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THEATER REVIEW



Photo by Joan Marcus

Valda Setterfield, David Gordon and Ain Gordon, from left to right, in 'The Family Business'

A Memorable Family in Turmoil

THE FAMILY BUSINESS. A new play written, directed and choreographed by Ain Gordon and David Gordon. Lighting designer, Stan Pressner. Sound designer, David Meschter. With Valda Setterfield, Ain Gordon, David Gordon. At the New York Theater Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. Manhattan, through April 16. Seen at Friday evening's preview.

By Jan Stuart
STAFF WRITER

ANYONE WHO has never suffered an aging and infirm relative might be mystified by all the laughing, crying and cheering down at the New York Theater Workshop, where the delightful "The Family Business" has opened for a criminally limited engagement.

You couldn't find a more authentic, or profoundly felt, family operation in town than this Obie-winning show, which has not only been co-written and directed by choreographer/actor/auteur David Gordon and his son Ain Gordon, but is performed with stunning elasticity by the two along with the Gordons' wife and mother, Valda Setterfield.

The business of the title is a father-and-son plumbing concern started by a first-generation American named Sol (whose own father, Chaim, changed the family name at Ellis Island from Fearandiscomfort to Smith) and carried on by his son, Phil, and Phil's son, Paul. The business that captivates our attention, however, is the family *stuff*, the whining and breast-beating and soul-searching endured by father and son when the clan's self-appointed matriarch suffers a stroke.

David Gordon, mustached, beefy and bedecked in simple hausfrau drag, plays Aunt Annie, a plow-truck of a woman headed into her 80s kicking and kvetching. Widowed, childless and felled by a stroke while nephew Phil is away on business, she heaps all her fears and frustrations on her gay grand-nephew Paul (Ain Gordon), who is being quite literally eaten alive as her caretaker. For Paul, it's just one more reluctant life role: A would-be playwright, Paul carries on the Smith tradition of artists who deferred their calling to earn a living by the monkey wrench.

To call Annie a tough patient would

be to do her an injustice. Terrified of surrendering control, she becomes the ultimate invalid tyrant, harassing a nurse's aid for putting out Roach Control without her blessing, sending Paul on exhausting searches for the perfect polyester housedress and criticizing his aspirations as a "play writer."

"That's playwright," Paul barks defensively, "One word!" Annie, the champion spoiler, counters, "Two words! No money!"

If this smacks to you of Jewish domestic sitcom, rest assured that "Beau Jest" this is not. "The Family Business" may take off from a situation, but it's really about a state of mind, a legacy of inner turmoil that gets passed down from generation to generation. Note that Ain and David Gordon also share a choreography credit: From its first rude expletive, every movement in the show is intricately mapped out to create a blistering, non-stop family frug which simulates the frenzy and discombobulation that only a blood relative can inspire.

The ingenious, rapid-fire deployment of the three performers heightens the

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mishegas. In the second half, Ain Gordon slaps fake noses on and off as he switches between playing Paul, his father and his grandfather. (Ain Gordon's sensitively delineated multiple roles, taken with his father's hysterically accurate Aunt Annie, magnifies our sense of the endless trap of inherited family patterns.) As Miss Wonder, the Smith's miracle-worker in secretary's clothing, Valda Setterfield is called upon to do everything from order the morning coffee (no mean feat, given the rotten deli service) to perform ambulance sound effects. In between scenes, the three performers serve as set changers, stirring up a whirlwind of shifting spaces with shower-curtain liners on rolling coat racks.

Call it postmodern Jewish domestic sitcom, if you will. But the surfeit of cool and clever stage business should in no way disguise the fact that Ain and David Gordon have written a hilarious, moving and memorable play about the pathological self-preservation of family.

In the program notes, Gordon, Gordon and Setterfield self-mockingly refer to themselves as "The Wonderful Family." In this instance, at least, they could save the irony for another day. "The Family Business" is a wonder. ■