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WOW!

Jennifer Maisel's warm and winning family dramedy *The Last Seder* opens with Michelle (Elisa Donovan), the youngest of four adult sisters, inviting Josh (Douglas Dickerman), a total stranger, to her family home. Michelle's Alzheimer's afflicted father Marvin (Joseph Ruskin) is about to be moved for long-term care into the serenely named *Serenity Willows* and the family home is soon to be sold, thus this year's Seder will be the family's last together and Michelle does not want to arrive empty-handed, so to speak.

As happy as matriarch Lily (Jenny O'Hara) is to have her four girls together again, having to maintain her calm with with an increasingly confused Marvin is getting to be too much for her. Playwright Maisel makes abundantly clear, amidst the laughs, the hell that living with an Azheimers victim can be on his or her loved ones. Without the slightest warning or provocation, Marvin will become severely agitated. "Where are my car keys? I've got to find my car keys!" he cries out at one point, and later, when Lily attempts to diaper him, he starts screaming for help. When told that one of his daughter's name is Angel, he replies, "Have I died? An angel? Why am I someplace with angels?" (Ironically, the only person Marvin "recognizes" is a Michelle's pickup Josh.)

Michelle is not at all happy about being at this year's Seder; she mourns the loss of "the only person I could really talk to." "He's disappearing." she tells Josh. "I'm watching him disappear." Michelle is feeling at a dead-end in her own life as an elementary art teacher. So is businessman Josh, aka Kent, who'd much rather be a musician/performer and decided to join Michelle's family for the weekend because gefilte fish sounded appealing.

Angel (Annika Marks), the family wanderer, is not at all happy to learn about the New Baby wreath on the front door of the home of ex-boyfriend Luke (Chuma Gault), that is until she finds out that it's Luke's 17-year-old sister's baby and not Luke's, making her studly ex still on the market.

7-months pregnant Julia (Victoria Stern), a therapist (and lesbian), has arrived with shiksa partner Jane (Heather Robinson), who feels happy just to be with an honest-to-goodness loving family for a holiday. Even though the latest ultrasound still shows no penis on Julia and Jane's baby, grandma Lily is giving him 2 months to grow one. (She's tired of a family of only women.)

Completing the sisterly quartet is Claire (Lauri Hendler). She and boyfriend Jon (William Duffy) are lawyers with baby issues. At first it was Claire who wanted a baby, but now Jon complains to her that "you keep thinking I'm trying to fertilize you." He can't figure out why she keeps postponing their wedding and he's starting to reevaluate their relationship, especially when it turns out that unbeknownst to Jon, Claire went on the pill a few months ago.

Over the course of the daughters' return, various love stories bloom. Lily has found solace in neighbor (and Marvin's favorite golf partner) Harold (Nick Ullett), whose own wife has died. Michelle and Josh/Kent seem to be falling for each other, and Angel and Luke rekindle a past romance, though Luke tells her (after they make love) "I don't want to love you anymore. The only thing between us is the past."

Maisel avoids TV movie cliches with humor. When Lily starts breaking dishes to relieve the stress, she admits to her daughters, "The problem with catharsis is you have to clean up afterwards." And when it suddenly hits Michelle that she's invited a total stranger home with her, she exclaims, "I was so worried that you'd think I was a total psycho that I totally forgot that you might be too." Maisel perfectly captures the family dynamics of a home filled with grown sisters as the story moves effortlessly from sister to sister and from couple to couple.

Adam Flemming's clever and effective set builds a house mostly out of the cardboard boxes used for moving, and Dan Weingarten's superb lighting allows the audience to focus on each scene's main characters all the while remaining aware of who and what surrounds them. Bich Vu's costumes are a just-right match for the personality of each character, and Martin Carillo's sound design and original music set each scene's mood to perfection.

Director Joseph Megel has elicited wonderful performances from each and every member of his sterling cast, with special mention due the lovely and sympathetic Donovan, erasing any memories of the snooty Amber she played in *Clueless* (movie and TV series); 84-year-young Ruskin, following his stellar turn in the recent *Park Your Car In Harvard Yard* with an absolutely heartbreaking performance here; Chuma Gault, sensational in *Miss Julie*, proving himself the next Denzel Washington; and O'Hara, once again proving that no one plays earthy better than she.

When the time for the Price family's last Seder finally arrives, and Marvin's memory returns, however briefly, revealing the man that Alzheimers has stolen from his family, Maisel's play achieves transcendental beauty. You don't have to be Jewish to fall in love with *The Last Seder*.

Greenway Court Theatre, 544 N. Fairfax, Los Angeles. Through July 27. Thursdays through Saturdays at 8:00, Sundays at 4:00. Added performance July 27 at 8:00. Reservations: 323 655-7679 ext. 100 or www.GreenwayArts.org.

--Steven Stanley
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