

Cortland Rep's 'River' floats above the ordinary

By Neil Novelli
Contributing writer

Joe DiPietro's "Over the River and Through the Woods" has a reputation as a pleasant but lightweight comedy, and it's often given a workaday production.

But Cortland Repertory Theatre has a habit of giving such shows fresh, sparkling interpretations.

REVIEW

Cortland Rep did it with "The Music Man" last summer, and it's doing it again with "Over the River" this summer. The story is about life in an Italian-American family — oops, "famiglia."

Under Bert Bernardi's brilliant direction, six fine actors bring out the play's latent power, filling it with zest and fire, and walking a fine line between comedy and poignancy.

A little sitcommy? Sure. But the audience's delight on opening night came from the sense of real lives, richly lived.

Marc Goldhaber does agile comic work as 20-something Nick Cristiano, who has dinner in Hoboken every Sunday with his four doting, overwhelming grandparents. When Nick gets a promotion that will take him to Seattle, he knows it will be a struggle to get them to accept it. Underneath, of course, is Nick's struggle to make a mature life of his own.

Scott Aronow's set design captures it all. Vintage 1950s furniture, comfortable and cared for. Lace doilies and big lace tablecloth covered with plastic. Some tchotchkes, with restraint; and lots of family photos, *no* restraint. The Gianellis are happy here, aren't going anywhere and don't see why Nick should.

In previous seasons at Cortland Rep, Suzan Perry has played, for example, Eulalie Shinn in "Music Man" and Helga in "Deathtrap." She continues her superb character act-

The details

What: "Over the River and Through the Woods."

When: 2 and 7:30 p.m. today and 7:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Where: Cortland Repertory Theatre, Little York Lake, Preble

Length: Two hours, including intermission

Family guide: OK for middle school and up

Tickets: Evening performances, \$22 to \$24; matinee, \$16 to \$18

Information: (607) 756-2627 or (800) 427-6160,

www.cortlandrep.org

ing as Aida Gianelli, whose response to any situation is to bring out food. Grandma Gianelli has a heavy accent, and her fluent body language also speaks worlds; when Nick wants to leave, Aida says "No!" every way she can.

Her husband, Frank, played by Claus Evans, is more complex. His own experience as a boy immigrant gives him a nuanced and sometimes paralyzing sense of Nick's situation.

Living



'Over the River and Through the Woods' a class act.