

Jewish Theatre Collaborative review: 'The Loman Family Picnic' serves up strange smorgasbord

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By [Marty Hughley, The Oregonian](#)



The powerful themes of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" -- the soul-crushing weight of dead-end jobs, the tight, tangled knots of family tensions, and so on -- make it an enduring tragedy. But what if you leavened them with a little comedy, a little music? Playwright [Donald Margulies](#) takes up that odd, intriguing proposition in his play "The Loman Family Picnic," which opened at Theater! Theatre! on Saturday night in a spirited production by director Sacha Reich and [Jewish Theatre Collaborative](#).

Echoing some of Miller's heavy themes in a mostly light-hearted confection, the story centers on plans for a bar mitzvah that doesn't mark manhood for elder son Stewie (Bryce Earhart) so much as it triggers mid-life crises for his vain, nervous mom, Doris (Jill Westerby) and his drudge of a dad, Herbie (Jason Glick). Meanwhile, younger son Mitchell (Dylan Earhart, Bryce's brother) ponders the similarities to Willy Loman's family -- salesman father, two sons, pervasive sense of failure. For a school project, he starts re-envisioning "Death of a Salesman" as a musical that somehow finds a happy ending.

There's lots of rich material here -- the sort of sharp, funny bickering we expect in comic depictions of a Brooklyn Jewish family, but also sad acknowledgements of life's unfairness, and even deep shadows of existential dread. And Reich draws suitably

affecting performances from her cast. Westerby makes comic hay with Doris' tight-wound self-regard and false mask of optimism. The Earhart brothers slip into their characters with a mix of commitment and charm. And Glick makes us feel the dull yet inexorable despair of an Everyman's meager days.

But the play has problems that are hard to overcome. Margulies' weirdly catawampus script veers in odd, seemingly random directions. Here's Mitchell singing his jazz-hands rewrites of "Death of a Salesman" plot points; there's Doris chatting with the ghost of her free-spirited Aunt Marsha (played by Sara Fay Goldman). Here, a running gag about Weight Watchers; there, unnervingly offhand references to the Holocaust and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. And with no set up to prepare us for such a gambit, we're given four different variations of the concluding scene.

Though interesting individually, all the experimental feints work against the sense of a coherent structure and tone. As a result the play feels like its a rewrite or two away from its full promise. Or like a picnic in which too many flavors clash.

-- [*Marty Hughley*](#)

"The Loman Family Picnic"

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays through June 2

Where: Theater! Theatre!, 3430 S.E. Belmont St.

Tickets: \$15-\$20, 1-800-838-3006, jewishtheatrecolaborative.org