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'Making God Laugh' review: family dramedy

August 21, 2013 by STEVE PARKS / steve.parks@newsday.com



Some Long Island premieres -- musicals that play Broadway for decades -- are highly anticipated. Others, such as "Making God Laugh" by unknown playwright Sean Grennan, may come and go without fanfare.

This new dramedy, delicately directed by Marian Waller at BroadHollow's BayWay Arts Center, might've been overlooked except for a promising ensemble led by Joan St. Onge as the well-meaning matriarch who turns every family

occasion into an empty-nest contest of wills.

We meet the family at Thanksgiving 1980 and revisit them every 10 years through 2010. Ruth is tyrannical, both as mother and wife. Yet St. Onge infuses enough unintentionally self-deprecating humor that we tend to overlook Ruth's demeaning put-downs of everybody except her "good son," the priest. Brian Gill presents Tom with the humility and forbearance you'd expect of someone in his line of work. Far more self-conscious are hard-drinking Rick, played with callow charm by Evan Donnellan, and actress-wanna-be Maddie, portrayed with a well-earned chip on her shoulder by Tara Palen. Gary Milenko as beleaguered Pops, bears silent witness to Ruth's one-woman rule.

At Christmas 1990, the mother-daughter relationship ruptures over Ruth's needling about Maddie's weight and lack of prospective husbands -- and children. Act II opens with a New Year's Eve reconciliation and surprise announcement. The finale, a family get-together summoned by Pops, tenderly transformed by Milenko, turns Ruth's fondest wish into elusive reality.

Bob Butterley's living-room set -- only the pillows change over the decades -- reflects photo-album nostalgia. A running joke about Ma's favorite recipe -- everyone hates her Fantasia dip -- comes to full-circle resolution.

Anyone who's been part of a family -- parent, child or both -- can relate. Grennan's play is shot through with sentimentality, but also with authentic truths about identity and belonging.

WHAT "Making God Laugh"

WHEN | WHERE 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. Sundays to Sept. 1, [Bayway Arts Center](#), 265 E. Main St., East Islip. Also, Sept. 28-Oct. 13, [Broadhollow Theatre](#), 700 Hempstead Tpke., Elmont

TICKETS \$14-\$25; 631-581- 2700, [broadhollow.org](#)

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