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Two theatres: Two kinds of family portraits

By Alidor Aucoin on May 6, 2009



Family values are at the heart of *Over the River and Through the Woods*, Joe DiPietro's heartwarming intergenerational comedy at the The Segal Centre for the Performing Arts until May 10. It's a slight play, normally dinner theatre fare, but, like a plate of delicious pasta, the Segal's production is hugely satisfying. It appeals to anyone who has ever found themselves caught between the demands of their increasingly dependent childish parents and grandparents, and their own, ever demanding professional obligations. The play is narrated by Nick Cristiano, (Gianpaolo Venuta), a New York advertising agency executive who has grown up in a tight-knit Italian family ruled by the three F'S – "Family, faith

and food." He is the apple of his grandparents eyes, and dutifully visits them in Hoboken every Sunday for family. But he's received a job promotion that means a move across the country to Seattle. When he breaks the news of his impending move to the geriatric foursome, they plot to keep him from leaving. In the words of his paternal grandmother, Emma, "People don't move away from their families because they don't like the weather, they move away because they are afraid." Convinced that all that Nick needs to stay in New York is a woman in his life, they arrange a blind dinner date for him with Catlin O'Hare (Diana Donnelly), in the naïve hope that love will keep him at home. He charms her; he gets on her nerves. Clean cut and good looking, Gianpaolo Ventua conveys appealing but frustrated affection for his relatives, and Donnelly is all coy sweetness and solid strength as the date who isn't easily bamboozled. The Segal's production truly blessed with a strong quartet of solid veteran actors. Frank Savino is endearing as the cantankerous maternal grandfather, Frank Gianelli, and, Deann Mears, and his wife in real life is delightfully upbeat as Nick's grandmother, Aida, who is forever in the kitchen. The paternal grandparents, Nunzio and Emma Cristiano (Bernie Passeltiner and Doreen Brownstone) are also wonderfully wise, young old souls. Some of the evenings biggest laughs come when the delightfully clueless, but never stupid, geriatric foursome play *Trivial Pursuit* using their own rules and convoluted logic to score points. Although some of the actors deliver their lines in cadences that often seem more Yiddish than Italian, it doesn't matter. In the end we are moved by these octenagarians and their acceptance of the inevitable.. Steven Schipper directed with a sure, understated hand, and Michael Gianfrancesco 's set is handsome, if a little too antiseptic, devoid of much of the religious kitsch one would expect to find in an Italian immigrant family's house.

Values of another sort, those in a so called extended-family of social outcasts are examined in The Centaur's production of *With Bated Breath* running until May 24. If your idea of a night out at the theatre is waiting ninety minutes for an actor to put a bag over his head and drop his pants, it is just the ticket. Bryden MacDonald's dark play is disappointingly over-rated. Macdonald writes dialogue well, but whatever the virtues of the script, the show is unfocussed,, self indulgent, contrived and pointless. The play's title, taken from a Dolly Parton's country tune evokes the cast of 'hurtin' characters who lead double lives and survive by their animal instinct. Told in a series of elliptical flash backs, it's the story of a sensitive - read gay - Nova Scotia farm boy named Willy, (Michael Sutherland-Young). Driven out of town by gossip about his sexuality, he flees to Montreal in search of love and acceptance but ends up in a world of sleaze, as a stripper in a third-rate gay club, before disappearing without a trace. His life experience is told by those closest to him: Bernie, his first lover (Neil Napier) who we are told is "not gay, just fucked up", Bernie's hard-drinking wife, Ricotta, named for her father's favourite cheese, (Danette Mackay) who is "a well adjusted fag hag," Camilla (Felicia Shulman), the local vicious gossip, and Esta (Sarah C. Carlsen), Willy's soul mate, Then there's Float, (Eloi Archambaudoin), the buff, emotionally hardened "sex machine," who teaches Willy how to hustle customers. Archambaudoin packs a wallop in the role. He dances well, and is so convincing as a stripper, its him you expect to bare all. He doesn't, even though his dance number is the one scene in the play that calls for nudity, Sutherland -Young is beautifully vulnerable as the inaplytly named Willy. He makes the play seem deeper than it is. Neil Napier is terrific as a conflicted human lost in alcoholic anguish. The women, especially Shulman as an embittered she-man, are strong in their roles, but none of the hard-edged performances add up to much. The characters aren't the beautiful losers the author would have you believe they are, just losers. They don't rouse themselves from their pathetic existence enough to make us really care. Sound designer Peter Cerone has added to the dramatic tension with yelping dogs and country music nicely underscores the simulated sex scenes. James Lavoie's weather beaten set fits in well as both the dingy strip club and a rustic Cape Breton farm. Author Macdonald and Roy Surette who shared directing duties are to be commended for their

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Author Macdonald and Roy Surette who shared directing duties are to be commended for their restrained approach.

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