



VARIETY

Vol. 218 No. 52

48 Pages

Hollywood, California-90028, Friday, Feb. 19, 1988

What's Wrong With This Picture?

(Back Alley Theater; 93 seats; \$17.50 top)

From the opening line of dialog, Brooklyn playwright Donald Margulies grabs hold and doesn't let go during this progression of hard-core vignettes depicting the Jewish family experience on the east coast.

Plot, of which there is little, revolves around the ostensible return of a youthful, vivacious mother (Phoebe Dorin as Shirley) after choking to death on a piece of moo shoo pork.

Mysteriously reappearing after her family had just concluded shiva (Jewish mourning ritual), she becomes the answer to a husband's (Allan Miller) overwhelmingly self-absorbed grief, and a son's (James Stern) bout with denial.

Grandparents Sid (Sandy Kenyon) and Bella (Lillian Adams) are on hand, in one sense providing comedic relief, yet come back in second act to confront their own irresolution.

At issue is to whom this frenetically paced tragicomedy has been designed to appeal. The largely middle-aged and presumably Jewish audience cackled hysterically to the verities of life for an extended, old-style Jewish family: Margulies hits home more than once.

And, on that front, the play stands on its own without further ado.

But for those seeking deeper, more universal truths, they are cer-

tain to recognize familial pain and manipulation that transcends the Jewish experience. In fact, the Yiddish setting becomes more a means rather than an end as the play becomes more revealing than humorous.

Each family member is an adept practitioner of reverse guilt, a skill passed on from each generation represented here.

Though Margulies never makes it clear whether Shirley is merely an apparition, it is implicit she's not the Shirley her family knew prior to her demise — no, she is an ideal Shirley as seen through each mourning family member's eyes.

Margulies skillfully aligns dialog to expose the reality of their respective relationships before Shirley's death by giving every person a chance to resolve conflicts with her — one-on-one upon an abbreviated second-stay. What emerges is an underlying warmth and acceptance always there in the guise of rampant criticism.

Herein lies the oyster in this shell.

Paradoxically, the script is so laden with inside Yiddish expressions that Margulies tends to obfuscate the messages he tries to get across.

Cast is very professional: Kenyon is endearing as the grandfather; Adams practically carries show on her own; Miller has total command of his gut-wrenching part; and Dorin sails through the performance in

(Continued on Page 37, Column 1)

What's Wrong With This Picture?

(Continued from Page 34, Column 3)

a role that might have overwhelmed an average talent.

Patti Deutsch as malcontent sister Ceil does the job, but director Stuart Damon (of "General Hospital" fame) has a tendency to limit her stage movement, relegating her to behind closed shutters, only opening them to deliver a line (shades of "Laugh-In," in which Deutsch participated during its last season).

Otherwise, Damon complements Margulies rapid-fire dialog by extracting animated banter from his

thesps, while not allowing them to hide behind a dialect.

Weak link is Stern: his gesticulations are stiff and emotions forced. Nonetheless, time is on his side and the foundation is there.

Set designer Don Gruber nicely captures the order of things inside a Brooklyn apartment, and Bob Miller designs garb, realistically.

Play, a definite go-see, closes March 20.

Har2.