

# TWN's "Moscows" proves dysfunction can be fun

By William Ferrall  
Contributing writer

## Theater Review

The novelist Leo Tolstoy famously declared that each unhappy family is unique, but we still know one when we see it.

In Sam Forman's entertaining and often amusing play, "The Moscows of Nantucket," at Theatre Workshop of Nantucket through Sept. 1, the play's namesake cheerless family will be familiar to many of us. Like those bickering families we encounter on the street or in grocery-store aisles, the Moscows often fascinate as well as appall us.

Ensnared at their fashionable beachfront home on Nantucket, this disagreeable family grouches, mocks and gripes at each other. Their combination of wealth and comfort is no guarantee of happiness, an ironic and potent circumstance that drives much of drama. Forman knows the landscape: He and his family are longtime sea-

sonal residents of Nantucket. He mostly makes it work effectively in "The Moscows," even if some of it's a little old hat and without remarkable surprise.

The most intense misery among the Moscows arises in the sibling rivalry between the hapless 20-something Benjamin, a not-so-successful writer going nowhere fast, and his older brother, Michael, an Emmy Award-winning television producer and once-divorced father. Theirs is the play's central, age-old conflict.

Cool and sarcastic, their retired financier father, Richard, alternately avoids or stirs the turmoil more than he helps it. Their mother, Ellen, the most likable of the tribe, naively tries to soothe and assuage both the sibling rivalry and her younger son's abject spirit, sometimes making matters worse.

Even a family this loutish de-

serves some buffering. Here, Michael's shiksa second wife, the actress Virginia Christensen, adds welcome levity with her southern, trailer park-bred sensibilities. Michael's and Virginia's nanny, Sara Pearlman, lends a sympathetic ear to her enamored, would-be suitor Benji. For at least this week, the Moscows are inflicting most of their firestorms on each other and their houseguests rather than on fellow supermarket shoppers.

Benji stokes the Moscow family's dust-ups with rants and histrionics fueled by copious amounts of vodka, as he lounges through the day on the deck, in a bathrobe. "I'm not a drunk," says Benji, "I'm a binge drinker."

At least he's out of his parents' basement, where he has been living while dreaming of getting into the MacDowell Colony to finally finish his novel.

You would expect to find little that's attractive in a whining,

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Photos by Nicole Hamishfeger

From left, Amy Stiller, Kate Sheridan, Fritz Michel and Joshua Isaacs in a scene from Theatre Workshop of Nantucket's production of summer resident Sam Forman's "The Moscows of Nantucket," on stage at 2 Centre St. through Sept. 1.

# Review: The Bickersons land on Nantucket

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hopelessly unhappy fellow like Benji, but as played here by Joshua Isaacs, there's enough self-realization and glimpses of real pain to win us over. In the pivotal scene between the two brothers, Fritz Michel skillfully makes the confident but hardened-by-Hollywood Michael, finally, into an affectionate and supportive big brother.

No wonder each brother is slow to come around to each other and to their inner selves. Their father, Richard, probably isn't the easiest guy in the room, even among friends and colleagues. As far as his family goes, he's still got one foot in the stock market and is given to feigning stereotypical slave dialect when asked to do something by Ellen. Gabe Caggiano smartly underplays Richard, even at the character's worst, but Forman hasn't given Richard a lot of nuance and depth for an actor to work with. Still, Caggiano bravely soldiers through an awkward, not entirely believable reminiscence by Richard of his youthful, painful yearning for a dog.

Admirably, Amy Stiller also modulates her portrayal of the well-meaning but often misguided Ellen. You could easily imagine Mother Moscow being more of the

stock, stifling Jewish mother, but with a modern veneer. After all, she's given to designing her son's apartments. Thanks to Stiller's skills, she's mostly sympathetic, with genuine moments of tenderness.

In playing Virginia Christiansen, Kate Sheridan lights up the stage as much as she does the otherwise dark and stormy Moscow household. Lisa Birnbaum as Sarah Pearlman provides the attractive, in every sense of the word, missing anchor the drifting Benji so desperately needs but will have to wait for longer.

Although Forman gives us plentiful and frequent laughs, often at the expense of another Moscow or from a hip reference to modern culture, some of it might go over audience heads. How many are familiar enough with the work of Dave Eggers to get a joke about him? How many know about the MacDowell Colony or will fully appreciate subtle jokes about a privileged Jewish family?

Well-read members of the so-called slacker generation and the intelligentsia from the opposite U.S. coasts will probably get the Eggers reference and more. And it's for them, along with their kith and kin, that Forman has created "The Moscows."

Not that there's anything wrong with that. It's the familiar territory of Neil Simon, Larry

David and Woody Allen, whom Forman referenced in an earlier successful play of his, "The Rise and Fall of Annie Hall."

This one might not measure up to those high standards of either a bounty of fresh jokes or comedic depths, but credit director Johann McKeon with creating a sense of there being more here than meets the eye and ear.

Once again Eric Schultz has created a just-right set, this time an elegant, sophisticated beach house. Sara Fraunfelder has clothed the cast in familiar and suitable contemporary trappings. Sandra Galley recreates the sunny feeling of a beach setting, putting the Moscows' tempestuous bonds in a bright light.

When all is said and done, the story is Benji's, even if his eventual epiphany and reconciliation with his big brother leads only to more talk rather than action. Forman needs a third act or a sequel to make that more satisfactory. Meanwhile, we're willingly along for the bumpy ride.

*"The Moscows of Nantucket," Theatre Workshop of Nantucket, Centre Stage, lower level of the Methodist Church, 2 Centre St. through Sept. 1. Wednesdays through Saturdays at 7:30 p.m.; Sundays at 3 p.m. Tickets \$25, online at [www.theatreworkshop.com](http://www.theatreworkshop.com) or by calling (508) 228-4305. Running time just over 90 minutes.*