

Clan Destined

'Family Business' Teases Heavy Themes With Heartening Wit

by Jane Wollman Rusoff

Annie Kinsman is a 76-year-old widow living alone—diabetic, arthritic, bellyaching—Oy, you shouldn't know from it! Now she's fallen in her tiny apartment and she can't get up. By the time her grandnephew Paul Smith comes to the rescue, Annie's head is drenched in blood. He goes for a towel to wipe it off, but she stops him: Don't use a towel! It'll get ruined! Use paper napkins!

Most everyone has locked horns with someone like grous-

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ing, demanding Aunt Annie and that's why *The Family Business*, at the Mark Taper Forum, through December 24, hits home. Tragedy gets an hilarious spin with an ensemble cast of just three. The title also refers to the play's creators and actors, who are family as well: Ain Gordon and David Gordon, the writers-directors-choreographers, are son and father. Valda Setterfield is David's wife and Ain's mother.

The story pivots on Annie's worsening health and Paul's frustration at being cornered into shouldering responsibility for her care. The Smiths have a family plumbing business that goes back three generations; but Paul, 30, would rather write plays than fish hair balls out of toilet tanks.

This work explores the conflicts of sacrificing one's loftiest aims for the plight that circumstance often dictates. "I never learned to be the boss of my own life," laments Paul's father Phil.

Trash Bags and Plastic

The Family Business owes much of its effectiveness to an unusual structure that not only has the actors breaking out of character to talk to the audience but narrating stage directions and arguing over script construction. On one level, there are the Characters Smith and their angst; on a second, the Family Gordon commenting on the work as they perform it.

The barebones scenery is inventive: mostly metal industrial racks hung with shower-curtain plastics the actors roll around in full view. At one point, a big, loaded garbage bag is flung downstage. It represents "The [New York] Street."

Mustachioed David Gordon plays Auntie Annie ("The TV Guide is her Bible") with remarkable believability, despite affecting nothing female except for three colored hair clips and a pink housecoat worn over his shirt and trousers. Scared, waiting to die, Annie has lost her independence but not her ill temper. Indeed, she gives a succession of nurse's aides grief and aggravation, upbraiding them about seltzer bottles and Roach Motels.

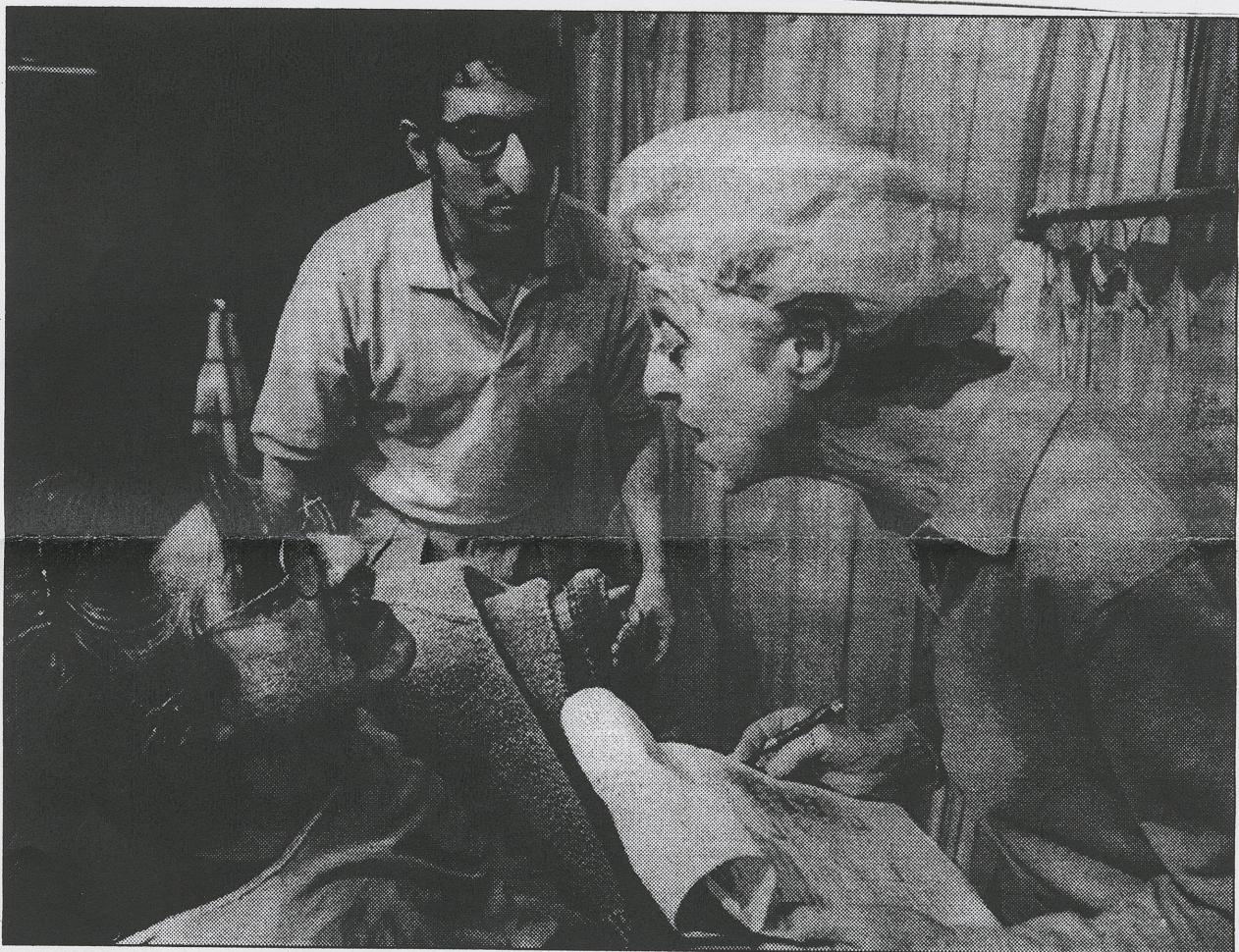
The British Setterfield puts in a top-notch performance as office manager Mrs. Wonder and a handful of other parts as well. Her deadpan comedy is priceless. She's also a hoot racing around the stage as a wailing ambulance.

Ain Gordon is outstanding playing three roles: Paul, his father Phil and his father Sol. Annie's demands are eating Paul alive—his body parts are "disappearing." And that, you know, doesn't sit too well with his boyfriend. From the third generation of Jewish immigrants, Paul informs: "I shop at Bergdorf's instead of the Kosher butcher." As Phil, Gordon wears a big nose and glasses, gets stoop-shouldered and pines for the songwriting career he never pursued.

There is a wonderfully funny scene in which Paul goes through his Aunt's mail, routinely consisting of nothing more than billets-doux from Blue Cross, Blue Shield and Medicare. Another scene—about bureaucracy and bedpans—in a hospital emergency room, is nimbly choreographed and right-on.

Ain Gordon, who began writing the play based on his own real-life experience, first performed it as a poetry reading. Although the themes tackled—mortality, self-fulfillment, identity—are profound, they're served up with heartening wit and humor. There's not a clunky moment in this gem.

The Family Business plays the Taper through December 24. To purchase tickets call (213) 365-3500.



Home Run: Left to right, David Gordon, Ain Gordon and Valda Setterfield—a family in real life—assume multiple parts to satirize family conflicts.

photo by Andrew Lichtenstein