

# A Very Jewish Playwright

By Naomi Pfefferman  
Staff Writer

The idea began with a nightmare. The year was 1978, and playwright Donald Margulies's mother had died, quite unexpectedly, of a heart attack. The dream came some three weeks later; Margulies was sitting in his living room, when suddenly, the doorbell rang. He opened the door — and gasped. There stood his mother — in her shroud — caked with mud from the grave. "I don't even want to talk about it," she snapped, as Margulies gaped. "I just want to jump in the shower!"

The dream was vivid, chilling, and upon waking, Margulies did what many writers do when loved ones die: He set pen to paper and wrote. But *Somnambulist* was more maudlin than cathartic, and so, was retired to the back of a dusty office drawer until the playwright revived it some three years later.

The result, *What's Wrong With This Picture?*, is now playing at the Back Alley Theatre

in Van Nuys. It's a play about dealing with loss: a Jewish family has just finished sitting *shiva* for their mother (Shirley choked to death, in the middle of redecorating, on a tough piece of *moo shoo* pork) when she unexpectedly returns from the grave.

The characters are more than recognizably Jewish, bantering about *tsuris* and *bubkis* and "going to Israel to see how the trees are doing." It's a bit like eavesdropping on your own relatives, so Jewish that one wonders how it got staged at a mainstream, albeit small theater. Weren't the producers worried about alienating non-Jews?

Not at all, says producer Laura Zucker. During previews, she explains, she asked non-Jews to raise their hands if the play made them uncomfortable. None did, though one woman said the characters reminded her of her own Italian family — with different vocabulary. (And, the reporter noted, the play is showing in the San Fernando Valley, which has an especially healthy population of Jews.)

The play was first staged three years ago in

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## Margulies

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even-more-Jewish New York, at the Manhattan Theatre Club, with Madeline Kahn as Shirley. But Margulies was dissatisfied with the production, and closed the show before critics had time to review it.

Now the play has been resurrected in Los Angeles; and though the script has changed, the characters remain very Jewish. For Margulies has always written about Jews.

"I tend to write about what I know best," he explains, especially as a playwright-in-residence of the Jewish Repertory Theatre in New York. The playwright, after all, is Brooklyn born and bred, from the likes of Sheepshead Bay and Brighton Beach and Coney Island. He now lives in Manhattan. Many of his characters, accordingly, reflect that background: there's 11-year-old Jeff Smolowitz, the nerdy brain of the critically-acclaimed *Found a Peanut* (directed, at Manhattan's prestigious Public Theater, by Claudia Weill); a CBS pilot (now shelved) called *Danny*, about a young Jewish bachelor who lives in Manhattan and works at a community center; an ABC pilot (also shelved) called *Great Society*, featuring a Jewish flower child named Doris (aka Dove) Moscovitz.

Now with all those last names that end in "witz," it comes as no surprise that producers sometimes wish Margulies would tone down his Jewish-ese. (Hollywood, after all, is a place where even director Paul Mazursky has to justify Jewish characters.) "He's a wonderful writer," they tell his agent, "but can't you show us anything less Jewish?"

No way, Margulies says. "I've got a lot of plays in me," he explains (he's only 33), "and I'm not going to censor my subject matter."

The playwright, for his part, was "terribly offended" by the Broadway version of *Brighton Beach Memoirs*; "it was cast in such a *goyishe* way it was unbelievable," he says. And he's disgusted by the way Hollywood whitewashes ethnicities: the Disneyized *Color Purple*, for instance.

But Margulies remains optimistic. His pal John Patrick Shanley wrote *Moonstruck*, with all its incorrigible Italians, and audiences love it. And Christopher Durang writes only about Catholics, Harvey Fierstein about homosexuals, Tennessee Williams about the South; so why can't he write about Jews?

Accordingly, Margulies's latest play is also about Jews — Jewish Holocaust survivors and their children, to be exact. If you ask, Margulies will tell you he's always been obsessed by the Shoah; at 5, he remembers asking about the tattooed numbers on his neighbor Ida's arm.

His new play is called *The Model Apartment*, and it's bound to be controversial, according to the playwright. "It becomes a sort of Frankenstein story," he says, cryptically; the survivors mold their child into a monster, so rooted are they in the horrors of the past.

As it happens, a stage reading of *The Model Apartment* will play at the L.A. Theatre Center March 4 and 6, at 2 p.m. and 10:30 a.m., respectively.

Meanwhile, Margulies is working on an episode of a *Baby Boom*, TV spinoff, to air on ABC. "I should be working on that even as we speak," he says, playfully, then traipses back to his computer. □

For information about *What's Wrong With This Picture*, call the Back Alley Theatre at (818) 780-2240. For information about *The Model Apartment*, call the L.A. Theater Center at (213) 627-5599.