Theatre this week

Nice and naughty

Two great shows at the big English theatres—no matter what your taste

ALL IN THE FAMILY:
The cast of *Over the River and Through the Woods*

By NEIL BOYCE

Hailing from Teaneck, New Jersey, playwright Joe DiPietro is proof that following the maxim "write what you know" is often a good idea.

DiPietro's warm-hearted comedy *Over the River and Through the Woods*, directed by Steven Schipper at the Segal Centre, takes us into the home of Italian-American seniors Nunzio and Emma Cristano, somewhere in the Garden State. Their adored young grandson Nick drops in for his regular Sunday visit, announcing he's been offered a job in Seattle. Soon, the other set of distraught grandparents are on the scene, "cooking, conniving and cajoling" to get him to stay. That's the whole story, right there. And for a few good reasons, it works just great.

As grandma and grandpa Cristano ("the loudest people I've ever met,") Doreen Brownstone and Bernie Passeltiner head up a solid cast, filling the play with the kind of ease and naturalism that talented senior actors seem able to do effortlessly. Sweet and sitcom-y, it's filled with one-liners and zingers: Nick refuses the veal his grandma pushes on him, saying he's vegetarian. "Ahh, he's an animal doctor," explains grandpa.

Real-life husband and wife DeAnn Mears and Frank Savino play the other grandfolks with equal charm, while Gianpaolo Venuta is good as Nick, though too much of an ungrateful jerk at the outset for the tone of the story.

This featherweight material, with its innocent message of familial love, might collapse under a writer less capable than DiPietro, or a director more heavy-handed than Schipper. Here, it's refreshing to see such a simple, untortured story: a generation gap comedy with a sentimental turn and no pretense.

Big city temptations

If "nice" isn't your game, there's plenty of psychodrama at the Centaur in Bryden MacDonald's *With Bated Breath*. Co-directed by the author and Centaur artistic director, Roy Surette, MacDonald digs deep into the private and obsessive lives of Cape Bretoners—and what happens to them in sinful Montreal.

It's a tortured, Maritime Gothic story, centring on Willy (Michael Sutherland-Young), a troubled, extra-sensitive gay kid who splits Cape Breton for Montreal's red light district and goes missing without a trace. He's touched the lives of all the other characters, and his presence lingers uncomfortably.

As reality blurs with fantasy, Willy's story is told and reinvented by his friend and protector Esta (Sarah C. Carlsen); Float (Éloi Archambaudoin), a jaded stripper

who takes him under his wing in Montreal; Camilla (Felicia Shulman), a small-town gossip; Bernie (Neil Napier), a married and deeply closeted man; and his wife Ricotta (Danette Mackay), a fading party girl whose on-the-rocks relationship gets a further blow as they invite Willy into their home.

MacDonald shuffles the chronology of the story—directed with smooth, logical transitions—from rural front porch to sleazy gay strip joint to tableside gossip over a shared joint.

"We're all so fragile ... you never know when it might just snap," says Esta. Raw and profane, the uniformly solid cast expose nerves—and plenty of skin—as they are shaken by the boy's departure.

It closes in a perfect circle as the opening scene (Where's Willy?) is repeated at the end. A great device: showing the audience how its acquired knowledge has changed everything.

Tits, ass, pubic hair, boners, masturbation: the play's got it all, at Centaur of all places, and about damn time.

***OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS* TO MAY 10 AT SEGAL CENTRE FOR PERFORMING ARTS (5170 CÔTESTE-CATHERINE). INFO: (514) 790-1245**
***WITH BATED BREATH* TO MAY 24 AT CENTAUR THEATRE (453 STFRANÇOIS-XAVIER). INFO: (514) 288-3161**

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