



ANDREW LICHTENSTEIN

The Family Business: Dad plays great-aunt, son plays dad, mom plays everybody else.

Son Spots

By Michael Feingold

The Family Business

By Ain Gordon and David Gordon
Dance Theater Workshop
219 West 19th Street
924-0077

Unfinished Stories

By Sybille Pearson
New York Theater Workshop
79 East 4th Street
505-1892

American plays, Europeans sometimes complain, are always about the father. Well, one might respond, so are *Hamlet* and *King Lear*; as with everything in art, the decisive factor is how you treat it. An obsession with fathers probably has some deep psychological justification in our culture, where the gap between generations has often seemed more like a chasm of interplanetary breadth. History changed America more rapidly than any other country, and without the interference, available elsewhere, of centuries-old cultural patterns to fall back on. The next generation, which has more direct contact with video monitors than with its parents, will probably write about traumas induced by E-mail and MTV instead, but for now father-son relations are still a prime topic.

The fathers under investigation in both *Unfinished Stories* and *The Family Business* are the sons of Jewish immigrants; in Sybille Pearson's play the grandfather is alive onstage, a retired doctor and 1930s refugee from Berlin, trailing clouds of European culture in its prewar glory into the Upper West Side apartment where he lives, not with his son or grandson, but with the son's ex-wife (E. Katherine Kerr), who is the play's fulcrum and at the same time its most shadowy figure. Not that the playwright hasn't defined her character—a librarian, an aging

'60s radical, a tireless collector of causes—but that the density of the men's tangled feelings for each other hardly leaves her room to breathe onstage; she has to throw a tantrum to get a word in.

Grandpa (Joseph Wiseman), who has the Weimar-era intellectual's typical mix of charm and overbearing absolutism, knows just which buttons to press to get her waiting on him hand and foot. Errant son (Christopher Collet), a dropout who's been driving a cab nights, treats her as a convenience while he's busy bonding with his grandfather. Only poor dad (Laurence Luckinbill), long divorced and newly married to a much younger woman, never gets off on the right foot with her.

But then, he can't do it with his father or his son, either; born in Paris during the old man's traumatic transit from Berlin to New York, he's spiritually a man without a country, an aging musical-comedy ham who spouts Shakespeare at any provocation and never makes a convincing gesture in lieu of a grand one. It says something about the playwright's problem with this character that an old pro like Luckinbill, alone of an otherwise strong cast, can't seem to get a handle on the role: What ought to be the focal figure seems most of the time to be either irrelevant or incomprehensible, the dad as negative presence, or as a repository for conflicting emotions.

Partly due to Pearson's uncertain take on this figure—he also seems like a person from another profession, onto whom a vague notion of "actor" has been grafted—her play lives up to its title: Its stories are unfinished not only by death and emotional estrangement, but by her inability to sort them out. Though thick with feeling, the action is jerky and muddled; the people pop in and out of each other's lives nervously, like

actors unsure of their blocking. Peter Wexler's oddly curved set, which suggests Southern California sprawl instead of an old West Side apartment, looks like an unconscious comment on the indecisive script: You're not sure who's overhearing which conversation or where they're barging in from.

When she sees past her feelings, Pearson can write beautifully: The two best scenes—grandfather dictating his final instructions to grandson, and his last tentative reconciliation with his son—are powerful reminders of what these stories might have been if she had let herself finish them. Otherwise her title stands as an apologia rather than a comment. Wiseman and Collet, who've played similar roles often enough to slip these on as easily as old coats, wear them smartly, and Kerr, a scrapper like her character, fights hard for some deserved attention. The irony is that the muddle probably entered the script while Pearson was trying to dress up what she felt to be overfamiliar material; focusing on the aspects most important to her would have been more to the point. Gordon Davidson's bland, soft-edged staging gives no clue to what they might have been.

If it weren't so much fun in itself, *The Family Business* would probably seem, from its title onward, to have been put up wholly as a rebuke to plays like *Unfinished Stories*. Unlike Pearson, the Gordons, *père et fils*, are all business when it comes to confronting the pain at the core of their material, and consequently never get lost in it. The result can be enjoyed as pure play, followed as a conventional family saga, or "read" as either a parable of the artists' problems or an exercise in collaborative autobiography. The overall feeling it projects, as we watch father and son (with an assist from mother) sorting out their forebears' anguished past, is like a

dual renewal of hope: Families can nurture love and kinship by facing their problems honestly together; plays can be beautiful, magical, joyous art objects instead of frazzled exercises in therapy.

The business of the title is both the emotional kind that gives everybody grief and a family plumbing firm, Phil & Son, Inc. The only plumbing that gets done, however, is of emotional depths. Phil, who inherited the firm from his father, Sol, always wanted to be a songwriter instead, and spends increasingly long periods away from the office. His son, Paul, who wants to be a writer, reluctantly stays there but refuses to take phone calls (they're all for his father anyway). The work that keeps the firm afloat comes from Phil's longtime employee and unrequited lover, Mrs. Wonder.

When not dodging the phone, Paul's chief occupation is taking care of his ancient invalid great-aunt, Annie Kinsman, who represents every kind of burden and

nightmare an elderly relative can provide, from an eternally clogged toilet to a nonstop monologue that sprays guilt and blame in all directions. The evolution of Paul and Phil from unhappy, hemmed-in drudges to working artists is accompanied by Aunt Annie's slow, furiously reluctant trip from infirmity to death, and beyond into familial memory (like the grandmother's death in Gordon père's *The Mysteries and What's So Funny?* two years ago).

The material sounds grim, but the Gordon family solution is to tackle it unabashedly as a romp, while never flinching from the hurt or the ugliness. Paul, Phil, and Sol are all played by son Ain

Theater

Gordon, Mrs. Wonder by his mother, Valda Setterfield, and Aunt Annie by his father, mustache and all. The writing is not flip, but is compressed to a top-speed essence, using terse, knowing, vaudeville-like repetitions to trace a deadpan map across the family's jagged emotional topography. (One heartrending scene, roughly five minutes long, is titled "Phil's Entire Life.")

The love, the grief, the resentment, the misunderstanding, the anger, the need, and the desperation of father and son are all played out through the wryly formalized, semiabstract slapstick, along with the social, economic, and cultural history that produced them. And the whole thing is done with the barest materials on an open stage: only a ladder, a cyclorama, and a few wheeled garment racks hung with varicolored polyester shower curtains. It's a tribute not only to the emotive power of theater but to the tremendous value wise artists can get out of one telling detail. Naturally, given the muddled state of our culture, *The Family Business* is booked to play only through March 6, and may then disappear forever if some bright person with a theater at his or her disposal doesn't rescue it. Meantime, I'd advise you to get there early, and bring a parent, or even two. ■

Different Drummers

By Ross Wetzsteon

Stomp

Orpheum Theatre
126 Second Avenue
477-2477

Thirty years ago this month, "four lads from England"—as all the 11 o'clock news shows called them in memorializing the event—brought a new sound to this country and music hasn't been the same since. This month, a new group from England—six men and two women called the Yes/No People—brought another new sound across the ocean, and while they're unlikely to so dramatically revolutionize our musical sensibilities, noise will never seem the same.

Despairing of describing *Stomp* in a press release, the producers sent a seven-minute videotape to members of the media instead, and if the information superhighway were fully functioning, this would be the place for you to boot up my review and get a seven-minute sample for yourself. But since words still have to do, recall the old summer camp routine of tapping out tunes on a row of glasses filled with water and expand it to include any object you can imagine. Brooms, buckets, trash cans, plates, bowls, matchboxes, dustpans, hammers, oil drums, newspapers, cigarette lighters, even eyeglasses—if you can tap it, bang it, slap it, knock it, or just drum your fingers on it,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 96