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Phoebe Dorin, James Stern & Allan Miller discover 'What's Wrong...?'

What's Wrong with This Picture?

Produced by Laura Zucker; Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; (818) 780-2240. Opened Jan. 28; plays Thurs.-Sat., 8; Sun., 2 & 7; closes March 20.

BY T. H. McCULLOH

They've been sitting *shiva* for a week. Poor Shirley is dead, done in by an incredible chunk of *moo shoo* pork at the grand opening of a new Chinese restaurant and right in the middle of redecorating the apartment. Sister-in-law Ceil can't wait to get the food put away in Shirley's Tupperware and try on her clothes, still hanging in the closet. Grandma Bella can't wait to get home and grandpa Sid is perfectly happy zonked out in a pile of Shirley's new furniture, still wrapped in its plastic. Shirley's devoted husband Mort is reduced to staring unseeingly at the boob tube, grubby and unshaven, and son Artie is resorting to juggling bagels to keep from going batty. Suddenly Mort and Artie are alone. But not *quite*. A knock at the door signals the arrival of—Shirley, shoes in hand, mud splattered on her dress and hair, exhausted by her long walk back home from the cemetery. How could a wife and mother like Shirley leave without making sure her guys would be all right? It's a delicious setup for a mild but often very amusing and eventually very meaningful comedy about letting go after it's over. Donald Margulies' *What's Wrong with This Picture?* is warm and insightful, the kind of comedy you like to just sink into for a couple of hours and think about on the way home.

What's right with this picture is Stuart Damon's clearcut and brisk direction and the performances of Allan Miller as Mort and James Stern as his 17 year old son Artie. Miller and

Stern work as tightly as a comedy team with timing that sparkles and a playing of levels of intent between father and son which give them truthful reality and rich humor.

Sandy Kenyon is gentle and honest as Sid, making logical the old man's misconceptions about everything that's going on around him; Lillian Adams is as solid as can be as Mort's mother, a rock with a heart of gold; and Ceil is given a good hard edge as Mort's divorced sister but riddled with warm humor in Patti Deutsch's engaging performance. Phoebe Dorin is unfortunately too grand, too coiffed, too chic and too relaxed as Shirley's shade who pops in the front door to get things straightened out before she *really* goes away. She doesn't seem to be a part of Mort and Artie's closely knit family. It would seem more logical to have cast Deutsch in the role; she could have matched their zaniness and togetherness in the early comedy and the bittersweet ending as Mort leaves to take Shirley back to the cemetery would be much more touching than it now is.

Don Gruber's setting couldn't be more perfect and exact in its detail and tone, and it is realistically and effectively lit in Larry Oberman's design. Bob Miller's costumes are right on for each individual, divulging additional information about the characters, and Jeffrey Markie's sound design is as up to the minute and as right as it can be.