

'Picture' a Comedy Inspired by Death

By JANICE ARKATOV

Best said, it's a little comedy about death," announced playwright Donald Margulies, whose "What's Wrong With This Picture?" opens this weekend at the Back Alley (where his "Found a Peanut" played in 1986).

"A Brooklyn housewife has died and all the relatives are sitting *shiva* [a Jewish mourning ritual]. But then the dead woman, Shirley Nussbaum, comes home.

"The father is glad but the son is ambivalent—he's more prepared to go on with his life—and his mother's return is slowing that down. There's a limit to how long suffering and grieving can go on."

Margulies added that the impetus for the play was a dream he had about his own mother, soon after her death: "She showed up at the door, caked with mud and said, 'Look, I don't want to talk about it. I just want to jump in the shower.' That was my starting point—it got me thinking how I'd react."

The play was originally staged in 1985 at the Manhattan Theatre Club, where Claudia Weill directed

Bob Dishy and Madeline Kahn.

"It played two weeks but was never reviewed," the New York-based Margulies explained. "This is the draft I wrote after that, at the Playwrights Conference at the Sundance Institute in 1985. Now what's happening—even with a less stellar cast—is that the *play* is emerging. And my job is to define some of the areas that aren't there. That's my value as a living playwright. You have the opportunity to state what your intent is, make changes, define moments—without people flailing around, trying to figure it out by themselves."

Stuart Damon directs.