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KIN DO: From left, Valda Setterfield, David Gordon and Ain Gordon tend to "The Family Business" at the New York Theater Workshop.

'Family' gets the business

A FAMILY off-stage playing a family on-stage that has certain distinct similarities to the family off-stage — it seems dangerously like a Hall of Mirrors, with a few distortions put in for laughs.

And that may well be just what it is — strange mirrors cunningly held up to simple nature. Unquestionably — whether truth be fiction or fiction truth — Ain and David Gordon's play "A Family Business," which opened last night at the New York Theater Workshop, is an engrossing theater piece.

It's both funny and moving, but most of all it holds the attention with the vise-like grip of an expert cliffhanger serial — The Perils of Phil and Paul.

It is absolutely true that the only thing that matters in art is truth. If you can tell the truth about

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yourself — unvarnished, warts and all — you will definitely create a work of art. Of course, hardly any of us can — autobiography becomes fiction and fiction becomes autobiography.

People like to be liked, or at least thought interestingly remarkable, and spin their stories accordingly. "The Family Business" is a play where the spin-doctoring seems happily minimal.

It is a comedy about old age and dying — and living with both. Paul and his son Phil are plumbers — Paul is away on business, and Phil and the firm's secretary and general dog-sbody, Mrs. Wonder are left in charge.

Paul's aged Aunt Annie, has a fall, cuts her head open and has to be taken to the hospital. The gist of the play is Annie, her death, the way father and son cope with it and themselves, and their relationship with the capable, but somewhat alienated Mrs. Wonder.



Clive Barnes

technique at all. Sets and props are sparse and vestigial. Ain Gordon plays both father and son (with a fake nose and mustache to identify between them), David Gordon, with a real mustache and trousers poking out from under his skirts, plays the aunt, while Valda Setterfield (in what is known as real life, the wife of David and the mother of Ain) plays Mrs. Wonder.

The actors in this fluid but intentionally rickety play, move in and out of character, even in and out of styles, with a Brechtian freedom, full of attitude and comment. Yet the dialogue, like the acting, remains for the most part stolidly realistic.

David Gordon is extraordinary as the troublesome and feisty dying yenta — first you realize he's a man, and then totally forget it as he throws himself into the role of a Jewish matriarch with no family to matriarch it over.

Ain Gordon is almost as good as Paul and Phil — a generational seesaw carried out with wit and perception. Setterfield, seemingly beyond the fray, brings a certain English-style disdain to the proceedings, but also pulls the play together, even acting as a kind of alienated observer-cum-audience.

"The Family Business" is not your ordinary play — although what it does is ordinary enough in the way it does it. But the Gordons aim at a bottom-of-the-barrel honesty, which makes this family saga something to recognize as well as something to laugh at.

New York Theater Workshop.