

The Huffington Post



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Home for the Hell Days

Posted December 17, 2007 | 09:46 AM (EST)

It's said that the secret to true happiness for the holidays is a large and supportive family - who are far away in another state.

I couldn't help thinking about that as I watched *Die Mommy Die* at New World Stages in New York City. Charles Busch's play is to families what "Grandma Got Run Over by A Reindeer" is to Christmas hymns - a very toxic variation on a theme.

The play, which Busch, a cross-dressing playwright, also stars in as faded pop singer Angela Arden, is at its heart, an affectionate tribute to the lush (think Bette Davis, Lana Turner and Joan Crawford) Hollywood women's movies of the 50s and 60s. It's also a lacerating take on family dynamics. Granted the family is John Waters by way of the Mansons.

Angela is married to the tyrannical Hollywood producer Sol, to whom his daughter Edith has an incestuous attraction. Their gay son Lance, whom Sol has a multi-dimensional hatred, has an equal attraction to Angela. Angela murders Sol, and the kids set out to prove she did it. Meanwhile, a sexually ambiguous tennis pro named Tony enters the family, and sequentially seduces all who are left standing.

It's all here in a Freudian fever dream - smothering mother, cruel and rejecting father, the attraction between father and daughter, father and son rivalry. Busch pulls it all together and injects it with something evil - and hilarious.

Going home for the holidays has been said to spike prescriptions for anti-depressants and even prompted one enterprising blogger to create Dysfunctional Family Bingo. You create squares with holiday events ranging from relatives who criticize your kids' hair to kitchen *coup d'etats* to such holiday classics as the disappearing spouse who leaves you with his over-Chardonnayed cousin ranting that if we allow this gay marriage thing to happen, next it's going to be people marrying dogs.

Every family has their variations. Five squares in a row wins.

Or -

You can get a crash course in dysfunction by catching *Die Mommy Die* (don't miss this hilarious play which closes on January 13th)

It will equip you nicely for another interesting holiday exercise in role assignment. Who is the good child, the problem child, the caretaker, the comedian, the lost child and the mastermind? Find them all and you will have completed your set of the six roles psychologists assign to dysfunctional families. All of them, and you can swap stories with Augusten Burroughs. None of them, and you're the Osmonds.

Hopefully absent the murder and incest, an evening spent with Angela Arden, Sol Sussman, Edith and Lance, will teach you a little about family. For one thing, maybe yours isn't so bad. And right before the holidays, a little perspective helps.