

# Failing Business

The Gordons' Energetic Show Doesn't Quite Work

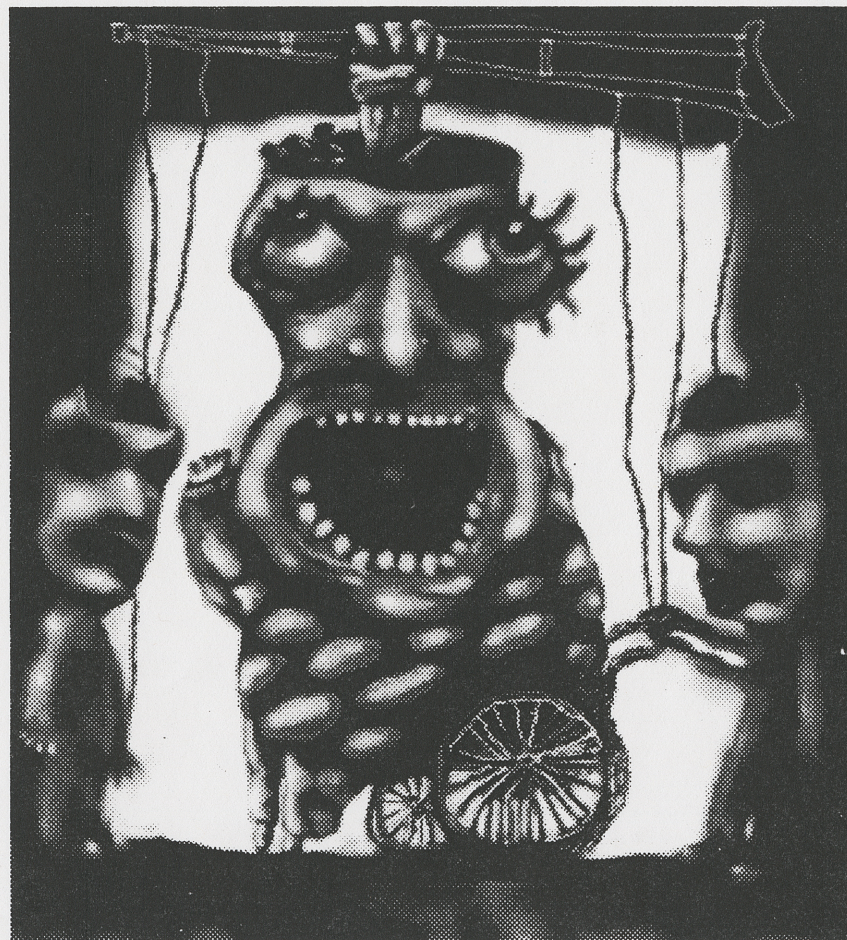
BY DEBORAH KLUGMAN

At the center of *The Family Business* lies an aged, sick woman whose infirmity greatly affects her family. Yet despite her importance, this play seems less about Auntie Annie's plight than about the pressures brought to bear on those who relinquish their dreams in favor of the duties and expectations imposed on them by their culture. But though executed with verve and talent by its three players, this overly long, surrealistic piece fails to capture the pathos implicit in the circumstances it attempts to depict.

Written by two of the three performers, father and son David and Ain Gordon, the show is based on their experiences with David's elderly Aunt Annie, here bizarrely but effectively portrayed by the burly, mustachioed David. As often happens with elderly people, Annie's frustration in dealing with her failing health manifests itself in petty tantrums and tyrannies, which she visits upon her loved ones. Annie's chronic kvetching creates a painful dilemma for her relatives, who want to care for her and make her comfortable yet find themselves driven to distraction by her incessant demands.

Notable as an unusual artistic collaboration among husband (David Gordon), wife (Valda Setterfield), and son (Ain Gordon), *The Family Business* never undertakes an orderly chronicling of events nor endeavors to replicate day-to-day reality in any way.

With David Gordon fixed in the role of the fictional Aunt Annie, Ain alternates back and forth between portraying Annie's nephew Phil—a man with a big nose and glasses—and her grandnephew Paul, a man without either. Glasses or no, both men are torn between what



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Annie's life. More mobile set pieces are composed of metal racks draped with colorful vinyl curtains, which are exuberantly rearranged by the performers each time there's a scene change. These transitions are announced verbally to the audience in lieu of blackouts or lighting changes.

Against this backdrop, the play ambitiously strives to broach both the petty particulars of dying and the grand consuming mystery inherent in the human experience. Infused with elements of dance and performance art that reflect the artistic backgrounds of Setterfield and David Gordon, the show touches upon some of the wretchedly common, darkly comic ironies of being ill in America: there's the ambulance stretcher that won't fit in the elevator, or the emergency-room patient for whom there's no room in the emergency room, and the doctors' bills for services never rendered.

Paradoxically, the same elements which make this production creditable—the wit, energy, and professionalism of the performers—also detract from its power. Amid the manic shuffle of set pieces and the sharp-edged satire which attends the characters, we rarely find ourselves moved. One never feels much of Annie's suffering, for example; instead, one laughs at her pathetic eccentricities. Performed in a large space and cold setting, *The Family Business* plays skillfully enough, but never with enough warmth or intimacy to touch the heart.

## The Family Business

At the Mark Taper Forum through December 24.  
For information call (213) 365-3500.

they would like to be—a songwriter and playwright, respectively—and what they have become, i.e., a couple of guys in the plumbing business. Meanwhile, Setterfield undertakes a variety of roles, chief among them Mrs. Wonder, Phil's longtime secretary, who for years has pined for him.

The set, like the characters, has a surreal quality. It's a rather ugly affair, with a clear vinyl curtain draped across the entire back of the stage and a tall, narrow edifice piled high with old junk standing right in the center. One has to presume that the centerstage detritus represents the material accumulation of