

## "Angels and Ministers of Grace" at the New Jersey Repertory Company

BY HANNAH WALKER



In New Jersey Repertory Company's "Angels and Ministers of Grace," three grownup siblings try to keep it together in the face of tragedy, bumbling ex-husbands, illness, and the inconvenience of prophetic powers. Despite that last part, the family roots of the play strike right to the heart of anyone who knows the messiness of dysfunctional siblings and coping with past loss. It also probably rings true to anyone who has supernatural powers, I wouldn't know.

There's something deeply satisfying about the slow opening up of a story. You're given just a few facts at the outset, and the rest comes slowly. Mini-revelation after mini-revelation leads to a breathtaking moment when all is finally revealed and the truths that characters have been ignoring throughout must be dealt with. Taken on a domestic level, the structure hits harder than the most shocking blockbuster mysteries or thrillers.

You get only a few hard facts to go on at the start of the play: Oldest sister Arletta (Maureen Silliman) is obsessed with making angels she doesn't want to sell, and doesn't leave the house. Younger sister and rock of the now three-person family Miriam (Dana Benningfield) is to be handled with care on "today of all days." And the loss of an address book is of critical interest to both. The 'why' behind all of this unfolds with more drama and suspense than a Liam Neeson action flick, even more powerful for being set in an unremarkable farm on a seemingly unremarkable day.

The sisters are what make the play work, and Silliman and Benningfield are what make the play work well, in performances stronger than the script they're given. Benningfield presents Miriam's prickly strength up front and smoothly peels that back to expose her wounded and vulnerable core. Silliman works in the opposite direction, Arletta seeming weak and strange with her wacky 'feelings' and her angel-making, but revealing an unexpected and powerful strength and determination. Both are stunning.

"Angels and Ministers of Grace" runs at the New Jersey Repertory Company (179 Broadway, Long Branch) through November 23. Tickets are \$42 and are available at njrep.org or 732-229-3166.

EASY AS A-B-C-D: AXELROD BRINGS CULTURE IN DEAL *continued from p.30*

"We're really bringing in some of the top stars nationally and internationally," says CEOP Jess Levy. "We also present Israeli and Jewish cultural programming, which no one else really does."

The Axelrod PAC recently hosted Rita, Israel's top musical star and one of only three artists to give a concert at the UN. Other stars drawn to Deal have included Brian Stokes Mitchell, Jarrod Spector, and Marin Mazzie of Broadway fame, stars of rock and jazz like Max Weinberg and John Pizzarelli, as well as art offerings, film festivals, and cooperations with other cultural heavyweights in the area.

And all this while mounting ambitious theatrical performances of shows like *Les Miserables*, *Evita*, and the upcoming production of *Gypsy*, opening November 14. Shows like this are productions which community theaters often avoid because of the large ensembles, elaborate costumes and sets, and big orchestra which're essential parts of the show.

Which is all part of the plan, says Levy.

"We try to do shows that're big shows, that other theaters haven't done or aren't doing. They're ambitious productions. And we try to be the first to do them," Levy says.

The ambitious strategy has paid off. The Axelrod Performing Arts Center organization has been nominated for over 18 Perry Awards for excellence in community theater. Not bad, for an organization that doesn't do theater full-time. But when they do it, they do it right. Full orchestra and everything.

"A lot of people don't realize that in many cases there's not much of distinction between equity theater and community theater," Levy says.

"Many actors that appear in community theater have a background in professional theater and just no longer hold an equity card, or they might be in college studying to be on Broadway and are Broadway caliber."

"We're lucky enough now to know some of the top actors and actresses from the region, and we'll occasionally bring in an equity actor if we have specific need or role to fill."

