

# Pasta Perfect

Cortland Repertory mines al dente laughs from *Over the River's* comical Italian types

By Len Fonte

It's a funny thing about Italians in pop culture. For every *Goodfellas* or *The Sopranos* depicting Italian-Americans as Mafia thugs, there's a *Moonstruck*, celebrating a loving if somewhat squirrely family enthusiastically pursuing the American dream between mouthfuls of spaghetti.

Joe DiPietro's *Over the River and Through the Woods*, the current offering at Cortland Repertory Theatre, is a boisterous example of the most benign Italian stereotypes. *Over the River* appeals to an audience in the same way as the hit film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, with which it shares a central premise and several jokes, as well as quirky but loving types that are easily shifted from ethnic group to ethnic group.

*Over the River* looks at the Italian-American rituals that 29-year-old Nick Cristiano both cherishes and is desperate to escape. His parents have moved—or rather fled—to Fort Lauderdale, leaving him to share massive Sunday meals with both sets of grandparents, who conveniently live next door to each other. When Nick announces that he's been offered a promotion to move to the West Coast, the grandparents plot to keep him close to home, hearth and propane.

To a large extent, the play is structured like a sitcom, with characters who could very comfortably occupy the hole in the TV schedule left by the departure of *Everyone Loves*

*Raymond*. Playwright DiPietro co-wrote the popular musical *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*, and *Over the River* shares with that show the ability to swiftly move from glib one-liners to insightful snapshots of human behavior.

Not surprisingly, *Over the River* has a whiff of nostalgia to it. The way of life that DiPietro celebrates has nearly disappeared. These days, we're hard pressed to find an Italian-American granny in a boxy black dress. The pasta-pushing grandmas of *Over the River* are giving way to calorie-counting suburban matrons.

like a wind-up little-old-lady doll, proffering a comforting morsel and offering a prayer whenever that doesn't work.

Nick identifies his father's parents as "The loudest people I ever met," and as portrayed by Bill Coughlin and Jean Luizzi that certainly is true. They are also triumphs of costuming. Attired in perfect grandpa-wear and owl-like glasses, Coughlin's feisty Nunzio Cristiano moves with the arthritic gait of an impatient octogenarian. He looks Nick squarely in the eye and tells him the way things are—or how they should be. As his wife Emma, Luizzi sports the big hair and polyester pants of a New Jersey granny, accompanied by the nervous giggle of an old woman who forgets that she's no longer a girl.

In his own way, the upwardly mobile Nick is a stereotype himself. Flashing a winning smile that would make any grandparent proud, Marc Goldhaber easily inhabits the role and finds the little quirks and complications that make Nick come alive.



Italian dressing: From left, Suzan Perry, Jean Luizzi, Bill Coughlin, Claus Evans and Marc Goldhaber in Cortland Repertory's *Over the River and Through the Woods*.

As portrayed by the spirited Cortland Repertory cast, however, the Gianellis and Cristanos are a lively bunch. Anchored in his easy chair, Claus Evans' Frank Gianelli booms out "Tengo famiglia!": Italian for "I hold the family!" His Frank is a once powerful man working hard to hold onto his grandson and his driver's license.

As grandma Aida, Suzan Perry gives a gem of a performance. With the perfect timing of a seasoned performer, she pops out of the kitchen

In the secondary role of Caitlin O'Hare, the surprise date set up by the grandparents to convince Nick to stay, lovely Sonya Cooke radiates the quietly centered life that Nick craves. Caitlin could easily become a joke: She's a vegetarian plunked down among the most happily carnivorous family on the East Coast. Nevertheless, Cooke's honest portrayal is a joy.

Scenic designer Scott Aronow provides the perfect playground for DiPietro's characters. The Gianellis' Hoboken house, with its tiny dining room crowded with an oversized table, is a knickknack heaven of end tables and religious statuary.

Under the watchful eye of director Bert Bernardi, there's an appropriately comic opera flavor to Cortland Repertory's production. Bernardi understands that the trick with a show like this is to keep up the breakneck pace while revealing the humanity of the characters behind the mounds of lasagna and cannoli. Maybe *Over the River and Through the Woods* isn't really true to life, but verisimilitude is beside the point: This is the Italian family as Americans would want it to be. And it is theater as a meal at a family restaurant, perhaps less than authentic, but tasty and oh so comforting.

*This production runs through Saturday, Aug. 20. See Times Table for information.*