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'Lenny & Lou': Comedy That's a Kick in the Pants

By Peter Marks

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, September 1, 2004; Page C04

You know those silly social taboos against suffocating your mother or having sex with your brother's girlfriend or exposing yourself to your grown children? *Fugeddaboutem!* Feel free to express yourself: Smother! Copulate! And let's see what you got under the nightie! Live, in other words, as the low-rent Feinsteins do in "Lenny & Lou," Ian Cohen's smutty-funny cesspool of unbridled outer-borough neurosis.

This Woolly Mammoth production, a world premiere directed with a fastballer's dexterity by Tom Prewitt, is comedy gone mental, the sort that asks the crucial question, What if the Oedipal and assorted other complexes and anxieties of a repressed Jewish family from Sheepshead Bay could be unleashed as if they were the contents of Pandora's Box?

In such a play, no stunt is too shocking, and "Lenny & Lou," with its potty mouth and steady stream of uninhibited displays, positively pleads for the title of Dirtiest Show in Town. It's not pornographic exactly, though one scene of acrobatic rutting is so well choreographed it would make a decent novelty act in an X-rated Cirque du Soleil. No, "Lenny & Lou" is merely reveling in a vision of family life in which the id has been liberated, like a big, slobbery golden retriever romping in the backyard.

Vulgar is the word, and sometimes Cohen points the shenanigans in the direction of the baldly sophomoric. He's too much the gross-out king testing the limits, for instance, when he has Lenny (Howard Shalwitz) tell us of his brother Lou's (Michael Russotto) childhood preoccupation with the flotsam in his nose. Nevertheless, Cohen is a swell composer of comic crises -- at times "Lenny & Lou" borrows imaginatively from the conventions of farce -- and the risible lines he gives these actors crackle with a buoyant authenticity. The play practically defines guilty pleasure.

Cohen's dialogue is spoken with an antic zest by Prewitt's cast, which -- with one surprising exception -- is smashingly up to the assignment. Shalwitz, especially, is spectacular. Playing a sleazy, schnooky bank employee who imagines himself an undiscovered rock legend, Shalwitz is so in his element in Lenny's oily skin that you can positively smell the performance. The hollow-eyed gaze, the praying-mantis posture, the greasy hair, the black polish on the bitten-down nails (nice touch) imbue him with the look of one of those dazed deadheads you see lingering outside a 7-Eleven at odd hours, inhaling a can of beer.

Russotto's Lou is a sweet, whiny loser, such a schlep he makes Lenny seem a veritable Jude Law, and Jennifer Mendenhall (what type can't this actress play?) brings the necessary from-the-old-neighborhood hard shell to Lenny's Italian American wife, Julie. Erika Rose contributes a fresh and feisty performance as a West Indian cleaning woman with a firm moral grasp of the universe. Only the usually sure-footed Nancy Robinette is wobbly here, playing a senile Jewish shrew from deepest Brooklyn, a part that is

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beyond the scope of her natural gifts.

"Lenny & Lou" offers a seriously twisted account of a patented family dynamic, the rivalry between a pair of brothers for a mother's love. In this case, the mother, Fran, played by Robinette, is an absolute witch, her dementia exacerbating her worst instincts. She has strung her grown-up sons along on a river of guilt and uncomfortably unresolved sexual feelings -- the Freudian element is unmistakable in her demand that they bring bananas, purportedly to help her digestion, when they visit her -- and now that she is less able to discern fantasy from reality, her impulses have become more graphic and cruel.

What sets the dizzy plot of "Lenny & Lou" in motion is a violent, cathartic act by Lou that, in a sense, consummates his love-hate relationship with his mother, who has always favored the older son, Lenny. The play drops more than subtle hints of a confused and bizarre attachment between Fran and Lenny; Lenny is both a sex addict -- which seems to suit Mendenhall's randy Julie just fine -- and a mama's boy who evinces a strange affection for his mother's clothing.

Robinette is the least convincing player in this frantic comedy because, despite her best efforts, her energy is all positive. (She's also at least 20 years too young for the role.) She can't help it; her dithering stage persona is essentially lovable, and Fran has to be an unmitigated downer, a destructive misery to match a Category Five hurricane. When the impressively disintegrating Russotto stalks her with a pillow, brandishing it like a lethal weapon, it's funny only if you share his liberating joy in the use he dreams up for it. Here, it's not a delicious felony, only an expedient one.

Still, Cohen has constructed an entertaining, boundary-pushing comedy, a rebuke to bland sitcom writing, and Prewitt offers a shrewd assist with his pacing of the material. Although Anne Gibson's threadbare scenery is a tad depressing -- it smacks too much of the dreary set of "The Honeymooners" -- Michael Kraskin's sound design is a wonderful approximation of the sensory overload of New York.

Shalwitz, Woolly's longtime artistic director, is the chief attraction here. It's scary how marvelously this role suits him, how Lenny's depraved desperation can be made to seem so real, so tangible, so hilarious. Here's an actor to give malodorous parasitic bottom-feeding a good name.

Lenny & Lou, by Ian Cohen. Directed by Tom Prewitt. Sets, Anne Gibson; lighting, Adam Magazine; sound, Michael Kraskin; costumes, Debra Kim Sivigny; fight choreography, John Gurski; dialect coach, Christine Hirrel. Approximately 2 hours 25 minutes. Through Sept. 26 at Goldman Theater, D.C. Jewish Community Center, 1529 16th St. NW. Call 800-494-8497 or visit www.boxofficetickets.com.

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ARTS > STAGE

Parent Trap

Twisted, perverse chaos thrive in 'Lenny and Lou'

by *Jolene Munch*
Published on [09/02/2004](#)

When Woolly Mammoth issues the caveat "For Mature Audiences," they're not kidding. Ian Cohen's shockingly outlandish comedy *Lenny & Lou* is about as "adult" as it gets without resorting to neon pole-dancing and a surprise appearance from the fuzz. Aside from those minor omissions, there is plenty of raunchy, bawdy, jaw-dropping, eye-popping sex, casual inferences to incest and other moral depravities, and sober senility to offend even the most offensive offenders.

In other words, a good time is had by all.

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After last season's kooky, hypersexual *Cooking with Elvis*, Tom Prewitt is back in the director's chair again, orchestrating outrageous carnal encounters and more twisted, perverse chaos inside the madhouse world of Cohen's imagination. Anyone brave enough to have witnessed the vivid, aesthetically-explicit

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rendezvous in Lee Hall's *Elvis* can only imagine what sort of sordid and distorted tricks Prewitt can pull out of his staging bag.

With Prewitt cheering them on, Woolly goes all the way with *Lenny & Lou*, a deranged tale of two incorrigible brothers who may or may not have drawn the final breath from their aging mother.

If Cohen's comedy elevates the dysfunctional family to a whole new level, then he has catapulted the term "Momma's boy" beyond the stratosphere.



In his opening scene, Cohen immediately establishes who these crazy, pathetic men are after a raucous late-night bananas delivery to Mom's Brooklyn abode ("I haven't moved my bowels!" she yaks). Safe back in Forest Hills, Queens, the siblings argue and bicker over who is best capable of caring for their single living parent. The conversation grows from familiar and laughable to hysterical to downright incredulous as we discover each brother's out of control neuroses. Lenny (Howard Shalwitz) eventually convinces brother Lou (Michael Russotto) to go back and check on their mother, Fran, to be sure she didn't suffer a heart attack after the harrowing ordeal. From here the family fabulous, including Lenny's oversexed and underpaid tart of a wife Julie, spins itself into the sickest, most head-shaking comedy of errors since the Bush Administration.

While the Feinstein brothers struggle to keep a hired nurse away and fuss over who gets to claim all of Fran's loot, supposedly stashed away in an old cigar box, family secrets surface and Cohen boxes his story into a corner by creating desperate circumstances for desperate people. During intermission the audience has an idea of where the story could go, of how it could possibly develop: It's either going to get really, really serious, or really, really absurd.

Naturally it's the latter.

Cohen's second act degenerates into a downward spiral of more and more lunatic territory while Prewitt's daring cast takes risk after risk with their fierce comic choices and voracious appetites for realism. And no one tackles more of this risky business than Shalwitz, Woolly's own Artistic Director.

Shalwitz, who portrays the cross-dressing, nail-painting sex addict

Lenny, spends most of his time onstage outfitted in a bright red frock of a dress, fantasizing about becoming a rock 'n roll star while fending off his horny, undersexed mother. Both he and Russotto create an electric rivalry that practically explodes off the stage.

Jennifer Mendenhall's brash, crash, cursing Julie provides the sparks. The reliably spunky Jennifer Mendenall plays the brash, crass, cursing Julie with palpable rigor. Erika Rose shines in the small role of Sabrina, a wise "black chick " nurse who looks after Mrs. Feinstein.

Lenny & Lou
By Ian Cohen
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But it is Nancy Robinette as the banana-biting, tantrum-throwing matron longing for the Hollywood stage who really runs this show. Robinette is a riot as the senior who has trouble recalling her sons' names, but can rattle off the lyrics of dated showtunes.

Woolly's usually-high technical standards are met with a multi-functional living room set designed by Anne Gibson. Her Brooklyn brownstone interior is creatively lit by Adam Magazine, whose intricate New York subway map is reflected in bright tape upstage.

Upon *Lenny & Lou's* foundation of absurdity, Cohen constructs a rare, revealing glimpse into the apathy of a country determined to lock up its elders in nursing homes. While it certainly provides a lightweight punching bag and lots of low-brow humor, *Lenny & Lou* delivers one final knock-out blow, targeting all those ungrateful progeny willing to throw away the key.

([TOP OF PAGE](#))

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August 23 - September 26, 2004

Lenny & Lou

Reviewed August 29

Running time 2:30 - one intermission
Performed at the [Theater J](#) facility

Caution: Simulated sex acts and other material definitely inappropriate for young audiences  A Potomac Stages Pick for making you laugh and think at the same time

The subject, the actions and the dialogue of Ian Cohen's new play are all so outrageously inappropriate for public exposure that only the manic energy of Tom Prewitt's direction of this cast of Woolly veterans - including artistic director Howard Shalwitz in one of his rare on-stage appearances - could make it the enjoyable, fascinating experience it is. You will find yourself laughing at matricide, incest, sibling rivalry, adultery, sexual compulsion, Alzheimer's disease and telephone automated menus completely indiscriminately and with guffaws, not just titters. You will also find yourself pondering some pithy comments and profound observations while you come to like characters who can behave abominably. Go figure! (No, just go watch.)



Storyline: Grown brothers Lenny & Lou attempt to cope with the difficulties presented by their mother's advancing dementia. Lenny is a free-thinking middle-aged hippy, stuck in a marriage built on sexual rather than intellectual or emotional compatibility, who still hopes to make it singing his songs in clubs. Lou is a repressed accountant who hasn't had a date since that time fifteen years ago that Lenny loused up the closest he had come to a chance at a romantic attachment. When Lenny's wife discovers evidence of his infidelity she comes after him with a gun only to find she's not the first one on the scene capable of homicide.

A number of qualities separate this farcical romp from other plays that let situations spin apparently out of control. One is the superb logic of the spin. Cohen sets the plot up with two scenes that make the pressure being felt by the two brothers clear. The scenes also introduce each brother in such detail that the audience understands just why he feels the pressures he feels and just how trapped he thinks he is. Both scenes are delightfully funny on their own, however, so there is never a feeling that the show hasn't yet begun and we are just witnessing the explanatory material. Cohen's gift for multi-layered retorts plays a key role here in keeping the audience on its linguistic toes. The closer attention you pay the greater the reward for your time.

That time is well spent, indeed, watching the work of this cast. There is Howard Shalwitz whose Lenny goes from mania to neurotic and back with remarkable energy. There is also Michael Russotto whose Lou never leaves logic behind while pursuing the most illogical courses of action. Nancy Robinette's all too brief moments on stage as

their mother are a joyful mix of the logic of Gracie Allen, the screwball comedy of Lucille Ball and the raunchiest of the current crop of standup comics. Jennifer Mendenhall who can make more out of a single expletive than most actresses can out of an entire speech is Lenny's jealous wife, whose brothers, by the way, happen to be Italian hit men but who aren't affiliated with any organization - got that!?! Only Erika Rose's scene as mother's daytime help drags before getting fully up to speed. All the rest seem to start from a high point and build.

That Prewitt marshals these forces is a testament to their collaborative genius, the strength of the script from which they work and his own talent for drawing an audience's attention to exactly the right place on the stage and precisely the right moment. So much is happening on Anne Gibson's three-apartment set as Debra Kim Sivigny's costumes get donned, shed, changed and exchanged that it takes the clear hand of a director to keep the focus from blurring and the pace from slipping or racing too far ahead. Under Prewitt, this wacky evening builds to a climax at just the right moment.

Written by Ian Cohen. Directed by Tom Prewitt. Fight choreography by John Gurski. Design: Anne Gibson (set) Debra Kim Sivigny (costumes) Annica Graham (properties) Adam Magazine (lights) Michael Kraskin (sound) Stan Barouh (photography) Elizabeth Wiesner (stage manager). Cast: Jennifer Mendenhall, Nancy Robinette, Erika Rose, Michael Russotto, Howard Shalwitz.

October 25 - December 19, 2004

Grace

The world premier of a play by Craig Wright (*Pavilion, Recent Tragic Events, Melissa Arctic*) will be performed at the Warehouse Theatre on 7th Street NW. The play presents the events leading up to the scene with which it starts with three dead bodies in a Florida condo.

December 8, 2004 - January 2, 2005

Our Lady of 121st Street

John Vreeke will direct the new play by Stephen Adly Guirgis whose *Jesus Hopped the A Train* played the Round House Silver Spring facility in 2004. The events of the play are triggered when the friends of a deceased nun gather for a viewing in a funeral home only to find there is no body to view.

March - April, 2005

Big Death and Little Death

Mickey Birnbaum's dark comedy is slated to be the inaugural show in Woolly's new home theater at 7th and D Streets NW. Howard Shalwitz will direct.

May - June 2005

The Clean House

Only Woolly would brag that their last show of the season "overflows with jokes we don't understand," but it is understandable given the fact that the comedy centers on a cleaning woman who'd rather tell jokes in Portuguese than straighten up. Rebecca Taichman directs Sarah Ruhl's comedy.

Washington City Paper

Theater review

From the September 3, 2004 issue.

The Subject Was Neurosis

By Trey Graham

Lenny & Lou

By Ian Cohen

Directed by Tom Prewitt

Produced by the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company

At the District of Columbia Jewish Community Center to Sept. 26

I told myself it was gonna be a while before I was able to shake the picture of a carrot-topped Howard Shalwitz gyrating in a slinky, sweat-stained red satin dress outta my head. And I still think that was a reasonable thought—but I hadn't reckoned on Nancy Robinette hitching up her bathrobe and starting to hump the right front corner of the refrigerator. That's right: Woolly Mammoth's back, and with the world premiere of Ian Cohen's brashly Brooklynite, enthusiastically Oedipal comedy Lenny & Lou, it's kicking off its 25th-anniversary season with—sorry, can't resist—a bang.

Shalwitz, Woolly's co-founder and artistic director, takes to the stage for the first time since 2001's *Rocket to the Moon* as Lenny, a ne'er-do-well sex addict and no-talent guitarist whose impatience with and guilty neglect of his Alzheimer's-stricken ma (Robinette) is eclipsed only by his resentment for (and exploitation of) his mensch of a younger brother. That would be Michael Russotto's Lou, an accountant and sexual martyr who's been dutifully tending to the querulous old bat while Lenny pursues his patently absurd musical ambitions. One unfortunate night, though, the roles are reversed, with predictably disastrous results: When the lights come up, a panicky Lenny is explaining to a boggled Lou how his bungled attempt to handle their mom's 3 a.m. call demanding the immediate delivery of bananas (paging Dr. Freud!) has ended in an enraged Adolf Eichmann impersonation and the possibility of the old lady's untimely demise. Anyone who's ever seen Shalwitz's finely calibrated knack for the neurotic spiral will have a pretty good idea how hilarious the first 10 minutes of Lenny & Lou is.

The good news is that Woolly's world-premiere production is very rarely any less hysterical. A visit to confirm Mom's continued respiration results in what can only be summarized as a dysfunctional-family trifecta: Russotto's long-suffering Lou winds up offing one relative, having what's apparently some fairly acrobatic sex with another, and learning from yet a third that his one long-ago true love was

hardly the blushing flower he believed her to be—all on the way to a personal epiphany that'll deep-six what little domestic tranquility remains among the family Feinsein. Cohen mines the specifics of one improbably fucked-up Sheepshead Bay clan for universalities that we can all appreciate, even if our own brothers and sisters practice a more garden-variety twistedness: Sibling resentment, intergenerational manipulation, and the terrible reality of parental sexuality are just some of what makes the Feinsein brothers' home front such a perilous free-fire zone.

Jennifer Mendenhall trades her natively crisp diction for the broad flatnesses of Brooklyn, turning in a deliciously homicidal performance as Lenny's jealous, gym-toned sugar mama—a woman whose rage at her husband's halfassery somehow fuels her voracious sexual appetite for him. And no, I'm not guessing: An angrily athletic Act 1 sequence makes for another transgressively comic installment in Woolly's ever-expanding tradition of blunt onstage excursions into pathological carnality.

Russotto delivers what's almost certainly the most committed and convincing performance I've ever seen him give; his Lou's as real and desperate, under the outrageousness, as any Tennessee Williams heroine—and almost as hopeless. And Robinette, going balls to the wall in her two relatively short stretches onstage, finds both the exasperated humor and the exhausted pathos in a character who's lost her grip but still has her humanity—not to mention a nagging case of the itch.

Lenny & Lou slackens to a simmer in an unnecessarily protracted bit involving an inconveniently persistent hospice worker—a dubiously effective Erika Rose as an underwritten “outsider” character, whose take on American standards of family loyalty is apparently meant to provide a bit of a moral. But otherwise Cohen and director Tom Prewitt, who's got de Sade's taste for confrontational kinkiness and Feydeau's own instinct for timing, keep the comedy boiling madly right up to the finale, in which all the insanity recedes to leave two Feinsteins thinking bleakly about the dynamic they've always lived by—and how they'll ever manage from here on out. The last sound as the lights go down on Lenny & Lou isn't raucous laughter, but a ringing silence; it's the signal that Cohen's crazed clan and Woolly's wild audience have both sobered up enough to recognize that family insanity, however impossible and individually maddening it may seem, is one thing we can all pretty much count on. **CP**

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It's risqué but hilarious Woolly Mammoth's 'Lenny & Lou' onstage at the DCJCC

by Lisa Traiger

Special to WJW

Deliriously decadent, dark and disturbing, *Lenny & Lou*, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company's latest, a world premiere, is so funny it will have you laughing until you cry. And then, at the end, this bleak tale of an amoral Jewish family will ultimately have you shedding a real tear or two.

Jewish theater typically revolves around the family, its ups and its downs, its relationships, hopes and needs. *Lenny & Lou* is no exception, but it's a classic family drama with a twist or three. This Jewish family needs all the help it can get, what with intense sibling rivalries, parental backstabbing, infidelities and just plain insanity tearing apart two brothers and their aging and infirm mother.

I don't know that any amount of 12-step programming, tough love or rabbinical counseling could help mend the dysfunctional Feinsein family. But that's playwright Ian Cohen's point ultimately: Sure, your family may be crazy, what with Uncle Max rambling on about the old country, and Aunt Syl hiking up her skirts too high. In Cohen's book that's minor league, and in the end you may even feel better about your own little familial squabbles after an evening with these wackos.

What a pair of poor *schlubs* Lenny and Lou are. Neither has had any success in life: Lou toils as an accountant, while Lenny pretends he's a would-be composer and guitarist who hasn't had a gig aside from some skanky bars. Their mother, Fran, is missing more than a few screws lately and, as she shuffles around in her house dress, slippers and wild gray hair, singing 1940s show tunes and wondering who the strange men claiming to be her sons really are, it's hard not to laugh.

Playwright Cohen has an ear for the working-class vernacular poetry of Brooklyn and his dialogue, spoken fast with plenty of exaggerated vowels and obscenities thrown in, is hysterical. The nonsequiturs and off-putting remarks, curses and criticism lend these fast-spoken conversations a level of absurdity that stills sounds somehow true to life.

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Fran's sons are fed up with her and her overbearing demands – bananas at 4 a.m. – along with unconditional love.

Lenny, the pseudo artist of the family, bemoans, "That ungrateful [female dog]. If she wasn't my mother I wouldn't have anything to do with her." Later, he complains she has "old timers," his Archie Bunkerism for Alzheimer's.

The family is so high strung, it make the antennas on the Empire State Building look like telephone poles. The bickering, inflected with screeches and moans, vulgarities and shrugs, becomes nearly operatic as the Feinsteins snipe and carp about everything from money to who was loved more by wives and one-time girl friends.

There's no love lost between these brothers, and the Cain-and-Abel plot line degenerates into madcap nonsense before Cohen expertly draws it all back together.

Lou, the upstanding one who takes care of crazy old Ma, finds himself in a mess with a body to hide, a story to invent, an apartment to clean out and a lot of figuring out to do. Soon enough Lenny is in on the caper too, and his shrewish wife, Julie, a sister of contract hit men – but not Mafia, she is quick to insist – tracks the pair down.

There, she takes on Lenny for his infidelities, but that becomes the least of his worries. Insanity and hilarity of the most vulgar sort ensue, and to try to explain the plot more specifically will only ruin the evening.

Suffice it to say, it's an oddball comedy of errors with a solidly R-rated tone. There are the continual obscenities all the characters spout and the multiple copulative poses – nearly half the *Kama Sutra*– performed by Lenny and Julie.

Throw in a little cross-dressing, some acted on Oedipal urgings, even hints of incest, and it's clear that *Lenny & Lou* isn't for everyone.

But if sex and death, infidelity and perversity don't faze you, you'll laugh until you cry.

Director Tom Prewitt seems to have given only one directive for his superb cast: More.

As Lenny, Woolly co-founder and artistic director Howard Shalwitz is beyond likable with his lost, artistic soul and sleazy give-me attitude; it's a muscular and rugged performance.

Michael Russotto as the more straight-laced but still - damaged Lou soon goes over the deep end; his performance is a manic tour de force, physically a riot, emotionally a roller coaster. Jennifer Mendenhall's Julie, with her born-and-bred New Yawk accent and her hell-in-heels attitude, is riotously funny and right on target.

As the home health aide, Erika Rose has a modest part, but she makes the most of it, milking a lilting Jamaican accent. Finally, Nancy Robinette as the wacko Ma, finds a way to

make this most difficult of mothers into a funny-sad character, a lost soul, wild eyed and confused one moment, a sharp-tongued snake the next. She unmasks the miserable truth about Alzheimer's by taking the comic episodes of forgetfulness to the extreme with Abbott and Costello-like bits about whether one of the boys is her son or Adolph Eichmann.

You really have to be there to get the full force of it.

Prewitt's found clever methods to keep the play moving quickly like a runaway subway train. He dresses the stage hands in reflective vests that match Anne Gibson's set design, which includes a New York City subway map of Brooklyn as a backdrop.

Sound designer Michael Kraskin's city noises – sirens, crashes, street bustle and banging – sound just like New York, and Debra Kim Sivigny's costumes have that lower-middle class discount store feel that suits the characters' down-and-out lives.

"Edgy" is how the Woollies most frequently describe themselves, and in the world of Ian Cohen's *Lenny & Lou*, the company's five actors hit the edge, blithely go beyond it and never look back. The result is penetrating, hysterical and finally poignant.

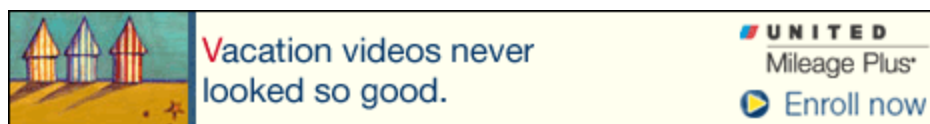
Lenny & Lou by Ian Cohen is onstage through Sept. 26 at the DCJCC. Tickets can be purchased by calling 800-494-8497 or going to boxofficetickets.com. Recommended for ages 16 and up.

Lisa Traiger writes frequently on the performing arts.

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The Washington Times

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'Lenny & Lou' takes subject to extremes

By Jayne Blanchard

Published September 3, 2004

The deranged family values of the Feinstein family would stymie even Dr. Phil. The Oprah-sanctioned TV shrink might throw in the towel if confronted with the sicko, hilarious antics of kinky Jewish mother Fran (Nancy Robinette) -- her senior moments are mostly XXX-rated -- and her two sons Lenny (Howard Shalwitz) and Lou (Michael Russotto) in Ian Cohen's shocking epic, "Lenny & Lou."

Woolly Mammoth has been known for pushing the envelope in such productions as "Cooking with Elvis" and "Christmas on Mars." With "Lenny & Lou" they push that envelope to scatological and sexually deviant new extremes.

From graphic depictions of sex acts and partial nudity to salty language and comments so inappropriate that John Waters might blanch, "Lenny & Lou" is an orgy of bad behavior.

Yet, for all the smut and outrage, "Lenny & Lou" is at its heart a radical reaction to dealing with an aging parent. Fran's mind is failing, and although she can remember show tunes from the '30s and '40s, she keeps forgetting she has two middle-aged sons.

Lou, an accountant who has never taken a sick day, is the responsible one, while Lenny lives the debauched life of a rock 'n' roller, only without the talent.

The tables turn when Lou snaps and Lenny must step up to the plate for the first time in his life. Given that Lenny is the product of a smothering, sexpot mother (her pet name for her son is "Lover") and an absentee father, you can just imagine how unprepared he is for a crisis. As his brother says, "You're not bad, just stupid."

What keeps you from feeling slimy is Tom Prewitt's tight direction and expertly abandoned performances by Miss Robinette, Mr. Shalwitz, Mr. Russotto, and Jennifer Mendenhall as Lenny's lewdly hormonal, Mafia princess wife, Julie.

The entire company also has a sure hand with the combative, "dees, dems, and does" rhythm of Mr. Cohen's snappy Brooklyn patter. Mr. Prewitt unleashes the play's comedy in all its puerile glory without letting things spin out of control.

Mr. Shalwitz is the artistic director of Woolly Mammoth, and you'd be hard-pressed to think of Arena's Molly Smith or Michael Kahn from the Shakespeare Theatre appearing in a role that requires cross-dressing (he looks pretty good in a bright red frock), sexual acrobatics that would be the envy of Cirque du Soleil, singing badly and delivering reams of potty-mouth dialogue.

Mr. Shalwitz dives into the role's muck with glee, even eliciting a touch of sympathy for Lenny, an aspiring musician who has prolonged adolescence way past the point of decency.

Fran is someone who blithely flashes her episiotomy scars and shares with her children porn star-like memories of her husband. Miss Robinette captures the alarmingly unhinged qualities of the elderly character while also revealing the quite arresting kook she must've been when younger.

As Lou, Mr. Russotto grows from a frustrated nebbish to a man taking his first, shaky steps independently of his crazy family. The splendor of his portrayal lies in the details -- the careful, resigned way he makes instant coffee in the microwave, his hemmed-in and resentful body language when stuck in the same room as his brother.

The carnally voracious Julie is played with randy lack of inhibition by Miss Mendenhall. Julie is the kind of gal who not only enjoys multiple partners but multiple locations, and her aerobic approach to sex is impressive and wildly funny.

As enjoyable as it is watching the extreme antics of these familiar actors, "Lenny & Lou" fails to reach a satisfying conclusion.

Instead, it simply runs out of material. There is an energy dip and sense of desperation in the second half, which is almost inevitable when a play is as jacked up as "Lenny and Lou."

For the most part, however, "Lenny & Lou" delivers as a sidesplitting and perverse look at familial love.

WHAT: "Lenny & Lou" by Ian Cohen

WHERE: Woolly Mammoth at Theatre J, 1529 16th St., NW, Washington

WHEN: 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays. Through Sept. 26.

TICKETS: \$24 to \$42

PHONE: 800/494-8497

MAXIMUM RATING: FOUR STARS

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[Return to the article](#)