

Where's Poppa?

This stage version of the offensively funny film ends up more like a sitcom.

Jonas Schwartz • New York City • Mar 10, 2007



Jeff Marlow and Barry Pearl in *Where's Poppa?*
(© Wesley Horton)

There should be a confessional in the lobby of the Falcon theater, because audiences will be crying *mea culpa* for laughing so hard through the first act of the offensively hysterical black comedy *Where's Poppa?*, based on the racy novel and 1970 movie of the same title. Sadly, Act II falls flat as the story gets darker and colder.

Balancing all of this spite and mirth requires a savvier director than Gordon Hunt, best known for his work on TV's *Mad About You*. Not surprisingly, he treats the play like a sitcom. In the second act, without jokes to distract the audience, his weaknesses become more apparent.

For seven years, Gordon Hocheiser (Jeff Marlow) has babysat his ill mother (Marylouise Burke), while his brother Sidney (Barry Pearl) has watched from the sidelines. One afternoon, a caregiver arrives to change Gordon's drab life: Louise (Katie MacNichol), a sweet nurse who can't seem to keep her patients alive, falls immediately in love with her boss, and the two begin to plan a life together.

Unfortunately, Momma, who suffers from dementia, scares Louise away -- just as she has all the women in Gordon's life -- by plopping her face in the mashed potatoes and whining, "Where's Poppa?" This infuriating woman drives Gordon to contemplate matricide or something even more horrific: putting her into a home. Not since *Psycho* has there been such a blow to mother love.

Writer Robert Klane, responsible for both the original novel and the screenplay, has added some scenes that are not in the film; these variously help and hinder the final product. The prologue at Poppa's funeral immediately alerts the audience to the piece's irreverence, as Sydney tosses his cigar butt into the coffin, igniting his father's corpse on fire.

The script also features scenes from the distant past, before Momma's dementia; her passion for teaching dance is witnessed, along with her adoration for the children. So is her frisky sex life with her husband. All of this adds dimensions to her character. However, by not demonizing Momma, the play makes Gordon's final action too vicious for the audience to empathize with him. If Momma is likeable, then Gordon appears unconscionable.

As the selfish Gordon, Marlow epitomizes the stereotype of the nice Jewish boy. With his round, youthful face, he allows you to laugh rather than cringe at lines such as "If you ruin this for me [mother], I'll punch your heart out." Pearl's comic timing is impeccable in the role of Sidney; he steals the show as the hapless brother whose Central Park jaunts always leave him battered, naked, or in prison.

With a thin body and poised head that make her resemble a frail greyhound, MacNichol is moving and very funny; she gets several of the best lines, and handles them deftly. Burke has some nice moments, such as answering the phone with "Who am I?" But she cannot wipe away the memory of the irreplaceable Ruth Gordon, who's largely

Hunt seems ill-equipped to handle the material; the pacing drags, which counteracts the play's farcical elements. Scenes end abruptly, particularly the final scene of Act I. Worse still, the centerpiece of the work -- the bit where Momma removes Gordon's pants to bite his tushy -- falls inexplicably flat.

In sum, *Where's Poppa?* mines comic gold but doesn't deliver as many nuggets as it should.