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# Over the River floats a raft of good feelings

The consensus is in and every audience member smiled their way out of the Leonor and Alvin Segal Theatre after *Over the River and Through the Woods*.

On until May 10, the play is touted as protagonist Nick Cristiano's comic struggle to break the ties that physically bind him to his dotting Italian grandparents. What it's really about is how a 29-year-old man discovers and learns to treasure the ties of the spirit, those that give roots and strength from one generation to the next.

That audiences of all ethnicities can relate to Nick's journey is why Joe DiPietro's play resonates so widely. It is also a delight to have the Manitoba Theatre Centre's Steven Schipper back and directing with his usual warmth. The Broadway-calibre cast, a number of whom are New York veterans, together crochet a tangible family feeling.

DeAnn Mears and Frank Savino, who play Nick's paternal grandparents, Aida and Frank Gianelli, are married in real life. Their performance may be life imitating art, but it goes way beyond that.

Savino's performance, in particular, is a

masterpiece, full of conviction, mischief and great heart. He's the grandpa who won't relinquish his car keys though his gear co-ordination seems to have lost its sense of direction.

Aida is the food maven whom every lucky grandchild has, the one who offers triple-decker sandwiches when you only want a snack or packs food home with you to ensure you don't go hungry.

The sweet-voiced Doreen Brownstone and Segal favourite Bernie Passeltiner (Tuesdays with Morrie, Visiting Mr. Green) play Nick's maternal grandparents, Emma and Nunzio Cristiano.

Set in New Jersey in 1994, both sets of relatives get together for weekly Sunday dinner along with their grandson, whose parents have already fled to Florida to escape their parents' clutches. His married sister has taken a similar escape route.

The oldsters are devastated when Nick announces he's moving to Seattle for a promotion in his marketing job. If they can't keep him close to home with their delicious cooking and sense of family fealty, they try the next best thing, a matchmaking plan hatched by Emma who just happens to have a canasta

partner with a single niece.

Caitlin, an Irish lass played by the lovely and down-to-earth Diana Donnelly, would appeal to any shadchan's heart. What happens between Caitlin and Nick is unexpected and so are the audience's emotions that well up at the end.

It's what makes this play more than a lightweight comedy and more than an evening's entertainment, though it scores brilliantly on both counts. You'll laugh till you hoot and the tears aren't far behind, either.

Gianpaolo Venuta, whom Segal audiences loved as Peter in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, here delivers the only sub-par performance in the role of Nick. His timing is off, his character lacklustre and monotonous, but in the presence of stars like Savino and the rest, he's carried along on their wave and gets away with it.

He'll likely pick up the torch deeper into the run. No one in this play has much to worry about since, as one man put it on opening night, "It takes a very good play for me not to fall asleep," and he was awake for this one.

Set and costume designer Michael Gianfrancesco gets the mood right, down to the flowered wallpaper and sofa afghan. A misplaced pillar in the middle of the set has you pondering its architectural authenticity, but the action works around it.

Sound designer Arlo Bates has one of the most heartbreaking moments of the show to himself, with an offstage effect. Lighting designer Kirsten Watt is commendably subtle in spotlighting the many asides to the audience

by the various characters, keeping them in real time and never letting these moments slip into phoniness.

It's refreshing to see a play about a "functional family," as playwright DiPietro puts it. After the ranting of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and the grave-digging of *Buried Child*, *Over the River* hits closer to home, but its punch is in a velvet glove. It's a glove that fits every viewer to perfection. Go and enjoy. For tickets, call 739-7944.



DeAnn Mears as Aida comes bearing food for her grandson in *Over the River and Through the Woods*, on at the Alvin Segal Theatre until May 10. [Randy Cole photo]

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