

# In 'What's Wrong,' there's a lot right

By Dina Adler

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When reading the advance copy describing Donald Margulies' new play, one wonders whether one is in for a Jewish version of "Blithe Spirit" or another brittle comedy in which the dear departed return to haunt, plague and otherwise distress the living. Fortunately, because of both Margulies' talent and his sensitivity, "What's Wrong With This Picture?" transcends this genre.

Indeed, it is refreshingly difficult to pigeonhole this play

juvenated Morty, the family members' responses range from shock to denial, when confronted with Shirley. In the process the audience, as well as the actors, is forced to deal with ambivalent feelings about life, death and family relationships.

There are some wonderful moments — and some superb lines. Artie describes his relationship to his father in this way: "It's as if I were a foreign exchange student and mom were the interpreter." Shirley's mother-in-law views her return with "What will I tell all the people who came to the

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which, while it deals with such eternal verities as death, love, family and the trivia of daily life, does so in a manner so oblique and original that it forces us to sit up and take notice.

The plot — such as it is — involves the sudden and absurd death of Shirley, a perky middle-aged woman and its impact on her family. The responses range from severe depression on the part of her husband Morty, to an aggressive "let's get on with life" posture on the part of her mother-in-law Bella (who seems not to have been that crazy about Shirley anyhow). Caught in the middle are Shirley's son Artie, a 17-year-old who is grappling with, among other things, his burgeoning sexuality; her father-in-law Sid, who (when he is not catatonic in front of the TV) seems to genuinely miss her; and her sister-in-law Ceil, who is too busy "dating" to be overwhelmed by the family situation.

Starting at the end of the "shiva" or seven-day mourning period, the play takes us through two days of recurring family trivia — with one notable exception to the commonplace — the return of Shirley, mud-streaked and leaf-covered, from the grave.

Taken from life "in the middle of redecorating," Shirley has returned "to re-arrange a few things" and to face the family's ambivalence at seeing her again. With the exception of the re-

funeral?" Sid, her father-in-law, confesses to Shirley that he has long felt an attraction to her and that once, while dancing with her he "held her too close" and she didn't object. Shirley's accepting response — "Why, Sid, you were making a pass at me" and his shy acknowledgement, create a very moving moment.

Indeed, the stirrings of sexuality recur continuously throughout the play. Upon Shirley's return, Morty's predictable response is "Let's go to bed"; Shirley confesses that part of her motivation for going to the Chinese restaurant where she met her death was to leave Artie and his girlfriend alone in the house so that they could let nature take its course, and, in a final denouement, Artie is forced to accept a painful truth about his mother's sexuality.

A Neil Simonesque scene that does *not* work well (and seems included only because it leads to a punchline) is the one in which, at his father's urging, Artie tries on one of his mother's dresses. It creates a jarring note and seems unworthy of Margulies — a try for an easy laugh in a context that is far more subtle.

On a recent evening, the playwright met with the audience briefly, after the performance to discuss his work and to answer questions. His "inspiration" for the play was, in fact, a dream he had right after his mother's death

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about 10 years ago, where she, like Shirley walked into the house, mud-caked and bedraggled and ran into the shower. Upon awakening, Margulies discovered his own ambivalencies in dealing with her "return from the dead" and, after

a former effort to explore them (which he described as "maudlin"), came up with this comedy.

The acting is uniformly good. Phoebe Doron, as Shirley, does a wonderful job, ably supported by the entire cast. It is especially nice to see Patti Deutsch with her unique voice and great comedic timing onstage once again as Ceil.

All in all, "What's Wrong With This Picture?" provides a unique and moving evening at the the-

ater.

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"What's Wrong With This Picture" runs 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays; 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. Sundays, through March 20. For more information, call 1-818-780-2240. Ticket prices are \$13.50 to \$17.50. The show officially opens Feb. 11. Previews, with reduced prices, run through Sunday.