

THEATER REVIEW

After 37 years, it seems OK to laugh

Yes, 'Where's Poppa?' is insensitive, but the subject matter is hardly controversial anymore.

March 14, 2007 | F. Kathleen Foley | Special to The Times

When it comes to political correctness, Robert Klane's "Where's Poppa?" based on the film of the same name, isn't going to win any awards. Now in its world premiere at the Falcon, the play concerns an exasperated son who dreams of murdering his senile old mother, a trying and indefatigably wacky individual who has wreaked havoc in his life -- particularly his love life.

The 1970 movie, directed by Carl Reiner and adapted by Klane from his own novel, was edited by the studio before its release, reportedly because its original ending dealt with themes of incest. What did finally make it to the screen was so offbeat that it engendered a fair amount of controversy, not to mention a sizable cult following.

A lot of sewage has passed under the zeitgeist since then, and subjects once considered inconceivable are now routine. Once a genuine shocker, "Where's Poppa?" may not rank high on the PC meter but is not otherwise likely to rankle any proprieties. In fact, if the play has a failing, it's that it occasionally lapses into sitcom lightness, the kind of blatant and mechanistic comedy that hasn't really been in vogue since the heyday of Neil Simon.

However, laughs are laughs, and director Gordon Hunt, blessed by a zippy, seasoned cast, knows exactly how to get them.

Ideally suited for the theater, Klane's wittily updated play takes place largely in one discreetly shabby New York City apartment, a claustrophobic milieu well realized by set designer Keith Mitchell.

Jeremy Pivnick's lighting and Robert Arturo Ramirez's sound are also first rate, although Les Hooper's original music seems more appropriate to a sitcom than a play.

Marylouise Burke, who plays Momma Hocheiser, spearheads the proceedings in a difficult but well-rendered performance. Part gamine and part monster, the vividly senile Momma seems maliciously intent upon creating as much chaos around her as possible.

Considering all the recent research into Alzheimer's disease and dementia, some might find Klane's treatment of Momma a bit benighted. But comedy is seldom tactful, and Klane's delightful, durable insensitivity may well prove bracing for those tired of homogenized "message" media.

Burke is well-balanced by the amusingly woebegone Jeff Marlow as Gordon Hocheiser, a much-put-upon attorney who has been saddled with his mother's care for the last seven years. A portrait in filial frustration, Gordon has been the unwitting dupe of his deliciously self-serving brother Sidney (droll Barry Pearl), whose guilt trips have kept Gordon in a state of sacrificial stasis ever since the death of their father. As Gordon's love interest, Louise, Katie MacNichol fleshes out her dingbat character to delightfully human proportions -- no mean feat, considering that her timeworn archetype wore out its welcome with Edith Bunker. Yet MacNichol wisely pitches her performance far enough over the top of realism to make everything work. The cast is nicely rounded out by Rob Nagle and Ellen Ratner, both of whom play multiple roles.

Time has weathered the play from the cutting edge to smoother contours. But this "Poppa" remains resiliently goofy.

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'Where's Poppa?'

Where: Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank

When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, 4 p.m. Sundays

Ends: March 25

Price: \$30 to \$37.50

Contact: (818) 955-8101

Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes