



Digging Up Dad

Ruskin Group Theatre
Reviewed by Jose Ruiz



One of the earliest reviews published on this site was about 10 years ago, when the gritty play *Cockroach Nation* by Matt Pelfrey exploded at the Los Angeles Center Theatre and its leading actor Cris D'Annunzio was mentioned in almost everyone's "best" list. Well, Cris is back and he's doing it again. This time it's his one-man show about his early life and his father, and more than a play, Cris turns this into a monologue that is gripping, compelling, riveting and all the other "-ing" ending words you can put together.

The opening scene is a cemetery where Cris is digging up his father's grave, stating that he should not be buried in the family plot because he abandoned the family and never cared for them. Then the story begins as he tells of his early life, his youth and the difficulties he had with his father.

In spite of a stereotype image we learn that Cris's father may have been involved with the mob. His death was as mysterious as his life and when the family discovers that he had left behind over \$ 250,000 the dots begin to connect. A great story teller, Cris recreates some of the colorful characters of his youth – people who at the time seemed like regular guys but as he grew older he began to realize that maybe – just maybe these men were a little off the margin of the law. D'Annunzio talks about his Italian Jewish grandfather, who survived the holocaust and became closer to him than his own father, but then he talks about his mother who seemed to know things – "I got a feeling ", she would say and almost always she was right. Early on in his life he learned to listen to her feelings.

There are many comic moments in the play, and there are many scary moments. When he relates how two extortionists are draining him of 15 thousand a week, the images are almost incredible, but when he tells how he becomes friends with Jeff, the Hit Man, that is a mini-gem of a story in itself. But behind the narrative of his experience as a stock broker, his uncertainty about his future and his family life, we see a man who is extremely conflicted with his father. He wants to hate him, but family bonds tell him he shouldn't. He wants to love him, but he's convinced the man never did anything to merit his love. He can't respect him because he never gave him a reason to do it and he can't ignore him because he is too much like him and whether he accepts it or not, his life has definitely been influenced by the father. So the only thing he can do is talk about him. Talk and hope that this regurgitation will help him muddle through the quagmire that became his past and somewhere find the truth for the future.

We get the feeling that this play is a little like the 12 step serenity prayer where one asks for the courage to change the things that can be changed, the serenity to accept the things that can't be changed and the wisdom to know the difference. In the meantime it is a courageous bravura performance that bares the soul, lays open the anguish and takes the audience into one of the most intimate moments ever experienced in theatre.

Digging Up Dad will play Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 through March 20, 2010 at the Ruskin Group Theatre, 3000 Airport Avenue in Santa Monica. Call (310) 397-3244 for reservations.