

**WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?**

Donald Margulies' very Jewish *Blythe Spirit* is full of surprises that keep it from being swallowed up by the stereotypes he writes so beautifully. Opening at the end of a *shiva*, the play is the story of grief-stricken dry-cleaner Mort (superbly characterized by Allan Miller), whose wife, Shirley, died the week before after choking on a tough piece of *mu shu* pork, leaving a house full of extra furniture because she was in the middle of redecorating. His all-too-loving but increasingly less supportive family is telling him "enough already, it's time to live your life." Once Mort is left uncomfortably alone with his teenage son, Artie (an uneven but often stirring performance by James Stern), the play begins to take its odd turns, which happily remove it from the path of Neil Simon family farce. As he convinces Artie to wear his dead mother's sexiest dress, Mort seems to be losing his mind, while Artie does his best to humor him. Then the sudden arrival of a very much alive Shirley (gorgeously portrayed by Phoebe Dorin) explodes everything. The play continues to take every unexpected path as the three try to cope with the situation among themselves and with the rest of the family. Margulies skillfully tosses us back and forth between hilarity and sentimental pain, all the while never leaving gaps of logic in this most illogical situation. Stuart Damon's wise direction plays everything absolutely straight and real, letting Margulies' well-crafted script and the very good cast tell the story. Back Alley Theater, 15321 Burbank Blvd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; mat Sun., 2 p.m.; thru March 20. (818) 780-2240. (Tom Provenzano)

We also recommend the following Equity-waiver productions: *Aleph* at the Boyd Street Theater, *American Basswood* at the West Coast Theater Ensemble, *Amour* at the Saxon-Lee Gallery, *Coming Into Passion/Song for a Sensei* at the Fountain Theater, *Daddy's Dyin'* at Theatre/Theater, *Dance Talks!* at the Saxon-Lee Gallery, *Distant Fires* at the International City Theater, *Hidden in the Laughter* at Company of Angels, *Jitters* at the Gnu Theater, *Just Like the Pom Pom Girls* at the Groundling Theater, *Kvetch* at the Odyssey Theater, *Marat/Sade* at the Friends & Artists Theater, *Personality* at the Odyssey Theater, *Rumplestiltskin* at Theater Exchange, *The Shoemakers* at the Odyssey Theater, *Slaughterhouse on Tanner's Close* at Stages, *Time Flies When You're Alive* at the Tiffany Theater, *A Wet One From East Rutherford* (part of *Messages*) at the Burbage Theater, *What's Wrong With This Picture?* at the Back Alley Theater.