

# Here's What's Wrong With This Picture?

By Terry Fisher

One of the best series on television is *Frank's Place*, set in a black section of New Orleans. It has warmth, intelligence, humor, a special humanity. It's not a show about black people; it's primarily about people who happen to be black. It incorporates the black experience without clichés.

This is not a review of *Frank's Place* but rather by way of saying that Donald Margulies's play, *What's Wrong With This Picture?*, at the Back Alley Theatre, is everything that *Frank's Place* is not. The author uses every cliché to present his Jewish characters in the

## Theater

most distasteful way possible. They are self-centered, callous, harping. They don't talk; they yell. They don't have a conversation; they talk at cross-purposes. No one listens to anyone else. It's impossible to like any of them, even if they are in mourning.

Allan Miller and his son James Stern have just finished sitting *shiva* for their wife and mother. Shirley (Phoebe Dorin) choked to death while eating moo shu pork in a Chinese restaurant. The father is wallowing in grief but is more concerned with his loss of comfort than anything else (his shirts aren't back from the laundry). The boy, coldly insensitive, juggles bagels while waiting for relatives to leave. Grandma Lillian Adams is a monster of a Jewish mother ("Maybe if she had cooked a little more often, she would be alive today.") Grandpa Sandy Kenyon is fighting senility. Sister Patti Deutsch is an adonoidal shrew who can't wait to get her hands on Shirley's clothes.

When Miller and Stern are left alone, there is a knock at the door. It's Shirley. Her dress and hair are matted with soil and her face is very pale. This gives the ghoulish impression that she broke through the coffin, fought her way up through the dirt and walked home from the cemetery.

Eventually, everyone reacts to Shirley's return, either with joy or dismay. But no one questions the fact that she has returned from the dead. Indeed — and this is one of the play's biggest flaws — Shirley doesn't even know she's dead; therefore we don't know why she has returned. It seems she discovers this during intermission, thus robbing us of her reaction.

When it comes time for her to go back, does she get a sign? A premonition? No. She merely states she must go.

Scene follows scene with utter disregard for dramatic interest. The story is underdeveloped and poorly thought out. Margulies's contention is that one must say goodbye and get on with one's life, and this is the reason for Shirley's return. But this is merely one week after her death! And if that is her intent, why does she keep talking about having to catch up on housework?

We are also asked to believe that Shirley, loving mother that she is, would have played a game with her son when he was younger of letting the waves carry her out to sea, calling "Goodbye!" then swimming back and telling him it was a joke. This isn't funny or cute, it's cruel. This bit provides the set-up for an ending that is as predictable as it is bathetic.

Call the play flight of fancy or black comedy, but in order for the audience to suspend its disbelief and accept the playwright's premise, there must be a certain logic to the craziness. Fantasy, too, requires order and development, both of which are lacking here. Humor is noticeably absent, with Margulies relying instead on stereotypical jibes to garner cheap laughs. He even has his characters spouting ethnic slurs ("the Puerto Rican," "schvaritze," "colored girl").

It's no wonder Stuart Damon's direction is as muddled as the play. The acting is self-indulgent, unmotivated and disconnected. At no time do we feel this is a family. Kenyon, the worst offender, merely play-acts at being an old man. Stern comes closest, in rare moments, to approximating a flesh-and-blood character. The only genuine element in the production is Don Gruber's wonderfully cut-



Photo by Ed Kruger

From left, Allan Miller, Lillian Adams, James Stern, Patti Deutsch and Sandy Kenyon (seated) in *What's Wrong With This Picture?*

tered and very lived-in apartment with an abundance of food on the table, mirrors draped in black and a *yahrzeit* candle burning. Too bad nothing else lives up to the set.

*What's Wrong With This Picture?* Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, (818) 780-2240. Plays Thursday-Saturday, 8 p.m., and Sunday 2 and 7 p.m., through May 15. □

For a positive look at the background of the play and a profile of the playwright, see accompanying story by Naomi Pfefferman.