

'Family Business' is one on stage

REVIEW: An often-clever script isn't well served by a self-conscious, performance-arty execution.

By **PAUL HODGINS**
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Loving is yelling in my family," says Phil, a world-weary middle-age plumber, sealing the aphorism with a "why me?" shrug. In "The Family Business" at the Mark Taper Forum, shrugs and yells are the lingua franca between Annie, a crusty, dying old woman, and her nephew Phil and his son Paul, who as her only relatives feel they must take care of her.

Written by David Gordon and his son Ain, who with David's wife, Valda Setterfield, play its characters, "The Family Business" is based on their experiences with David's real-life aunt as she fell ill and died.

In his father's absence, Ain found himself saddled with sole

'The Family Business'

- **Where:** Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles
- **Continues:** Through Dec. 24. 8 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturday; 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sunday
- **How much:** \$28-\$35.50
- **Ticket availability:** Good
- **Call:** (714) 740-2000
- **Length:** 2 hours
- **Suitability:** Not suitable for children

responsibility as caregiver for a lonely, gravely ill woman. It was a frustrating, confusing experience for Ain, giving him a big dose of things most of us prefer not to think about — the pain of old age and failing health, fear of losing control over one's own life.

To their credit, the co-authors have turned what could have been a trite family drama into something deeper, and they have found humanity and humor in a seemingly inhuman, humorless situation. And their script is full of wonderful asides — a bitingly funny soliloquy about how we waste our lives, a small but telling scene of noncommunication



'FAMILY BUSINESS': Ain Gordon, left, and father David Gordon star together in the play they co-wrote.

between a bagel vendor and his customer (both performed with charming understatement by Setterfield).

At its deepest level, "The Family Business" is about the struggle to communicate meaningfully with others and, ultimately, with oneself. Phil finally admits he hates his job and wants to be a songwriter; Paul is a frustrated playwright, and the play we're seeing is his first effort.

Therein lies "Family's" weakness: its overly self-conscious execution. The script, while clever,

is essentially conventional. Yet it is presented in a slyly ironic, performance-arty context that seems inappropriate for such a simple, self-evident script — props are junkyard-simple, David Gordon plays Annie without trying to hide his gender, sound effects are provided by the actors themselves, and characters constantly break the fourth wall and let us know they're in a play. It's like watching "Saturday Night Live's" Dieter and his Sprockets colleagues do Neil Simon; there's a false veneer of avant-garde sophistication that

isn't merited by the material.

Perhaps it comes with the territory. David Gordon and Setterfield made their reputations in the no-holds-barred world of '60s postmodern dance, and the play's fluid, busy blocking resembles choreography at times.

But the Gordons' dance origins can be a bane. David Gordon's performance is often monochromatic, as is Ain's (he plays Phil and Paul, both crucial roles) and pacing is ineptly handled. In the end, "The Family Business" is a puzzle. Like Phil, it can't decide what it wants to be.