

# Drama lifts spirits

Valley Star

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By MARIA HAMAGAKI  
Entertainment Editor

*What's Wrong With This Picture* stirs all the emotions expected of good theater. Donald Margulies' compelling drama speckled with hilarity holds the audience's attention to the end.

The opening scene reveals a Jewish family in New York on the last day of sitting shiva, a seven-day period of mourning. Mort's wife, Shirley, died from choking on a tough piece of moo shoo pork at the opening of a Chinese restaurant.

Allan Miller, as Mort, delves into his character and brilliantly conveys his pain as the bereaved husband. Morose over his loss, Mort is oblivious to his mother's complaint of his son's behavior at the funeral.

Miller boasts 150 TV shows, 15 movies for TV and the film *The Billionaire Boys Club*.

Mort's overbearing but loving mother, Bella, is aptly played by Lillian Adams. She has performed in TV shows and in the film *Private Benjamin*. She rightly communicates Bella's subtle resentment toward the deceased.

Sandy Kenyon as Sidney, Mort's father, sleeps while life drifts by. When awake, Sid confuses the past with the present. Kenyon, still in his prime, plays a delightful old man.

Kenyon comes from the early days of live television and has TV and theatrical performances to his credit.

Director Stuart Damon successfully guides the professional cast to vitalize three-dimensional characters. He orchestrates the scenes with attention to comedic timing. The humor is not forced but naturally born from the characters to create hilarity in pathos.

A good example is the riveting scene when Bella decides to help Mort stop his grieving. She takes Shirley's clothes and begins to put them into a shopping bag.

Mort reacts violently at his mother's intrusion. He grabs for the clothes, pitifully begging her to stop.

James Stern plays Artie, Mort's 17-year-old son. Artie combats his sorrow by being a wise guy. He sarcastically mimics the rabbi who gave an incorrect eulogy of his mother at the funeral.



Stuart Damon directs play at Alley.

Born in Toronto, Stern made his debut in the CBS film *Assassin*. As Artie, Stern demonstrates a charisma necessary on stage.

Patti Deutsch is well cast as Ceil, Mort's divorced sister. Deutsch properly reveals the character's subtle jealousy of Shirley's way with men.

Deutsch was a member of the comedy group *The Ace Trucking Company* and performed in many TV and theatrical productions.

Mort and Artie get the surprise of their lives when Shirley enters the apartment pale and covered in mud as if nothing has happened.

Detecting a shiva was held in her home, Shirley tries to guess who passed away. Artie shows her a polaroid picture of herself in a coffin taken by cousin Murray.

The cast executes the storyline's transition from reality to fantasy marvelously, making the implausibility work.

Phoebe Dorin as Shirley is captivating in her role of the young woman who died in her prime and doesn't want to let go of life.

Dorin has appeared in many TV shows and played on Broadway in *Happiness is a Rolls Royce* and *Young, Gifted and Black*.

The excellent set design of Don Gruber conveys the disarray of the family after a death. New furniture piled on top of the old underscores Shirley's character and her redecorating mania.

The elaborate set flaunts the Back Alley Theatre's high standard of excellence.

Founded in 1979, the Back Alley Theatre now ranks among the ten largest non-profit theaters in Los Angeles. Co-founders Laura Zucker and Allen Miller are the artistic directors.

They produce four plays a year and their policy is to do challenging, provocative or innovative work.

Being the innovators of the first group subscription plan in Los Angeles, the Back Alley has a membership of nearly 2,000 people. Seventy-five percent are Valley residents.

Its national profile is prestigious. Plays originated at the Back Alley, such as the *Fox* and *A Woman of Independent Means*, have been produced on and off Broadway.

*What's Wrong With This Picture* cost \$50,000 to produce, said Director Stuart Damon. Damon is best known for his role as Dr. Alan Quatermaine on the daytime soap *General Hospital*.

Though this is his directorial debut, Damon felt confident. He has performed on TV, theater and film for many years and has acquired an inner-knowingness needed to direct others.

When Miller played Quentin Quatermaine on *General Hospital* for six months, Damon expressed his desire to direct a play. "Then practically at the last week of the show," Damon said, "he brought in the play *What's Wrong with this Picture*."

Miller asked Damon if he wanted to direct it. "I jumped at the chance," he said. "I understand the play thoroughly. This wasn't foreign to me in any way."

Damon said that the character of Artie reminded him of himself in his youth and how he used to perform for his family.

Damon feels theater is thriving in Los Angeles. "I think the entire city is much alive with theater," he said. He added that it is wonderful people patronize their local theaters.

Damon commends the Back Alley Theatre for its contribution in providing a professional environment for actors, playwrights and directors.

*What's Wrong With This Picture* will play until March 20.

Performances are every Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. with two performances on Sunday. For information call (818) 780-2240.



Mort (Allan Miller) argues with mother (Lillian Adams) when she packs his deceased wife's clothes. Ceil (Patti Deutsch) Artie, (James Stern) and Sid (Sandy Kenyon) try to pacify the situation in hilarious play at Back Alley Theatre.

# Writer's dream creates impetus

by MARIA HAMAGAKI  
Entertainment Editor

A playwright's impetus for creation can come from an occurrence or an idea from his psyche. However, the premise for *What's Wrong With this Picture* now playing at the Back Alley Theatre was incited from a dream.

"A dream I had after losing my mother," playwright Donald Margulies said. "It was a dream about my mother coming back from the grave and essentially waking up where she left off."

*What's Wrong With This Picture* is a comedy. "But it also has a strong emotional impact," he said. "I like to think I write plays. If it's funny, great."

Margulies lives with his wife in New York City. He travels to the West Coast whenever one of his plays is produced.

He wasn't present for set design or casting but came for the last days of rehearsals to "realize the play as I envisioned it," he said.

Though satisfied with the production staff and casting, Margulies wanted to ensure the cast understood the state of affairs of the play.

*What's Wrong With This Picture* was developed at the Sundance Institute Playwrights' Conference where he was in residence. It was first produced in 1985 at the Manhattan Theater Club.

However, at that time, Margulies wasn't satisfied with the outcome. "It was a limited run," he said. "I didn't invite critics." The production didn't express the intentions of the emotional part of the play."

He said that not all the time does a playwright need to see his work on stage. Readings and rehearsals can be sufficient to assure its completion.

A young man in his 30's, Margulies has written a dozen plays. *Found a Peanut*, produced in 1984 by Joseph Papp had a successful run in New York City. Its West Coast premiere was in 1986 at the Back Alley Theatre.

The Jewish Repertory Theater in New York where he is writer-in-residence produced Margulies' plays off Broadway, including *Resting Place*.

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Though he said, "In that particular case, I did benefit. Seeing it on its feet, I realized it missed the mark."

Margulies graduated from State University of New York College of Purchase and earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in visual arts.

"I was a graphic designer and drawing major in college," he said. Disappointed with the art world and what it offered, he started to write plays while in college.

"Theater was a much stronger outlet for artistic expression," he said. "I enjoyed the interaction with other people."

Margulies never pursued an acting career. He said that he only performed for friends and in private readings but never on stage.

As a director Margulies has been involved in developmental work. "I've done my plays and other people's plays," he said.

His latest black comedy play, *The Model Apartment* will be a part of the new work series at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in March.

He wrote pilot scripts for Norman Lear's Embassy Television, Disney, and an ABC Afterschool Special called *Divorced Kids' Blues*.

Margulies has screenplays waiting to be produced but he emphasized, "Who hasn't."

Modestly he said that his goal is to be a great writer. "It feels wonderful to hear the words the way I wrote them," he said. "When it works, it really is exhilarating."