

LA Theater Review

Where's Poppa?

By [Les Spindle](#) | Posted March 15, 2007, midnight

Writer Robert Klane's 1970 film *Where's Poppa?*, based on his novel, maintains a cult following. Quite shocking in its time, the story is a fractured Freudian farce, mining sardonic humor from the plight of adult children of senile parents, facing whether to banish the elders to an old-age home. The Ruth Gordon-George Segal film, directed by Carl Reiner, remains an intermittently hilarious satire, though insufficiently cohesive. Perhaps because Alzheimer's disease strikes a more sensitive chord than it did in 1970, Klane's world-premiere stage adaptation prudently adds a line stating that the bizarre matriarch is merely nutty, not an Alzheimer's victim. Yet it's not questions of taste that mar this endeavor; tonal inconsistency is even more prevalent here than it was in the film. Director Gordon Hunt's unevenly paced production mixes a slick sitcom veneer with dated gags that mostly play out as more crude than startling. Even that infamous "tush" scene falls flat.

Except for a quite different ending, the script adheres to the original plot. Manhattan lawyer Gordon Hocheiser (Jeff Marlow) is driven up the wall by the kooky antics of his controlling mother (Marylouise Burke). That she eats Froot Loops drenched in cola for breakfast is the least of it; more troublesome are things like her cavalierly sharing — with Gordon's new amour, Louise (Katie MacNichol), the live-in caretaker — that her other son, Sidney (Barry Pearl), has a small pecker. When Louise flees from the Oedipal household, Gordon leans on Sidney to intervene before he throws Mommie Dearest out the window.

Burke elicits solid laughs, but she shares a problem with the production as a whole: She doesn't sustain the lunacy. The show's comic energy periodically drops, and at moments it inexplicably seems Hunt wants us to take these madcap machinations seriously. Marlow and Pearl do a better job of sustaining their blustery mania. MacNichol has good moments as the befuddled would-be fiancée, and Rob Nagle and Ellen Ratner do creditable work in multiple small roles. Script retooling might help, but one has the lingering suspicion that this relic had its optimum impact almost four decades ago.

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