

What's Wrong With This 'Picture'?

By SYLVIE DRAKE,
Times Theater Writer

The funny series of scenes playing at the Back Alley don't really know it, but they're in search of a play.

That's what's wrong with Donald Margulies' "What's Wrong With This Picture?" and it's a shame that it's such a fundamental part of the proceedings. Otherwise, this production—the acting, directing, design and dialogue—are first-rate and, if you're into Jewish family humor, frequently hilarious.

The trouble, of course, is that it's not quite enough. If Shirley (Phoebe Dorin) has choked to death on a bite of *moo shoo* pork and chooses to come home the minute the family's through sitting *shiva* (a Jewish mourning ritual), she's got to do better than say, "Look, I don't want to talk about it" and jump in the shower.

Funny line? You bet. Funny moment, too. The line and the moment can stay, but Margulies has got to offer us something more later to back them both up. Instead, he continues to create more funny moments and lines, never bother-

ing to fill in the really important details—such as why does Shirley come back? What makes it possible? And why isn't her distraught husband, Mort the dry cleaner (Allan Miller), or their less distraught son, Artie (James Stern), a little more curious about this sudden, unexplained reappearance?

Margulies has created a collection of stereotypical but precise and lively characters who interact beautifully, but he has curiously neglected the reason for giving them life in the first place. While we laugh hard at Mort's bullying mother Bella (Lillian Adams), his sweet, distracted father Sid (Sandy

Kenyon), his shrill, divorced and resentful sister Ceil (Patti Deutsch), we are patiently waiting for more plot to develop.

Not much does. Once it's firmly established that Shirley died in the middle of redecorating, we're allowed to assume anything we like. Did she really come back just to move furniture around?

We won't describe what little there is of a story, but you can be sure of two things: that it's what these actors and director Stuart Damon do with it that gives it stature and flair—and that Shirley offers no more persuasive reason

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THEODORA LITSIOS



Phoebe Dorin, Allan Miller, rear, and James Stern in "What's Wrong With This Picture?" at Back Alley in the Valley.

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for deciding to return to the dead than she gave for resurfacing among the living.

Margulies could be credited with seeing to it that Shirley makes a bit more of an effort to explain her second departure from this world. But it's a weak argument, and it is met with too little resistance by the hitherto crazed-with-grief Mort. It's clear the playwright hasn't finished thinking this through, though he's had a high old time fleshing it out.

Scene by scene, "What's Wrong With This Picture?" is a hoot. Miller is deliciously glum and neurotic. Stern as son Artie gives what may be the play's best performance, at moments reminiscent, in the best sense, of "Broadway Bound's" Eugene Jerome. Kenyon

has a lovely, light touch with the spacy, hen-pecked Sid, while Deutsch and Adams go straight to the unvarnished stereotype.

Don Gruber's snug apartment set complete with bathroom, Larry Oberman's lights, Bob Miller's costumes (especially that transparent red dress) and Jeffrey Markle's sound design all professionally augment the play. But they can't disguise the vacuum at its center.

Audience reaction alone should tell Margulies that he's onto some thing. What he needs to do now is pursue it with the thoroughness that it deserves.

Performances at 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys run Thursday through Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sunday at 2 and 7 p.m., until March 2. Tickets: \$13.50-\$17.50; (818) 780-2240.