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From Life & Arts:

Theater Review: Digging Up Dad

Cris D'Annunzio in Digging Up Dad at the Ruskin Group Theatre. Photo by Agnes Magyari

A Futile Exercise In Untying Family Ties

Resolving childhood parental conflicts is sometimes a life-long struggle. Some psychologists say that these experiences are grooved into the brain and it takes years of therapy and tens of thousands of dollars to retrain the unconscious thought process, sometimes without any success. Cris D'Annunzio's one-man autobiographical show, now on stage at the Ruskin Group Theatre, has turned these attempts at resolution into a wonderful theatrical extreme and it works, becoming another notch in this theatre's growing repertoire of excellent productions.

The play begins with digging sounds on a creatively designed set by Christine Silvoso, who perfectly replicates a cemetery setting. At first, one assumes a grave is being dug but before long we find out that Cris is actually digging up the coffin in which his father has been laid to rest after a mysterious death at the ripe old age of 48. He has to decide whether to dump it into the river or just burn it.

Dad, it turns out, was a two-bit petty bookie alcoholic with mob connections, who eased his frustrations by regularly beating up his wife and young Cris. When he goes to dad's apartment to clean it out, he finds $250,000 in cash which appears to be mob money and sets up some unpleasant encounters with guys with funny noses who demand a payment of $15,000 a week. The family believes dad was "whacked."

Now anyone who has grown up with an alcoholic parent can attest to the fact that walking on eggshells is a way of life as you never know when a good mood could suddenly turn dark or when tenderness could transition into violence in the blink of an eye. Using sharp imagery, Cris paints that picture vividly, giving a deep sense of how it was for this little boy who grew up living in fear.

It takes a lot of energy, plus vocal and physical variety to sustain a compelling one-man performance. Cris succeeds by creating a variety of characters, each with its own voice and physical presence, including his mother, father, sister and his Holocaust survivor grandfather. In addition, he brings to life a group of "Mafia" types with such engaging names as Tino the bartender, Itchy Jimmy, and Jeff the hit man.

After all is said and done, after all the childhood wounds have been aired, and all the resentments have been unearthed, Cris says that he still loves his dad despite how cruel he was to Cris and his mother, a testament to the family ties that bind us, despite it all.

Produced and well directed by Mike Myers, who keeps the action visually interesting by incorporating historic stills of the family, and underscoring the production with an interesting sound track, the only fly in the otherwise perfect ointment was Brandon Baruch perplexing light design which did nothing to enhance the production, but in fact, was a major distraction by washing the stage with unflattering colors and being obvious and quite intrusive in the light cue transitions.

Ruskin Group Theatre, 3000 Airport Avenue, Santa Monica, CA 90405, Tickets: $15-$20 - 310.397.3244, Run: Fri. - Sun. through April 3, 2010, No Sunday performances after March 31. Free parking

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DEADLINE IS MARCH 15TH

Santa Monica Real Estate

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