

Review: 'Where's Poppa?'

Bob Verini

VARIETY



MARCH 12, 2007 | 02:43PM PT

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Jeff Marlow assumes George Segal's movie role as Gordon Hocheiser, a neurotic attorney who would balk at throwing Momma from a train only because doing so might not succeed quickly enough. She's a senile but cunning old bat whose apron strings are greedily tied to a crucial part of Gordon's anatomy.

A deathbed promise to Poppa not to plop Momma (Marylouise Burke) into a home has made Gordon a virtual prisoner to her whims (she tap dances incessantly and requires his help in the bathroom, or claims to). To get a moment's privacy he barricades her in her bedroom, from which she keeps escaping to foil his efforts to have a life of his own, especially a love life. Homicide on his mind, he goes so far as to don a gorilla suit to scare her into a heart attack.

We can accept a grown son's pathological love/hate relationship in broadly comic terms when the underlying psychology rings true, and when we believe in Momma's genuine (if inadvertent) monstrosity; she must be a gorgon. Certainly after five minutes of Ruth Gordon's voice and manner in the movie, you can easily buy into any attempt to do away with her.

But kewpie-doll Burke is directed to be a sweetie-pie, now up on her toes with delight, now winsomely pouting, fussy rather than insistent. She's a cutie not a creature; locking her door reads as a gesture to protect her, not to keep a wolf at bay. Her repeated cheek-pinching "You're such a good boy" comes across as a sincere compliment rather than as a sinister claim of territoriality.

The wholesomeness appropriate to "On Golden Pond" has no place in the inherently cruel world of "Where's Poppa?" Yet the entire Falcon production has been skewed never to offend or even disturb.

Given property's black-comedy rep and today's anything-goes mores, the toothlessness of Hunt's direction is mind-boggling. The playing is safe and superficial, lacking need and urgency. Though the plot includes attempted murder, elder abuse and anal rape, production's only shocking element is the profanity, uncalled-for amidst the squeaky-clean context.

Speaking of toothless, the most famous moment in the movie — Momma's pulling down Gordon's pants to bite his bare tushie in the presence of his girlfriend (Katie MacNichol) — is executed upstage so no one can see it, turning an iconic image of maternal possessiveness into one more twee sitcom bit.

Though cast seems perfectly capable of imbuing the play with requisite ferocity, only MacNichol and Barry Pearl as older brother Sid are given any chance to demonstrate it, however fitfully. A nude Pearl, victim of a Central Park mugging, nicely juggles two pieces of shrubbery in a lengthy confrontation scene, although he gets no comic mileage out of the Viagra he's supposed to have taken (one of Klane's anemic efforts to update the script to the present).

The odd angles and sharp corners of Keith Mitchell's convincingly dressed brownstone apartment subtly convey the craziness not in evidence elsewhere.

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Where's Poppa?

Falcon Theater; 130 seats; \$37.50 top

Production

A Falcon Theater presentation of a play in two acts by Robert Klane, based on his novel and the MGM movie "Where's Poppa?" Directed by Gordon Hunt.

Creative

Sets, Keith Mitchell; costumes, Denitsa Bliznakova; lighting, Jeremy Pivnick; sound, Robert Arturo Ramirez; stage manager, Deirdre Murphy. Opened, reviewed March 9, 2007. Runs through March 25. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.

Cast

Gordon Hocheiser - Jeff Marlow Momma Hocheiser - Marylouise Burke Louise - Katie MacNichol Sidney Hocheiser - Barry Pearl

With: Rob Nagle, Ellen Ratner.