

ISRAEL TODAY

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Jewish Playwriting Comes of Age

How many Jewish playwrights can you think of? Neil Simon definitely. Wendy Wasserstein probably, and after that the list starts to peter out. In the past there's been a tendency amongst Jewish playwrights not to advertise their cultural differences, and once they're Broadway-bound, the theatrical establishments tend to de-ethnicize the distinctive Jewish elements in their writing. Yet, the last few years have seen a new wave of young Jewish playwrights—strong, vibrant writers proud of their distinctive ethnic voice. Donald Margulies, who has been playwright in residence at the Jewish Repertory Theatre in New York, belongs to this growing circle.

Although Margulies lives on the East Coast, he is currently in Los Angeles to oversee the final stages of rehearsal of his comedy, *What's Wrong With This Picture?*, at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys. Theatregoers may remember one of his other works—*Found a Peanut*—which was a smash hit at the Back Alley in

adjunctive in this situation. I have a very strong cultural identity as a Jew, which is naturally apparent in my work as an artist.

Margulies' cultural identity is especially evident in his play, *What's Wrong With This Picture?*, which opens for previews on Jan. 28. It's a warm, affectionate portrait of a Jewish family who is sitting *shiva* for their mother when, quite unexpectedly, she returns from the dead. Extraordinarily enough, the play springs almost directly from Margulies' personal experience: "The play is autobiographical in that I lost my mother when I was 23 years old. Shortly after my mother's death, I had a dream in which she returned from the grave. A very vivid, disturbing dream, but it was strangely amusing, because what happened in it was very characteristic of my mother. In the dream, the doorbell rang, I went to answer the door and there was my mother, covered in mud, and I was horrified. I gasped. She said, 'Look, I don't even want to talk

writing, and I put it away."

Like many manuscripts, *Somnambulist* languished at the back of a drawer in Margulies' office for three or four years, before he decided that there was enough distance between his personal experience and his art to revive the project. This time he extended the play's cast, and created an entire family of characters, enabling him to dramatize the way different people respond to loss. The play was staged in 1985 by the New York Manhattan Theatre Club, but it never opened for the press. This time, he is confident things will be different.

Margulies lists among his contemporaries at the Jewish Repertory writers like Susan Sandler and Richard Schoffer. "We're bound by the fact that we are members of the same generation—the baby boomer, post-Holocaust generation who grew up with similar values during the 60's, most of us easterners. There seems to be a wide range of theatrical voices that are being produced at the Jewish Rep."



A SCENE FROM THE ORIGINAL—1985 production of *What's Wrong With This Picture* by Donald Margulies at New York's Manhattan Theatre Club. Pictured (from left) are Bob Dishy, Evan Handler, and Florence Stanley.

Photo by Gerry Gunderson

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What distinguishes Margulies is his feel for the cultural rhythms of Jewish experience: "I tend to write about Jews. It's my voice, I believe we are all products of our childhood and mine was an intrinsically Brooklyn, New York middle-class Jewish upbringing, and the Jewish is an essential

adjective in this situation. I have a very strong cultural identity as a Jew, which is naturally apparent in my work as an artist."

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The company, to its credit, has encouraged Margulies and the other playwrights in their more provocative new work—sometimes at the expense of the taste of its loyal audience, who would be happy to watch Tevye dance his way through "If I Were A Rich Man" time and time again. "I think the critical establishment



A SCENE FROM THE ORIGINAL—1985 production of "What's Wrong With This Picture" by Donald Margulies at New York's Manhattan Theatre Club. Pictured (from left) are Bob Dishy, Evan Handler, and Florence Stanley.
Photo by Gerry Goodstein

patronizes the Jewish Rep, simply because it's called the Jewish Rep, in the same way that women's theatre has become a perjorative term. It's that sort of bind that minorities have always been in: you want to be a part of the community without any concessions, and yet by virtue of

your minority status you *have* to distinguish yourself first for what you are.

What's Wrong With This Picture? opened on Jan. 28 at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. Call for reservations, (818) 780-2240.