering the premiere of "What's Wrong . . ." but the play did have a short-lived run at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1985, which starred Madeline Kahn and Bob Dishy. Even though the sold-out run was very well received by audiences, Margulies chose not to invite critics due to rewrites he felt his work needed and "a couple of other production mistakes we made contributed to my displeasure with the production."

This is not an overly sensitive writer who bruises easily or rests on his laurels, Margulies is able to step back and apparently take an objective look at his work, listening to advice or criticism.

"I'll do anything that anyone suggests if I feel that it's better than what I have. I think very often playwrights lose sight of their strengths and weaknesses and it just becomes a matter of getting the lines right as written and it sometimes shuts off the possibilities of exploring your work. I'm pretty objective. I'm a pretty self-critical person."

Certainly a popular motivation for a young playwright to explore ghosts returning from the dead could be the current rage of recounting "out-of-body" experiences, but Margulies vehemently denies this suggestion.

"This was a dream, an old-fashioned dream, before people started talking about out-of-body experiences. My mother died about ten years ago and shortly after she died I had a dream in which she came home and very simply announced that she didn't want to talk about it but wanted to take a shower. The feelings I had in the dream were that of horror. I was totally thrilled that she was home and yet I knew that she was dead and it was very troubling to me."

The then 23-year-old author tried to write about his feelings but he "was too close to it and it came out really maudlin and terrible." So he shelved it until 1984 when Robert Redford invited Margulies to present it as part of the Sundance Institute's Writer's Conference and again in 1985 after the unsatisfying New York debut.

After rewriting, reworking and

traveling from New York to Utah to California with "What's Wrong . . ." Margulies feels "a strange elation that the play will finally open."

Unlike Damon's long-sought realization of financial success as a daytime television star, Margulies and his young wife are still in the middle of their struggle, living in a "four-room railroad flat in Hell's Kitchen," too deeply in debt to ever be considered yuppies ("Banish the thought!").

This young couple does not grow giant zucchinis in the backyard garden, but the seed planted by Margulies' startling dream has grown into a full-length potential dream come true.

"What's Wrong With This Picture?" is an autobiographical black comedy dealing with death, a tricky balance to maintain for a beginning director. Both playwright and director have tackled difficult challenges but seem to have the emotional stamina and self confidence so essential to successful theater.

For the present, Los Angeles audiences and critics will be their judge as the Back Alley Theatre presents from now until March 20 "What's Wrong With This Picture?" Let's hope . . . nothing.

For tickets and info call 818-780-2240.

## Theater Review

### What's Wrong With This Picture?

by Lenore Blossom

"What's Wrong With This Picture?", Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, Thursday through Saturday 8 p.m., Sundays 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. Tickets vary from \$13.50 to \$17.50. For information call (818) 780-2240.

Comments: Excellent black comedy entices the audience with absurdly comedic events. The playwright first seduces with laughter and then throws a sledge-hammer punch.

Experiencing a well-constructed black comedy should be emotionally exhausting. Creating simultaneous laughter on the lips and sorrow in the heart requires total objectivity from the playwright while delivering his subjective message, as Edward Albee does so brilliantly in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

"What's Wrong With This Picture?" is a courageous attempt at autobiographical black comedy, made doubly difficult when coupled with tackling the big unavoidable truth we all face—death.

Playwright Donald Margulies' two-act play opens with a Jewish family sitting Shiva, a mourning period indulged in after the unex-

pected death of Shirley (Phoebe Dorin), the fortyish wife and mother who, one week earlier, choked to death on a tough piece of moo shoo pork, and comes back from the dead to redecorate the apartment and straighten out her grieving family. This is the perfect set-up for good black comedy, a fascinatingly funny, yet horrific situation.

The cast of characters allows author Margulies freedom to deal with death through a variety of life stages, beginning with teenage son Artie (James Stern), appropriately confused about everything, the lost and lonely widower Mort (Allan Miller) suddenly forced to face his own eventual mortality and ending up with the comfortably elder Sid (Sandy Kenyon) who has learned to welcome death as an old friend.

Margulies begins building his story by utilizing the correct elements and also ends as the black comedy should, with no resolution, only an expose of beginnings and endings in relationships with no answers. It is the unfocused in between that needs more work and punch.

The author is obviously fond of his characters, too emotionally close to make them comically cruel; he pulls his punches just when he should wallop. The result is a half amused and slightly befuddled audience, unclear as to the playwright's intent.

Artie, the young man around whom the play revolves, is the thinly-veiled Margulies, and it is Artie's emotional roller-coaster the audience must ride. This young playwright is on the right track, he only needs to pull back and dissociate in order to analyze, zero in and nail his message home. He must decide if his play is to be a hard-hitting black comedy or a more light-hearted comedy with a heart and a message.

Donald Margulies is a talented new playwright whose "Found a Peanut" was successfully produced by Laura Zucker and the Back Alley Theatre in 1986 and now is in popular demand by regional, dinner and high school theaters across the country.

Stuart Damon (star of TV's "General Hospital") in his first directorial outing does a fine job of keeping a lively pace without pushing too hard. The performers are all excellent and talented professionals, with particular nods to Allan Miller (recent co-star of television's "The Billionaire Boys Club") as the helpless widower and James Stern's honest and touching portrayal of the bewildered Artie.

Don Gruber's set design enhances without distracting, Larry Oberman's lighting and Jeffrey Markie's music set proper moods with Bob Miller's costumes balancing nicely throughout.

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