

T H E A T E R

The Horror and Farce of Family Dysfunction

BY MARK HALL AMITIN

In its own small way *Pterodactyls* makes a major contribution to the convergence of a new theatrical movement, known as Queer Theatre by some, which has taken root in New York and firmly embeds itself this season. This is not to imply that the only aspect of plays which fall into this category have nothing else to commend them than their homosexual bent. Rather, playwright Nicky Silver deeply explores themes on the dysfunctional family in the farcical expressionist/surrealist style last fully delved into by Edward Albee in his one acts *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream* over 30 years ago.

The theatrical community, which has been more devastated by the AIDS crisis than any other profession in America, has profound reasons to delve deeply into this facet of its existence along with the tributary themes of family, acceptance, sexuality and loss. The methodology that appears to work best for making these themes palatable for a wider audience is comedy. Through the veil of raucous laughter comes the tears. The phenomenal success of the Pulitzer and Tony Award-winning *Angels in America* and the new and deeply challenging *Twilight of the Gods* both enter the realm of gay life from a new perspective; these plays' gayness is not the subject but rather the deeper and more threatening aspects of society's attempt to integrate that experience into its soul. Where better to begin than in the nuclear family.

Pterodactyls, which opened last week at the Vineyard Theatre, takes the simple family formula of a young man and his girlfriend and turns it on its head when she introduces her mother (Tony Award-winner Kelly Bishop) to her intended husband, charmingly played by new-

comer T. Scott Cunningham. The daughter is a looney hypochondriac portrayed with abandon by the delightful Hope Davis. At first we think we're just in the household of a slightly off-beat upper class Philadelphia mainline family but we soon discover with the return of the prodigal son stricken with AIDS that he has nowhere else to go. It is here that we sense we're in for a dramatic turn. But we get thrown further and further afield when the sister can't remember that she has a brother and the father, a bank president, has just been sacked and still thinks his son wants to go out in the yard to play a game of catch.

Meanwhile the daughter's boyfriend, in desperate need of employment (he's an orphan who has been brought up by priests and nuns — the church taking its lumps here too), and a place to stay, takes the lowly position of the household's maid including wearing the former employee's dress. As the play unfolds, son and boyfriend find themselves drawn more to one another, the mother delves more deeply into her bottle of scotch and the father becomes more scathing and remote.

Nonetheless, plans for the daughter's wedding to the black-dressed boyfriend continues until she sees her brother kissing him; she suddenly goes deaf, takes the



Family of Fools: Kelly Bishop and Hope Davis in Nicky Silver's new dark comedy "Pterodactyls" at the Vineland Theatre.

wedding gift her brother gave her (a gun), and goes to her bedroom to commit suicide. Now only hours away from the big event, the house is brimming with presents, a dead bride, a sexually confused groom, a drunken mother, a desolate father and a melancholic son who has been digging up dinosaur bones from the backyard and reconstructing them into a tyrannosaurus rex in the living room.

The *deus ex machina* of the final scene is a painful series of Oedipal revelations that leaves comedy behind and descends into a surrealistic hell. The only thing left intact are the skeletal remains of the pre-ice age mammoth.

There is much to commend in this play; the acting is full blooded and rich, the exception being the son played with a kind of flat displeasure by Kent Lanier. The writing, while sometimes stilted, is a worthy experiment into form and nature pushing the boundaries of theater, a step or two further. Director David Warren, however, doesn't seem certain of what exactly he wants from the play and so it lurches to and fro. The Vineyard Theatre, usually more reserved in its repertory, is to be commended for its risk-taking adventure.

Pterodactyls runs through November 7. For reservations and information phone 353-3874. The Vineyard Theatre is located at 108 E. 15th St. between Irving Place and Union Square East.