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In "Punch & Judy Get Divorced" (from left): Ben Evett, Lola Pashalinski, Gail Grate.

## Opening Wednesday: Theater

# Turning a puppet show into a marital musical

By Douglas J. Keating  
INQUIRER THEATER CRITIC

**D**avid and Ain Gordon don't think much of acting together. But the father and son have found that writing as a team works out just fine.

The Gordons are the creators of *Punch & Judy Get Divorced*, the musical the American Music Theater Festival will open Wednesday at Plays and Players Theatre. Earlier they wrote *The Family Business*, a play that father, son and Valda Fetterfield, David's wife and Ain's mother, performed in Los Angeles.

"We'll never do it again," David Gordon said, as Ain nodded in agreement. "We all liked each other. The problems were not between us. They

were about being actors for eight shows a week. I don't know how any family does that."

The idea for *The Family Business* came from Ain, who at 33 has had eight plays produced. "Since he was working on family-related material, he showed me what he was doing, and I asked if he thought we could work on this together. We had a good time," said David, who is 60.

*Punch & Judy*, on the other hand, was an idea of David's that had two previous incarnations. His first treatment of the idea of connecting the traditional Punch and Judy puppet shows to contemporary life was done as a presentation for a Los Angeles television station. He then turned

See **PUNCH** on G12



# A father-and-son team transform puppet show into modern musical

**PUNCH** from G1  
the piece into a dance, which his wife and Mikhail Baryshnikov danced with Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Company. When the American Music Theater Festival and the American Repertory Theatre commissioned David Gordon to turn *Punch & Judy* into a musical, he invited Ain to collaborate.

"I think what I do and what he does on his own have something in common — which is perhaps not unusual since we've known each other a long time," David said. "We both see something absurd and comical in the darkest moment, and something quite dark in what seems like the sunniest time."

"It's like laughing at someone slipping on a banana peel: It's an uneasy laugh, a laugh at disaster or a possible disaster."

The primary theme of *Punch & Judy Get Divorced* is miscommunication between the sexes. That eternal condition, David said, was as much a part of Punch and Judy shows, which became popular in England 200 years ago and are still performed there, as it is a part of contemporary culture. "In America today, the books that sell very well are called things like *I Don't Understand You* and *Men and Women and Their Separate Languages*," Gordon said. "These books are about Punch and Judy for the '90s. These characters are timeless."

The first act shows a couple, Punch and Judy, preparing to attend a Punch and Judy show. They

get into a quarrel over what she should wear. "They are in a contemporary argument on their way to see a show in which the theatrical Punch and Judy are going to have an argument about how they always argue in the same way," Gordon explained.

The Punch and Judy show itself is not performed by puppets but by actors. A farce that mixes elements of vaudeville and cartoon antics (the characteristic Looney Tunes music

is an element of the score), this show-within-the-show is played by traditional Punch and Judy characters — Punch, Judy, Baby, the family dogs and the Devil.

"The Devil manipulates both Punches and Judys into a divorce," Gordon said. "At the end of Act One, every-

one gets divorced."

With music by Edward Barnes and lyrics by Arnold Weinstein, the first act is told pretty much through song. The second act, which the Gordons said is darker, has more dialogue. It takes place 36 years later and has all female characters, although male actors take the parts of some of the women. Punch has tried to reconcile, but Judy has rebuffed him. The all-woman household now consists of Judy, her sister, her mother, Baby, who is now 40, and her 20-year-old twin daughters.

David Gordon also directs and choreographs the show, just as he did *Shlemiel the First*, the farcical musical that introduced his work to American Music Theater Festival

audiences in 1994. That show — like *Punch & Judy*, a co-production of AMTF and the American Repertory Theatre — is based on a Sholom Aleichem story about a simpleton living in an Eastern European Jewish village. He sets out on a journey, gets turned around and, returning to his home village, thinks it must be another town with the same name and his wife, another woman named Mrs. Shlemiel.

Comparing that show with *Punch & Judy*, Gordon said, "In *Shlemiel* there is a strong thread about the unhappy relationship between Shlemiel and Mrs. Shlemiel and how miserable they are, to and with each other."

Then when Shlemiel thinks he's in another place and his wife is not really his wife, he continued, "They fall back in love. They commit what they think is the sin of adultery, and they expect to be punished for having fallen in love with each other. There is something dark and preposterously funny about that to me."

In *Punch & Judy*, he said, "That's what's going on all the time. There's battle, there's sadness — and there's wit."

## If You Go

■ *Punch & Judy Get Divorced* previews today and Tuesday and opens Wednesday at Plays and Players Theatre, 1714 Delancey Place. The American Music Theater Festival production runs Wednesdays through Sundays through May 26. Tickets: \$15 to \$25. (Previews are \$6 to \$10.) Information: 215-893-1145.