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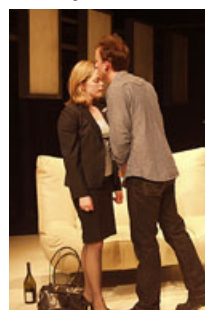
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Lenny and Lou

By Ian Cohen

Directed by Sturgis Warner

29th St. Rep

212 West 29th Street

212-868-4444

Review by Maya Avrasin

Playwright Ian Cohen creates a modern Shakespearean tragicomedy in his New York premiere of *Lenny and Lou* with his hilarious take on sibling rivalry, sex, and debauchery.



Heidi James and David Mogentale look for answers in sex and debauchery in *Lenny and Lou*.

Hapless Lenny Feinstein, played by David Mogentale, can't seem to organize his life. His failed dreams of rock stardom clog his head, preventing him from carrying on a meaningful life. Meanwhile, his contentious and sexually charged relationship with his wife, Julie, played by Heidi James, leads him to seek advice from his wound-up, but responsible younger brother, Lou, played by Todd Wall, and dementia-ridden mother, Fran, played by Suzanne Toren. His misery and breakdown don't send Lenny over the edge. Instead, Lou is the one who forsakes his logical, accountant-like persona and snaps.

When Lou fears he killed his mother from fright after a bad prank in the middle of the night, he manipulates his brother to visit Fran the next morning. Lenny's visit instigates a sequence of events involving murder, sex, violence and role-playing (with a little cross-dressing thrown in for kicks), causing chaos in an already dysfunctional family.

Cohen's play premiered in Washington, D.C., in 2004 to critical acclaim. Cohen's quick-paced dialogue and random comical snippets humanize the often brash exchanges between the characters. The sex scenes are creatively staged, but the actors do not fare so well on their own. For two brothers who are supposedly "such a tight-knit bunch," the exchanges between the two seemed forced and awkward. In the supporting role of the dominatrix wife, James's constant hands-on-hips pose suggests boredom instead of bitchy. Unfortunately, due to the lack of chemistry, many of Cohen's jokes fall flat.

One of the bright spots of the evening is the mother. For the 25 minutes she is on stage, Toren does more with her character than the leading actors do in the two-hour production. Her comic timing is effortless, as is her ability to convey her character — a woman lost in the past who seeks admiration and love using her sons as her courtiers.

In the end, redemption is achieved for most of the characters including Lenny, who finally realizes he is, and always will be, a putz.

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WASHINGTON SQUARE NEWS

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

Arts and Entertainment: Theater

Lenny, Lou and their Mom

by Rachel Bishop
Staff Writer
February 10, 2006
29th Street Rep

"Lenny and Lou" is a comedy based on characters nobody really wants to hear about. An old Jewish mother with Alzheimer's (or, as Lenny says, "old-timers") and her two sons: a loser accountant with no life (Lou) and a pathetic musician unable to give up delusions of future glory (Lenny) constitute this family. Most stories of tragically dysfunctional families describe them with tender sadness, but this is no "Dinner at The Homesick Restaurant."

Ian Cohen's play relentlessly makes fun of the characters while managing to make important points about life — using "Star Trek" analogies and raunchy sex. It is a rare gift to be able to make an audience both love and loathe all of the characters at the same time, and "Lenny and Lou" knows just when to lay on the absurd vulgarity and when to let the characters soften up and cry.

The audience cringes at Lenny's attempts to write songs ("I'm tired of all the tears/tired of all your sneers/I thought we'd be together for eternity/but now I see/you're not the one for me"), laughs while his psychotic girlfriend Julie hurls dishware at him and nods in cringing recognition as the mother, Fran, cavorts around the stage.

Fran, the addled mother played brilliantly by Suzanne Toren, is easily the most well-rounded character in the play. She is disgusting and unique, but manages to display enough typical motherly characteristics to remind us of our own mothers — nagging incessantly and singing show tunes in their hideous apartments that smell of mothballs. Her Alzheimer's gives her conversations an Abbott and Costello-esque quality, and her ability to steal the show is made all the more incredible by the fact that she spends most of the play limp under a blanket.

The other actors are excellent as well — as much for their nuanced portrayals of people in pain as for their ability to turn their faces beet-red on cue. The director and the actors do an excellent job of making the most of a tiny performance space and limited set, and the action is kept nonstop until necessity calls for a still moment.

Any play so unapologetically raunchy will find it difficult to keep from descending into vulgarity for its own sake. "Lenny and Lou" walks this line nicely. The more debauched moments — like Lenny having sex with his crazed girlfriend, Julie, on a kitchen table — are all at least somewhat crucial to the plot — and the blocking is mercifully arranged so that the audience doesn't see more than a glimpse of Lenny's schlong. The blatant undercurrents of incest are perhaps unnecessary, but they magnify the play's ability to make you cringe and laugh simultaneously. Lenny running around in his mother's dress is patently ridiculous, but in that charmingly stupid way always guaranteed to get a laugh.

The play ends in total disarray and hilarity. "It's your lucky day," Julie says to Lou. "It's not every day a loser gets to kill his mother and fuck his brother's wife."

It's not every day we get the pleasure of watching it, either.

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A CurtainUp Review Lenny & Lou

*Lemme tell ya what happens when ya die --nothin. You're dead.
And that's it. You're like this fuckin table. . .you're just gone. It's
like before you were born, except it's after you're dead ---Lou
That scares me. --- Lenny
Nothin to be scared of--- Lou
Why not?
Cause you're nothin.
-- Lou*

*I'm not nothin. Never will be nothing. Maybe bein nothin is
okay with you, but it ain't okay with me .---Lenny*



David Mogentale & Heidi James in
Lenny & Lou
(Photo: Robert Adam Mayer)

Since last I visited the 29th Street Rep, an upscale looking building has risen next door to the theater. With the play I was about to see tagged as the company's first comedy, could these devotees of true grit, like their neighborhood, be headed for a more gentrified style of theater?

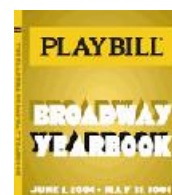
Not to worry. The company's reputation for plays peppered with x-rated language and peopled with characters who tend to live on the unsunny side of the street, whether in the inner city or the heartland, is safe. **Lenny & Lou is indeed comic -- but it's a comedy that's dark as coal and dismally tragic.**

Artistic director and creator of many an unforgettably brutal portrait, David Mogentale, doesn't have as much to work with here as some of his past roles though his self-absorbed, Lenny Feinstein stirs memories of the real rock star he so memorably played six years ago in *Bobby Supreme* (see link below).

Lenny's rock star ambitions are the obvious pipe dream of a totally self-deluded loser who, though pushing forty, relies on his younger brother Lou (Todd Wall) to bail him out of financial scrapes and be there for their mother Fran (Suzanne Toren) who has Alzheimer's. While Lou is the more responsible of the two brothers, none of playwright Ian Cohen's characters, except Fran's Haitian caretaker/housekeeper Sabrina (Carolyn Michelle Smith), would get high grades on a mental health or good common sense test.

Long before Alzheimer's caused Fran Feinstein to float in and out of reality and require a caretaker, her maternal ministrations made Lou painfully uptight and ripe for having an aborted romance turn him into one of the many walking wounded scurrying from boring jobs to lonely apartments. Fran's own dreams of Hollywood glamour obviously rubbed off on Lenny, and their unwholesome relationship left a mark that leads to some of the play's more bizarre comic developments.

Without giving away too much of Mr. Cohen's plot, the Feinstein saga begins with Lenny's frantic early morning visit to his brother's Forest Hills apartment. Instead of relying on



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Lou to take care of their mother's frequent demands for attention as is his wont, he heeded her latest middle-of-the-night request for bananas but forgot to bring his key to her apartment with the result that he now thinks that he may have scared her to death. Death does indeed figure in further developments but what turns this into a potential keystone killer crime drama is not triggered by the obvious loose cannon, Lenny, but by Lou, the long-suffering *nebbish*.

Director Sturgis Warner, whose staging of *Fuente* at Barrington Stage I admired (see link below), somehow fails to prevent the evening from ultimately feeling more like a drawn out joke than a really ferocious tragi-comedy. **Still, there are plenty of chuckles to be had from some of the more insane riffs: a hilarious sex scene between Lenny and his wife Julie, whose love-hate relationship with her hired killer brothers matches the Feinstein family's dysfunction . . . Lou's big blow-up and attempt to deal with the unwanted arrival of the opinionate Sabrina. . . the muscular Lenny's rummaging through his mother's belongings and donning a little black dress she wore in her younger days . . . and mom's ditzzy rendition of her favorite song, "You Made Me Love You."**

While Warner hasn't encouraged deeply nuanced acting, the ensemble does manage to bring their pathetic characters to life. Mogentale has the showiest role. He is well matched with Heidi James as his tough, sexually avaricious wife. Todd Wall captures the driven to the edge frustration of Lou, and Susanne Toren makes it quite clear that Fran wasn't too tightly wrapped long before Alzheimer's tore away at any pretense at normalcy. Carolyn Michelle Smith takes her minor part to its fairly standard issue limits.

Ryan Scott's set is a little too bland and lacking in detail but then maybe that's the idea -- to show that dysfunction is the decorative motif dominating all three Feinstein apartments. The wittiest illustrative touch is provided by Isabel Rubio's costumes for Mogentale and James. Like past 29th Street Rep plays, the total abandonment of socially acceptable behavior and language calls for a "not for everyone" caveat -- a caveat cheerfully ignored by their many loyal fans.

LINKS

[Fuente](#)

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LENNY & LOU

Playwright: Ian Cohen

Directed by Sturgis Warner

Cast: Heidi James (Julie Riggio), David Mogentale (Lenny Feinstein), Carolyn Michelle Smith (Sabrina DuChamp) Suzanne Toren (Fran Feinstein), Todd Wall (Lou Feinstein)

Set Design: Ryan Scott

Costume Design: Isabel Rubio

Lighting Design: Charles Foster

Sound Design: David Margolin Lawson

Fight Director: J. David Brimmer

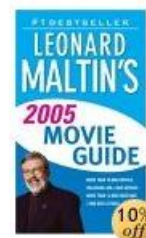
Running time: 2 hours and 15 minutes, including an intermission

29th Street Rep, 212 West 29th Street, 2nd Floor (7th/8th Aves) [SmartTix 212-868-4444](#)

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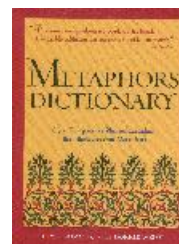
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Lenny & Lou



This is the New York premiere of *Lenny & Lou*, a new brutal comedy by Ian Cohen. This description is from the press materials: "Lenny is a middle-aged wannabe rock star with zero talent. Lou, his

younger brother, is a lonely accountant who hasn't had a date in fifteen years. And their wildly inappropriate mom, Fran, is permanently stuck in a senior moment. When the responsible Lou snaps during an early morning banana delivery, he unleashes a torrent of murder, sex, and cross-dressing." The press release says that the show is demented, debauched, and disturbing; it's for mature audiences only. The play premiered at Washington, D.C.'s Woolly Mammoth Theater in 2004.

Pictured: Heidi James and David Mogentale in a scene from Lenny & Lou (photo © Robert Adam Mayer)

nytheatre.com review

Martin Denton · January 29, 2006

A very good—though definitely not the only—reason to see *Lenny & Lou* is the chance to see David Mogentale in a dress. Fans of 29th Street Rep, the company Mogentale runs with co-artistic director Tim Corcoran, will know that this is just about the least likely costume for the burly, currently bearded, testosterone-laden actor who has played such diverse roles in the past as Killer Joe, Jack Henry Abbott, and Bobby Supreme. Especially this particular dress, a black slinky number, low cut with spaghetti straps.

But wear it he does, with panache if not exactly high style, as Lenny Feinstein, a wannabe rock star with issues, lots of issues, many of them centered around his disturbingly dysfunctional relationship with his mother Fran. The dress is hers, and he's wearing it to feel closer to her because she has just been strangled by Lenny's brother Lou and Lenny is dealing with his grief, admittedly in a weird way. Fran and Lenny were close, maybe too close: incest is suggested, as is a kind of screwy Oedipal/mother fixation that put me in mind of Norman Bates and his old lady.

By contrast, Lou, an accountant, is the normal one; in the context of the story,

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CAST

David Mogentale,
Heidi James, Carolyn
Michelle Smith,
Suzanne Toren, Todd
Wall

AUTHOR

Ian Cohen

DIRECTOR

Sturgis Warner

SETS

Ryan Scott

LIGHTING

Charles Foster

COSTUMES

Isabel Rubio

SOUND

David Margolin
Lawson

FIGHT DIRECTOR

J. David Brimmer

STAGE MANAGER

Cesar Malantic

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his strangling of Fran almost feels defensible: *Lenny & Lou* is that kind of play. It is, indeed, sitcom turned on its ear, a comical and quick-witted look at a family of fruitcakes: the East End plays of George F. Walker offer a frame of reference, as does *The Simpsons*, except the Feinsteins are a lot edgier and potentially more dangerous.

The play begins in Lou's dining room, in the middle of the night. Fran has called Lenny and asked him to bring her some bananas. He went to her apartment but couldn't get in, because Fran—not only hard of hearing but more than a little senile—couldn't figure out who he was. Lenny got mad and told her he was Adolph Eichmann, come to kill her. This did not get him into her apartment, and indeed has resulted in Lenny's arrival at Lou's, pulling his brother out of bed because he's worried that Fran may have dropped dead from fright. Lenny wants Lou to check on Fran—that's the sort of relationship the two brothers have—and Lou, after a lot of protestation, decides to look in on their mother.

Which leads us to the strangling incident: Lou is resentful of having to take care of both his mother, who never seemed to care much for him, and his good-for-nothing brother, and so the old lady's demented carryings-on this morning manage to push him over the edge. Meanwhile, Lenny returns to his home and his hot-tempered wife, Julie, who is also pretty fed up with Lenny's uselessness; in a hilarious sequence, she demands sex from him before they both leave for work. Back at Fran's, Lou is now acting like a character in a farce, piling lie upon lie as he tries to cover up what he's done to his mother when Fran's caregiver Sabrina turns up at the apartment.

Playwright Ian Cohen savvily ramps up the comedy in the play's second act, getting Lenny into his mom's dress for one thing, and also bringing Julie into Fran's apartment to push toward a scary-hilarious climax in which the two brothers go at one another like refugees from a Sam Shepard play.

Lenny & Lou is an actors' paradise, offering five choice parts that, here, are played to the hilt by an accomplished cast. Mogentale dominates through sheer force of personality (plus Lenny is the most colorful of a highly eccentric lot); he's as brutal and fearless as his fans expect, and hilarious in a number of deadpan comic moments that they might not see coming. Todd Wall more than holds his own opposite Mogentale as the more serious, less flamboyant Lou, making the character utterly believable at his most desperate and, when warranted, his most surprisingly explosive. Suzanne Toren is terrific as loony old Fran, and Carolyn Michelle Smith makes the most of her single scene as the Jamaican nurse Sabrina, trying vainly to let her agency know that she's been given the day off and being thwarted by technology old and new in the process. Heidi James completes the ensemble as the simmering powder keg Julie; earthy, brash, and supremely confident, she threatens to steal the show every time she shows up.

Under Sturgis Warner's well-paced direction, the show is splendidly mounted, with Ryan Scott's unit set particularly well-crafted and Isabel Rubio's costume design 100% on target. I'm not sure that *Lenny & Lou* is for everyone, but if bad language and frank talk about sex, disease, and death don't bother you then you might want to consider letting Cohen's play turn your views about those subjects cockeyed, at least for a couple of hours.

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FEBRUARY 05, 2006

Theater Review: Lenny & Lou

On Sundays Gothamist runs opinion pieces relevant to life in New York and reviews of recent books and performances. The judgments expressed below are entirely those of the author.



If people are going to continue to follow the age-old adage of "write what you know," my guess is that, based on demographics, we're going to see a lot more plays about

middle-aged people having to deal with their even aging, weakening parents. Obviously that's not a new dynamic, but with boomers as the ones now going through it, you can bet they'll be more vocal about the experience than past age cohorts. You can also bet that a good deal of what they say will be sensitive and fairly gentle – this is after all the generation that enshrined political correctness. Refreshingly, Ian Cohen's new play *Lenny and Lou*, about two brothers and their senile mother, is none of that; rather, it lives up entirely to the tradition of "brutal theater" that 29th Street Rep prides itself on. There are a few quieter, semi-serious segments, but for the most part, even if it isn't quite as offensive as all the "for mature audiences only" disclaimers make it out to be, the show is a pretty nonstop assault on quaint notions of good taste – and, I should add, a very funny, well-acted assault at that.

The opening scene is one of the best, and handily sets the pace and tone for the rest of the play. It's 5AM and Lenny (David Mogentale) has just barged into his brother's place in a panic because he's afraid he (Lenny) just killed their mother. As Lenny relates the story of the bizarre phonecall she made to him earlier, demanding bananas, and how he decided to go buy her some despite the hour, only to get to her apartment and find her in a sleep that won't break until he starts screaming that he's Eichmann come after her, Lou (Todd Wall) listens exasperatedly, the weary range of expressions shifting across his face telling a story of their own about how used to this sort of thing he is. As Lenny, Mogentale is a bundle of nervous energy very suited to the role: Lenny is, despite being married and late-thirties-ish, hardly a grown-up; he's more like a little boy with ADD who has to be at the center of everything going on around him. He has a part-time job but really wants to be a rock star, much to the annoyance of his wife, Julie (Heidi James), who has to support him financially and protect him from the wrath of her macho Italian brothers, plus she has a lot of issues of her own. Lou, meanwhile, has a real job and seems mature, especially in comparison with his brother, but he can't get laid so he still feels and is perceived as less than a man. Not surprisingly, this makes him a lot less naturally likeable than his eager, confident puppy dog of a brother, a charmer who has been able to get what he wants out of women from a young age, as we find out soon enough.

...continue reading after the jump...

Adding to the emotional cocktail for both guys is their relationship with their mother, which is complicated to say the least, and not just because she has Alzheimer's and is always forgetting that they're her sons. Unfortunately,

we don't see near enough of Fran (expertly portrayed by Suzanne Toren), because – spoiler alert! – when Lou goes to check on her after Lenny's aborted early-morning visit, he snaps after having to hear her complaints and confused questions one too many times, and he smothers her with a pillow. He's upset after he does this, but mostly because he's scared of

getting caught: his mother's daily caretaker, Sabrina (Carolyn Mitchell Smith) will arrive soon. He dispatches her quickly, but then Lenny arrives and the two have to come to terms with what has just transpired, which they do in large part by hearkening back to the past, going through boxes of old stuff and talking about what it was like growing up with Fran as a mom, since she was evidently far from a typical Jewish mother. The reminiscing process isn't the kind of deep, reflective coming to terms that inevitably forms the core of other plays with these kinds of family issues, but it's better that way— *Lenny and Lou* is "madcap" in a good sense, rushing pell-mell through absurdities and offenses. Actually, apart from one scene of mock explicit sex, the play isn't as willfully inappropriate and "brutal" as one might fear after reading advance material on it: mostly the brutality is in the honesty of the brothers' admissions of how they feel about their mother, and such honesty is plenty welcome at a time when false claims of sympathy and good feeling seem to be the order of the day. The brothers aren't heartless by any means, and Mogentale, Wall, and James all flesh their characters out beyond the stereotypes they first seem to be (the multifaceted result is even sometimes a little too strong, making the show lose a little momentum). But overall the effect of their dilemmas, which increase as the past is dredged up, is one of hilarity and gleeful absurdity that makes what would be a ponderous, melodramatic situation in other hands into a highly enjoyable performance.

Lenny and Lou is at 29th Street Rep., 212 W. 29th St., through Feb. 26. Shows are Thurs.-Mon. 8pm; tickets at [Smarttix](#), Fridays pay-what-you-can.

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Roughing and Blocking and Other Mechanics of Sex



Robert Adam Mayer

Heidi James and David Mogentale in "Lenny & Lou."

By **ROBERT SIMONSON**

Published: February 12, 2006

When "Lenny & Lou," a dysfunctional-family comedy by Ian Cohen, opened in Washington, Peter Marks, writing in The Washington Post, declared that "it positively pleads for the title of Dirtiest Show in Town."

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On stages in New York, several shows, including "Red Light Winter" at the Barrow Street Theater, could compete for the honor — along with a 29th Street Rep production of "Lenny & Lou." In the new version, the cast members David Mogentale and Heidi James take turns performing oral sex on each other before winding up on a dining table quickly cleared of the dishes.

But Sturgis Warner, director of "Lenny & Lou," describes the scene with all the prurience of an engineering problem. "So much of it is in the detail work," he said. "We roughed it out when we blocked that scene. Then we came back a week later and spent a few hours, trying different things and trying to pinpoint the moments — both what is doable, how can we make it work with the lines, how can we make it a progressive action. It's kind of cut and dried."

Cut and dried? Mr. Warner held his ground. "It's very Step One, Step Two, Step Three."

Rehearsal looked a little different to the playwright, Mr. Cohen, who adorned the scene with a few bits of choice dialogue. "Where'd you learn to do that?" is one of the few printable examples. He recalled several funny moments as the actors tried to figure out

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whose hands went where.

If the cast was embarrassed about discussing the choreography of simulated copulation, the actors masked it well. Mr. Mogentale, who is also artistic director of 29th Street Rep (and who said, "Every play I do, I'm naked more or less"), recalled telling Mr. Warner that "I wanted to be able to show my bare bum and let's do it from there." His onstage partner, Ms. James, assumes three compromising positions in two fraught minutes. "We're both very physical actors, anyway," she said matter of factly. "It would just be like a fight scene, or anything else you had to do."

Mr. Warner said it helped that the onstage lovers were already acquainted: "You didn't have to deal with two actors who just met each other, and three days later they're working on the sex scene."

Even so, he eased their path. "There was a period of time when we kind of marked our way through it," he said, "until that one day..." Mr. Warner hesitated.

Ms. James finished the thought: "... and, O.K., now the underwear is coming down."

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THE LITTLE DOG LAUGHED

The Little Dog Laughed is a new comedy by playwright Douglas Carter Beane (*As Bees in Honey Drown*), directed by Scott Ellis (*Twelve Angry Men*), about a male Hollywood movie star who may or may not be gay -- still a taboo out there.

"I play an agent/manager/aspiring producing partner to a young Tom Hanksian good-guy movie actor, right before he breaks out to become a big, bankable star," explains charming cast-member, Julie White, "and my goal is to make that happen; only my boy suffers from a slight, recurring case of homosexuality. It's a love story that I need to thwart."

The cast of four in this rollicking two-acter includes another couple, "an adorable, young club kid/male prostitute and his Holly Golightly girlfriend," according to White, who puts forth the crux of the action: "Can I make it all work out to make everybody happy?" Apparently, the fashions are fabulous and there's some brief boy nudity. Quoting the playwright, White adds, "If the boys are naked, and the girls are fabulously dressed, you know it's a Douglas Carter Beane play."

Second Stage Theatre, 307 W. 43rd St., (212) 246-4422. Previews Dec. 13, opens Jan. 10. Tues., 7 p.m.; Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; mats. Wed. & Sat., 2 p.m., Sun., 3 p.m. \$42-\$65.

LENNY AND LOU

The excellent 29th St. Rep is best known for staging hard-edged dramas, with plots centered around rough themes like a trailer park murder schemes. Their latest, *Lenny and Lou*, is no less gritty, but it's a full-out, demented comedy. Written by Conev Islander Ian Cohen, the play revolves around a repressed New York Jewish family, and the sibling rivalry between two grown brothers vying for their manipulative mother's love.

Cohen explains that he began writing the piece as if he was creating "exaggerated, stupid" versions of him and his younger brother, and was inspired by the guilt that went into caring for their elderly mother. "But then while writing it," he says, "I started to go crazy and took these characters to the extreme. I made the mother insanely obsessed with sex, and in doing that, everything changed."

The character of Lenny is a selfish woman-chaser, "a low down, egotistical con man," who is married to Julie, "a Mafia princess who uses him," while younger brother Lou is "a sexually repressed accountant." Everything goes haywire one night, and Cohen promises, "There's one raunchy, madcap, insane moment after another." A fifth character is Sabrina, the health-care attendant, about whom Cohen notes, "She is the one normal person in the play, so at least the audience has someone they can identify with."

29th St. Rep, 212 W. 29th St., (212) 868-4444. Jan. 19-Feb. 19. Thurs. - Mon., 8 p.m. \$19.

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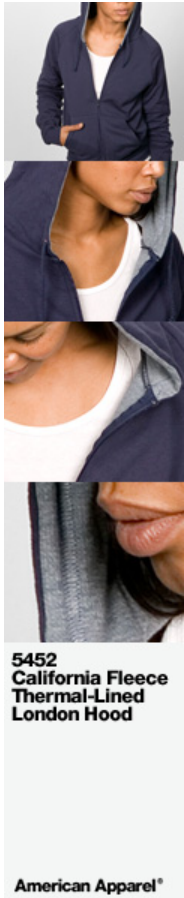
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