

OFF BROADWAY



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## THE FAMILY BUSINESS

**NEW YORK** A New York Theater Workshop and Pick Up Performance Co. presentation of a play in two acts, written, directed and choreographed by Ain Gordon and David Gordon. Lighting, Stan Pressner; sound, David Meschter; additional set and costume pieces, Anita Stewart; production manager, Susan R. White; production stage manager, Ed Fitzgerald. NYTW artistic director, James C. Nicola; managing director, Nancy Kassak Diekmann. Opened April 3, 1995, at the New York Theater Workshop. Reviewed April 3; 150 seats; \$25 top. Running time: 2 HOURS.

Cast: Valda Setterfield (Mrs. Wonder), Ain Gordon (Paul, Phil, Sol), David Gordon (Annie Kinsman).

**W**ith a few movable partitions, a couple of sticks of office furniture and a flare that all but proves talent is genetic, the creators of "The Family Business" provide a near-empty Off Off Broadway stage with more theatrical flash than any two big-budget extravaganzas drawing lines uptown. Written and directed by father-son team David and Ain Gordon, and starring the two along with Valda Setterfield (David's wife, Ain's mother), this domestic comedy scores one improbable delight after another, not the least of which is making the phrase "domestic comedy" seem an all-too-inadequate description.

The family business of the Gordon-Setterfields is, of course, the stage, with all three members having extensive credits in theater and, especially, dance. Through a sort of imaginative alchemy, the two Gordons have transformed an actual incident in their lives — the emotional turmoil wrought by the decline and death of a beloved elderly aunt — into as moving and funny a play as is likely to be found on any stage in the city. Stripping the story to its physical essentials, the Gordons have fashioned a small story with big resonance.

In synopsis, "The Family Business" might sound like any number of sitcoms or boulevard comedies of the kvetching-Jewish-family variety. The business of the title is a father-son plumbing operation, the son being Paul, a would-be playwright whose frustration is magnified when, in his father's two-month absence from the country, he becomes the de facto caretaker of the ailing Auntie Annie. To say the difficult, 78-year-old Annie is demanding is an understatement: In the type of theatrical bravado displayed throughout the play, Paul occasionally loses body parts as his life is literally being stolen, bit by bit, by the frightened, cantankerous old woman he truly loves.

Further turning what could be TV-movie fodder on its head, Annie is played by David Gordon, a burly, gruff, mustachioed actor whose sole concession to gender-play is a flowery housedress. How he convinces audiences of his Annie's terror, abrasiveness and, against all odds, dignity is one of the production's wonders — and an extremely humorous one at that.

And David Gordon's performance is matched every bit of the way, if not more so, by those of his son and wife. Ain Gordon plays both father and son of the plumbing team, changing roles with a pair of eyeglasses and fake nose, a stoop in posture and an utterly convincing shift in tone from youthful impatience to middle-aged resignation. The younger Gordon also makes a

charming host, addressing the audience as he "writes" the play being performed. Setterfield, as the plumbers' multitasking assistant, Mrs. Wonder, is just as engaging, helping the "writer" of the play by tackling all the supporting roles and comically pointing out when dialogue goes askew.

The inventiveness of the production is typified in the final scene, when the recently deceased Auntie Annie imparts some wisdom to her grand-nephew. Speaking from the top of a ladder at the back of the stage, Auntie Annie asks the young plumber what he's writing. It's the play we've just seen, of course, and when the old woman barks, "Who would want to see a thing like this?" the audience has the answer.

—Greg Evans