

ENTERTAINMENT

'Family Business' plumbs depths of caring for ailing loved ones

By Daryl H. Miller
Daily News Theater Critic

Crises often force people to re-evaluate who they are and what they're made of.

In the new play "The Family Business," the incident that prompts this heavy-duty soul-searching is the long illness and death of a loved one. The demands

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of caring for a cantankerous old woman cause her great-nephew to feel as though he's being eaten alive, while her nephew harbors the guilty thought that passes through the minds of so many people witnessing a loved one's decline: "I wish she would die ... or that I would."

Meanwhile, this brush with mortality causes the men to reassess whether they've been fulfilling their own needs.

Created and performed by a family that passed through a similar experience, this piece — presented by the Mark Taper Forum after its New York debut — poses some age-old questions in intriguing new ways. For all its perceptiveness, however, it never takes flight — mostly because the performances, are too one-dimensionally bland and the writing too clunky.

The family involved is David Gordon, a dancer and choreographer; his wife, Valda Setterfield, once a leading dancer for Merce Cunningham; and their son, Ain Gordon, an actor, writer and director. The father and son set about writing and directing the piece after caring for David Gordon's own ailing aunt.

Events have been fictionalized. The family business in the play is plumbing, not performing. But the plumbers are frustrated artists. Paul and Phil, like Phil's father before them (all played by Ain Gordon), went into the safe, respectable plumbing business instead of pursuing their dreams as, respectively, a writer, songwriter or cantor.

Paul and Phil are already chafing from this when Auntie Annie (played by David Gordon) falls ill. Paul finds her lying in her apartment, bleeding from a fall, and as he attends to her escalating needs in subsequent weeks, he feels he's losing control of his own life. Phil, meanwhile, remains conspicuously absent — having breezed out of town in rebellion against his life, and remaining there even though he knows he's needed at home.

Through it all, the ever-complaining Auntie Annie confronts her own sacrifices, as well as her fierce reliance on these two men — her only family after her husband's death. And the miraculous Mrs. Wonder (Setterfield), the men's

THE FACTS

■ **The show:** "The Family Business."

■ **Where:** Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles.

■ **When:** 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sundays; through Dec. 24.

■ **Running time:** Two hours, five minutes; one intermission.

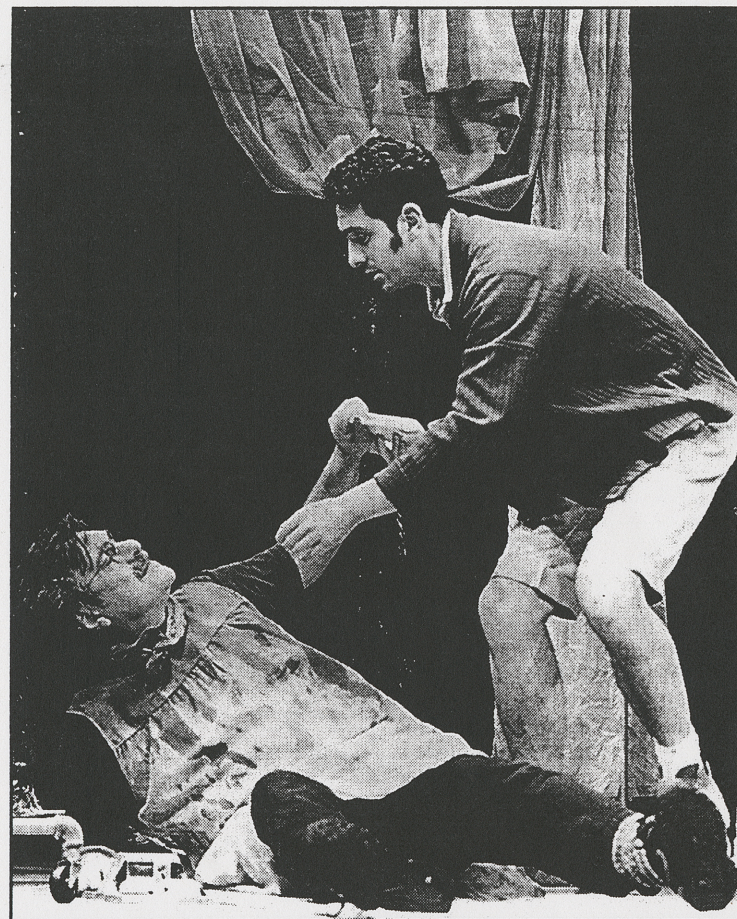
■ **Tickets:** \$28 to \$35.50, available through Ticketmaster, (213) 365-3500.

■ **Our rating:** ★★

receptionist and all-purpose assistant, quietly helps everyone make sense of what they're going through.

Auntie Annie, in particular, is a wonderful character — a sharp-tongued old woman who can drive a person to the brink of insanity (in one of the most humorously true-to-life moments, the penny-pinching old lady yells at an in-home aide, "Paper towel does not grow on trees, do you hear me?"), then erase it all by saying something unexpectedly perceptive and loving.

The show calls attention to its own theatricality through such devices as having the mustachioed David Gordon play Auntie Annie with barrettes in his own salt-and-pepper hair and allowing his pants and men's tennis shoes to show beneath his housecoat.



Multiple roles prevail in "The Family Business," as Ain Gordon, right, finds real-life dad David Gordon — as Auntie Annie — after a fall.

What's more, the performers call out scene numbers and stage directions as they push the multipurpose set pieces (cleverly constructed of plumbing pipe) into place. Such abstractions keep the audience from getting too emotionally involved, so they can calmly analyze the proceedings. This focuses their reaction and makes the show more viewer-friendly, since some people might not be keen on attending a performance they know will make them weep for two hours.

Still, the writing falls apart, particularly when Paul starts mysteriously losing his body parts — an all too literal depiction of being eaten alive by Auntie Annie. And despite all their years of performing, these people can't seem to establish a rapport with the audience; Ain Gordon is bland and expressionless in his many roles, and David Gordon whines all of Aunt Annie's lines at the same high pitch. Only Setterfield injects variety and whimsy into her performance as Mrs. Wonder and Annie's endless string of in-home aides.