

## Theater Review

BY L. C. COLE

### Aunt Misbehavin'

#### THE FAMILY BUSINESS

by Ain Gordon and David Gordon  
New York Theater Workshop

The frustrations of dealing with one's relatives has to be one of the oldest stories going. In a way, the myth of the Trojan War is a lengthy arraignment of difficult relatives; ditto tales ranging from the first half of the Bible to *Cinderella* to *Portnoy's Complaint*. Of course the topic of the (as we now call it) "dysfunctional family" remains eternally popular because, for anyone not born an orphan, the thought of becoming one is a common, and not always infrequent, fantasy. Families are at once the foundations upon which we build our future lives, and the millstones around our necks that seem determined to keep us from having one. To flee or not to flee, that is the question.

Interestingly enough, it is a family of artists that take up the question in *The Family Business*, now at the New York Theater Workshop. Co-authors, directors, and choreographers David and Ain Gordon are real-life father and son; they perform the comedy with their wife/mother Valda Setterfield. To make a rough capsulation of their careers, the father is a choreographer, the mother a dancer, and the son a playwright, though forays into other performing arts are often made by all of them.

The play is based on an incident that befell the Gordons: taking care of a cantankerous but much loved aunt who had become incapacitated for some months. Out of this has come the story of two New York City plumbers trying to take care of the last of their female relatives, a cantankerous but much loved old aunt who has fallen at home and will soon die. Ain Gordon plays both plumbers, Phil and Paul,

who, as father and son, are the second and third generations in a family of immigrant Jews; Setterfield is the family's amazingly capable company secretary, Mrs. Wonder; and, wearing nothing more transforming than a few

barrettes and an old housedress, moustachioed David Gordon marvelously transforms himself into the men's ailing Auntie Annie. Having had no children of her own, the aunt has taken motherly possession of the lives of her dead sister's son and grandson—much to their loyal distress.

As it turns out, neither middle-aged Phil nor thirtyish Paul ever wanted to be a plumber. Both have been dutiful in pursuing the "family business," but at a price. Phil, at play's start, has finally snapped and is missing; he calls in to the office from time to time during the first act, but it is clear he isn't in a hurry to come back home. Paul is left to cope with Auntie Annie's unexpected fall and tend to her in the hospital. She's cranky, demanding, frightened. She doesn't trust her doc-

Valda Setterfield  
and David Gordon in  
*The Family Business*.

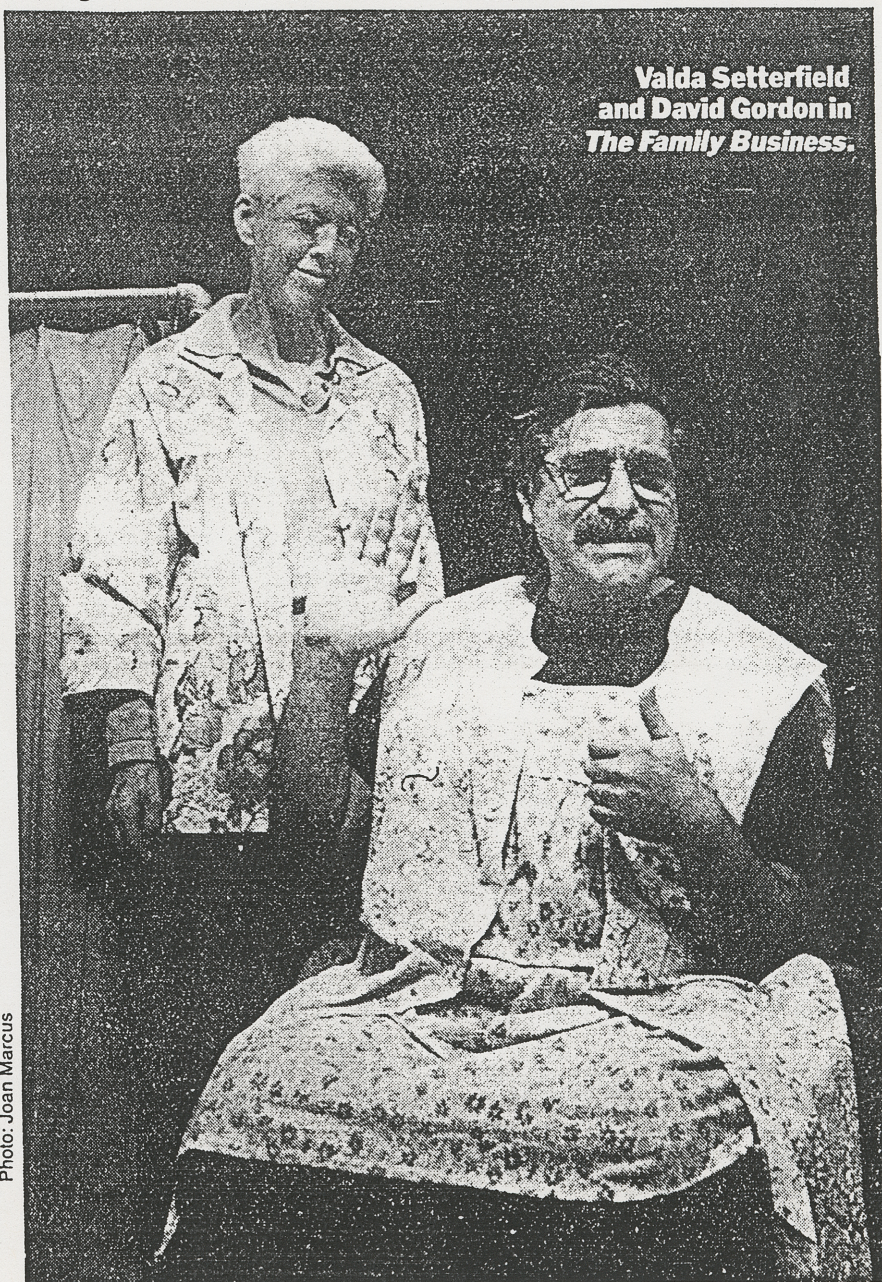


Photo: Joan Marcus



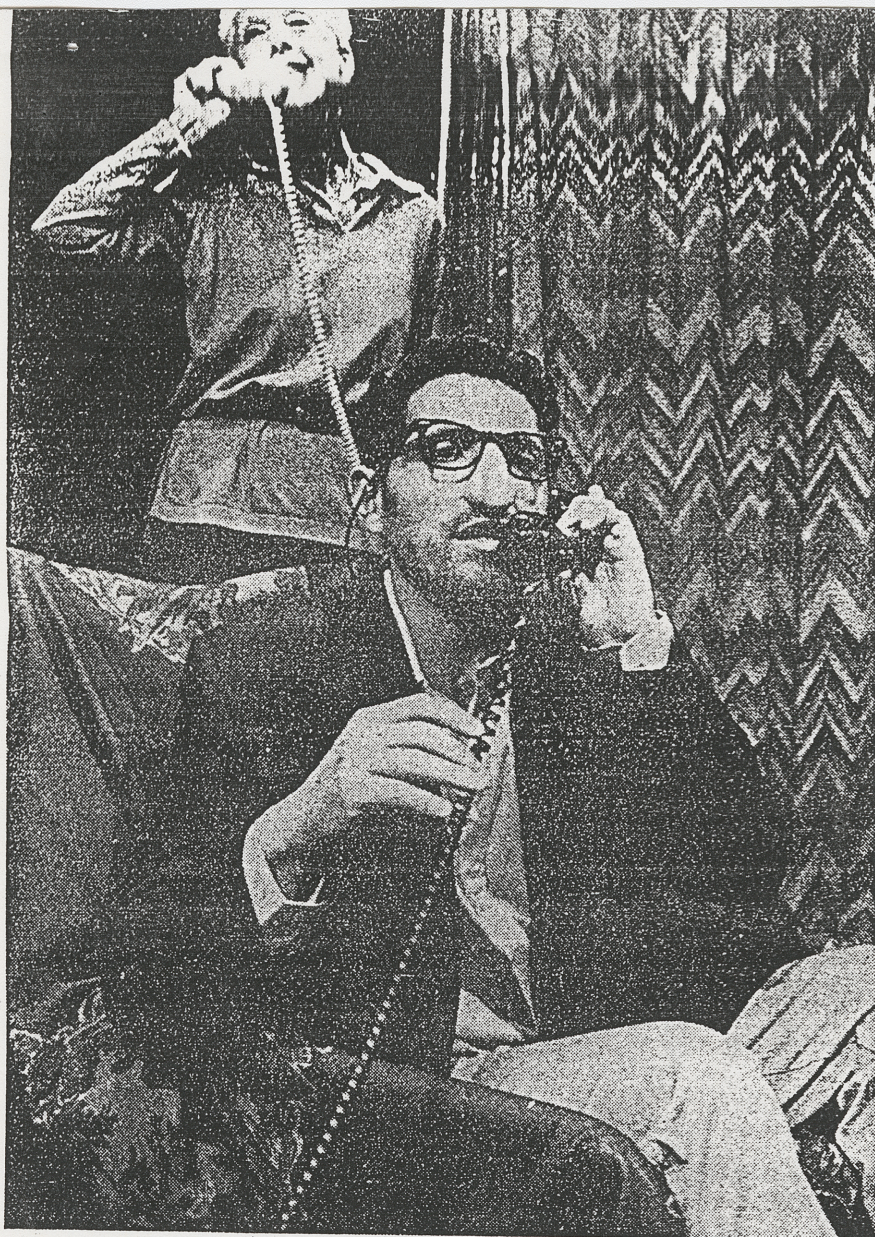


Photo: Joan Business

**Ain Gordon (foreground) and Valda Setterfield share a local call in *The Family Business* at New York Theater Workshop.**

tor (named Devour) or her nurse (named Indifferent). Paul tries to keep her placated and comfortable, but the old woman's combined neediness and affection are literally cutting bits of him away—a fingertip here, an ear lobe there, etc. By the end of the first act, he is spotted with sticking plaster and desperate to get away from her.

Similar flights of imagination are applied to elements of stagecraft and scenery as we await the outcome of the men's efforts to break away from their aunt's control without breaking her heart. Multi-colored shower curtains are hung on wheeled racks and swung into place by the actors whenever they want to create the walls or entrances to the office, a hospital

room, Auntie Annie's kitchen. Brown shower curtains placed behind a character indicate a door; yellow curtains placed around a character indicate his riding in a taxi cab. Scene changes are all graceful and fun. Ain Gordon plays Paul using his own clean-shaven, youthful self, and dons a false nose and mustache when he plays the late-returning Phil in the second act. Setterfield puts on a hat and/or changes her voice to portray a variety of minor roles (like the insouciant nurse or a hard-of-hearing deli attendant), and occasionally stops the action to comment on the progress of the play and what it might need for improvement. Paul, you see, is a would-be playwright who is writing

the piece as it is being performed.

As it transpires, few people in this family have ever done what they wanted to do or married whom they wanted to marry. Sacrifices have been made for the sake of financial security, represented by the passed-along plumbing business that has kept them all housed, clothed and fed through the many years. Even at death's door (actually, even after death, since in the end she also comes back from the grave to have one last word with Paul), Auntie Annie cannot fathom the men's giving it up and taking off on other careers. Risk-taking, to her and her generation, was not a solution to unhappiness. Indeed, one didn't look for a solution as long as one had a family.

And so, nagging and kvetching and pleading, she keeps Phil and Paul in her thrall, tied to the plumbing store and quietly miserable. But they love her too much, and each other and Mrs. Wonder, to ever pack up and leave for good.

In sum, the play's creators do not come up with anything new regarding how to handle the demands and constrictions of even our best-intentioned relatives: To flee or not to flee remains the question. Instead, they present the issue with charm and wit and invention, and almost, but not quite, manage to overcome our awareness that the dramatics of the situation are a bit slim, the insights pretty conventional. Woody Allen wouldn't have unearthed any more wisdom, but he would have turned the situation into an engrossing farce, with all the characters behaving as outrageously as Auntie Annie does. Eugene O'Neill would have turned it into a great, grinding tragedy. The Gordons soft-pedal the men's feelings, dampen their reactions to the most astounding provocations, so that love and patience—not anger, pity, or zinging one-liners—become the keynotes of an evening dominated, and largely justified, by David Gordon's splendid performance. A shorter script (the play's a very full two acts) would have fit the treatment better. But *The Family Business* succeeds as a charming, sometimes hilarious entertainment, with many delightful stylistic variations on an old theme. ■