

FINE ARTS

# Absolutely marvelous acting brings 'Caregiver' to life

Jewish Ensemble Theatre presents "The Caregiver" by Ian Strausfogel at the Aaron DeRoy Theatre, lower level of the Jewish Community Center, 6000 W. Maple Road (corner of Maple and Drake Roads), West Blainfield through May 30. Performances 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday; 8 p.m. Saturday; and 2 p.m. Sunday; May 9, May 12-16, May 19-23, and May 26-30. Tickets \$15 to \$23, discounts for seniors and students, call (248) 788-2900. BY VICTORIA DIAZ SPECIAL WRITER

With "The Caregiver" now premiering at the Jewish Ensemble Theatre, opera director and librettist Ian Strausfogel makes his debut as a playwright.

Featuring original music by Allen Shawn, "The Caregiver" is a contemporary story with a theme as simple — and as complicated — as love itself. It's brought to wonderful life here by some absolutely marvelous acting, some music that more than fills the bill, and a well-wrought production that's reflected in everything from the evocative lighting to the costumes to the sure hand of director Evelyn Orbach.

In "The Caregiver," Eric is a young conductor who is preparing to make his debut at Carnegie Hall. On the cusp of a promising career, he seems to need most what he can't quite attain: the support and approval of his father who won't attend the debut, and who sometimes refers to his thirty-year-old son

as "a baby."

As the play begins, the two men are at home in the New York apartment they share, discussing the music Eric will conduct.

"The conductor serves the composer," says Eric.

"Nein, nein," argues the father. "The conductor serves the music."

It is the first of many disagreements we will witness between these rather argumentative men who have come to a crossroads in their life. Eric is just beginning his career; his father, once a renowned conductor himself, has been forced to give up his profession because of the onset of apparently incurable dementia. The differences in the two men run deep. Eric, you might say, sees the world pretty much in black and white. From his viewpoint, reality may not be pleasant — as love itself, but it's still reality, and anyone who doesn't recognize this is asking for a lot of trouble. His father, on the other hand, is an emotional, imaginative man who follows his heart, and who is not above donning a pair of rose-colored glasses if that is what it takes to get through the day.

When a young woman named Laura enters the picture, she quickly impresses Eric because he seems to possess a marked gift for making the old man his old self again. And when Eric later leaves for a concert tour, she is hired on as a caregiver in his absence. Soon, the girl with the "wack-o" sense of humor and the elderly Weingarten (who,

even in his dotage, is something of a comic himself) discover that they are not just two desperately-needy individuals, but soulmates. For awhile, the world seems happy and right. Weingarten even returns to his music. But then, something happens. And when Eric returns, he sees Laura as a money-grubbing, sick "fraud," the last person fit to care for his ailing father. Immediately, he sets about the separate the two.

As Weingarten, Sol Frieder is simply remarkable. By turns he is cranky, cruel, comical, sad, bewildered, confused, sly, deeply-tragic. Whatever he is, he's infinitely convincing, and brings to the role a very human, artless quality with which you can all identify.

As his son, Eric, David Wolber does a good job with a slightly tricky role. He seems rather mechanical at times, but perhaps this quick liss more with the character than with the actor himself.

In the role of Laura, the caregiver, Kate Willinger simply glows. Her Laura is so naturally ebullient, so filled with life and warmth that she seems to light up this stage. We miss her presence when she's not in a scene, and though we are not always sure we like or admire her character, we are always certain we believe in her.

Though one might hunger for a drama with more hopefulness overall, "The Caregiver" offers enough food for thought to sustain us for a long, long time.



Drama: Kate Willinger (left) David Wolber (center) and Sol Frieder in a scene from "The Caregiver."

# Families enjoy playing together in Livonia Symphony

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN STAFF WRITER lchomin@ocshomecomm.net

Sitting in the string section of the Livonia Symphony Orchestra, Nick J. Nagrant and his children blend in quietly with the rest of the musicians rehearsing for the final concert of the season May 15.

Nagrant, a long-time Farmington resident, is quick to add the family is but one of six playing with the orchestra. (The Ford Motor Co. engineer and his four children shy away from being the only ones in the spotlight.)

Parents and children, husbands and wives — they faithfully meet at Churchill High School every Monday evening from September to May to rehearse for the regular season. Nagrant is the only original member left from the Oakway Symphony

Orchestra founded by Francesco DiBlasi 26 years ago. Oakway, short for Oakland and Wayne, was the name of the orchestra until 1988 when it became the Livonia Symphony Orchestra.

"As a result of the orchestra, I was introduced to the Madonna University music program," said Nagrant. "In 1981, I began studying for a music degree which I received in 1989."

Music education is important to Nagrant. Ever since he first started taking lessons in third or fourth grade, Nagrant said he has seen time and again the power music has to develop the mind and body. It's the main reason he started oldest son Nicholas P. playing violin in fourth grade.

Besides building physical and mental skills, early music lessons help train the ear,

### "String Genda"

What: A concert with the emphasis on strings. Guest violinists are Yuri and Dana Mazurkevich. Both studied at the Moscow Conservatory.

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, May 15

Where: Churchill High School Auditorium, 8900 Newburgh, (north of Joy Road), Livonia.

Tickets: \$15 adults, \$8 children under age 12. Call (248) 645-6665, (734) 464-2741 or (734) 421-1111.

Nagrant, who began conducting choirs in the 1970s, says "learning pitch is important to singing a capella."

"By learning things at an early age, I wanted to give my kids the opportunity to have an easier time to differentiate pitches, to have that brain development for pitches," said Nagrant, director of St. Nicholas Byzantine Church Choir in Detroit. "The best instrument is a violin, not a

piano, to differentiate pitches."

Nagrant's children — Suzanne Swannay, 26, Andrew, 23, George, 22 and Anne, 17, like their father, love playing the violin.

Suzanne was seven when she heard her father and mother Marianne talking about signing up younger brothers Andrew and George for violin lessons. Suzanne was playing piano at the time. Now a 26-year-old

engineer at Ford Motor Co., Suzanne has played with the Livonia Symphony Orchestra for the past 10 years.

"I enjoy playing violin and it's a tradition for us to play our ethnic music — Carpatho-Rusyn," said Swannay, a Royal Oak resident.

Andrew began playing at age four. A substitute teacher for Farmington, New and West Bloomfield middle and high schools, Andrew, like his brothers and sisters, studied both traditional and Suzuki methods of violin. By the time they were in the school band, the boys played trumpet, the girls flute.

"I like it, I've enjoyed being a part of it," said Andrew. George also started at age 4. He joined the Livonia Symphony because at the time he was taking trumpet lessons with

DiBlasi. Anne, in addition to playing with the Livonia Symphony, is concertmaster for the Livonia Youth Philharmonic. Youngest son Michael, at age 11, is still too young to play with the Livonia Symphony, but is a member of the Livonia Youth Philharmonic.

The Nagrants are quiet and modest about being the largest family group in the LSO. They point to father and son Carl (French horn) and Mike Karoub (cello), mother Alicia Ledwon and daughter Halina McAlpine (violinists), brother and sister Leslie (violin) and John Kachnowski (trombone), and husband and wife violinists Tan Gao and Zhiling Zhang and Sharon (violin) and Tim (cello) Nicola as other families who play with the Livonia Symphony Orchestra.

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