

SECTION F • TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 1995

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Giving the Business to Business of Caretaking

Homely Narrative Gets in the Way of Exciting Theater

THEATER REVIEW

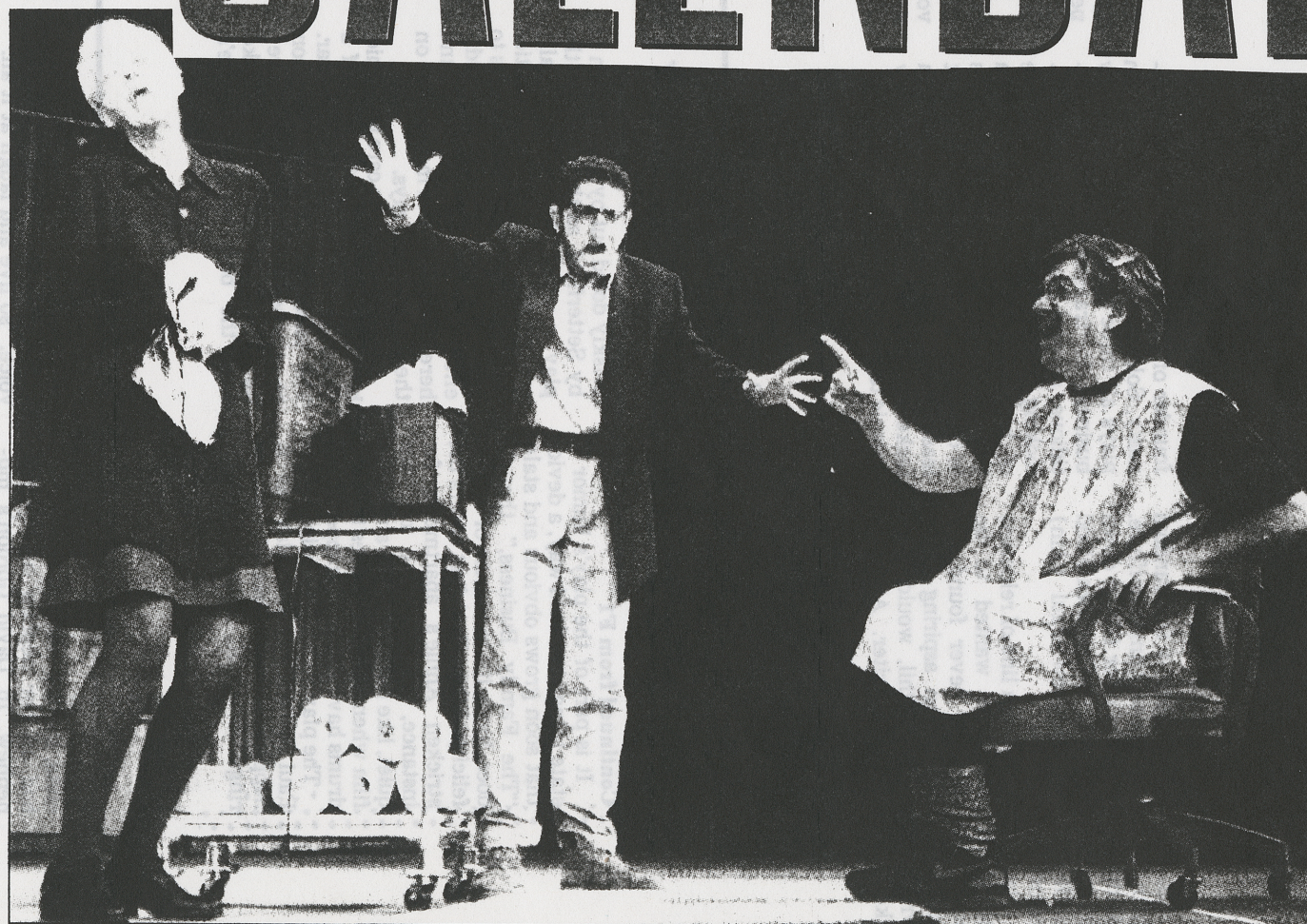
By LAURIE WINER
TIMES THEATER CRITIC

It is the business of every family to care for its dying members, and that is just what the dutiful father and son do in "The Family Business," a serious comedy that attempts to elevate the drudgery of caretaking to the revelation of art.

Now at the Mark Taper Forum, "The Family Business" is written and directed by father-and-son David and Ain Gordon. In performance the two are joined by the elegant Valda Setterfield, who is David's real-life wife and Ain's mother.

In the freewheeling style of the play, David plays Annie, the family's ailing, elderly aunt, with no wig or makeup, his mustache intact, his street clothes—black pants and T-shirt, black Nikes—visible under Annie's flowered house-

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Valda Setterfield, left, Ain and David Gordon keep it all in the family in "The Family Business": Moments of verbal felicity.

coat. Gordon does sport a few random hair clips, in tribute to Annie's coiffure. Annie hits her head after falling down from a stroke and lies in her own blood until her great-nephew Paul (Ain) comes to rescue her.

Paul is the third in a line of reluctant plumbers, men who wanted to be something else but never found the gumption. Paul is an aspiring playwright. His father, Phil, would have liked to be a songwriter. And the

founder of this unhappy plumbing dynasty, Sol, wanted to be a cantor. Ain plays all three members of the family business. He transforms from the fastidious, snappy Paul to the defeated-looking Phil through a slope in the line of his back and also by donning a Groucho Marx plastic nose that seems in questionable taste. To this viewer at least, the nose came to represent a tacked-on zaniness that never felt truly organic to the material of the play.

Among other roles, Setterfield plays Pearl Wonder, secretary to the firm. Quietly in love with Phil, Pearl is the perfect female helper, a Mary Poppins-like combination of efficiency, wisdom and patience.

If Pearl Wonder is aptly named, so are the doctors who pass in and out of the family's life: Dr. Piranha, Dr. Devourer, Dr. Paymore and Dr. Vulture. Annie's neighbor is Mrs. Nosy.

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'BUSINESS': The Drudgery of Caretaking

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It is part of the play's humor to state things in a bald way, a device that soon grows obvious and stale. "The Family Business," though, does have its moments of verbal felicity. When Paul first enters the stricken Annie's apartment, for instance, he hears an ominous quiet, like the moment in a western film when a settler notices that the drums have suddenly stopped.

The play's framing device is that Paul is writing the play as it happens. "Scene three, the phone rings" is an oft-repeated phrase,

briskly doled out by Ain Gordon or by Setterfield, as they narrate the play in which they are frantically acting. At times the two realities collide, such as when Annie calls to Paul, who is talking to the audience. "I'm giving background here!" Paul says. "I'm bleeding on the floor!" Annie says.

Once Paul starts to care for Annie, he claims to have lost the tip of a finger, and later, a finger and an ear. The missing body parts are soon re-attached when Paul's father returns from a mysterious trip to take over the bulk of Aunt Annie's

caretaking. In case anyone misses the point, Paul reports that taking care of Annie is eating him alive.

Coming from the world of performance art and dance, the creators may have underestimated what it takes to transform a homely narrative into exciting theater. Despite an energetic staging on a nearly empty stage, the storytelling devices that they employ to fuel the tale do so only sporadically. While entertaining, these devices fail to lift the story from the generic to the universal. They never sufficiently convey the inti-

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mate, specific hold that Annie has had on her nephew and grand-nephew. In David Gordon's monotonous portrayal, Annie is a drone, a complainer, full of self-pity and passive anger. She monitors the placement of each Roach Motel and the usage of each paper towel by a series of paid home-care takers. We are asked to care about this woman because she is an average human, and that is fair enough. But she is not *our* aunt, and we don't have to care about her unless the playwrights really make us care.

"The Family Business" begins with an Ethel Merman recording of "Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries."

"You can't take your dough/When you go, go, go," sings the robust voice, "so live and laugh at it all." At the end of the play, Phil can be heard whistling the song. In the show's sentimental conclusion, both Paul and Phil are freed to become the playwright and songwriter inside, with the death of their beloved, pain-in-the-neck Aunt Annie. Even Mrs. Wonder gets what she wants. The ending, as much of the beginning and middle, is unconvincingly merry.

■ "The Family Business," Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Tuesday-Saturday, 8 p.m.; Sunday, 7:30 p.m.; Saturday-Sunday, 2:30 p.m. Ends Dec. 24. \$28-\$35.50.

(213) 365-3500, (714) 740-2000. Running time: 2 hours.

Valda Setterfield Mrs. Wonder
Ain Gordon Paul, Phil, Sol
David Gordon Annie Kinsman
The Center Theatre Group/Music Center of Los Angeles County present a New York Theatre Workshop/Pick Up Performance Company production. Written, directed and choreographed by Ain Gordon and David Gordon. Lights Stan Pressner. Sound David Meschter. Additional set pieces Edward E. Haynes Jr. Production stage manager Ed Fitzgerald.