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The Seder of their discontent in 'When Do We Eat?'

By Bob Strauss, Film Critic

What, another dysfunctional family holiday comedy? Most of us would agree that one more of these things sounds about as appetizing as Thanksgiving leftovers by Pearl Harbor Day.

But at least Passover hasn't been overexposed to this treatment.

And "When Do We Eat?" is about as funny, emotionally satisfying and even spiritually significant as this type of thing gets.

It's about a really bad Seder and is unmistakably a sitcom. But it's a very high-functioning one. Recognizable types keep defying behavioral expectations, and character epiphanies come at great, hard costs - which actually makes them seem valuable, as opposed to the typical holiday film banalities.

And did I mention that most of the gags are really funny? The deft ensemble cast is topped by the great character actor Michael Lerner, whom you may recall as the clueless studio head in "Barton Fink."

His exquisitely named Ira Stuckman (think Willy Loman, only verklemt) is a magnificent creation, grouchy and unsatisfied at the far end of middle age, rightly feeling unloved and aware that it's mostly his own withholding fault, yet possessing deeply buried reserves of affection and compassion.

Ira isn't much of a Jew. He owns a Christmas ornament business, for God's sake, and he prides himself on running the fastest Seder in the West. That's the one thing most of his relatives like about him, since they basically just want to get to the food.

But this year is different. Ira's second wife, Peggy (Lesley Ann Warren), is determined to throw as traditionally kosher an event as she can. That's because their eldest son, Ethan (Max Greenfield), has suddenly gone all Hasidic and she wants him to feel comfortable.

Neither Ira nor the couple's three other children - sex surrogate Nikki (Shiri Appleby), teen stoner Zeke (Ben Feldman) and autistic adolescent Lionel (Adam Lamberg) - appreciate this. Nor does Ira's resentful daughter from his first marriage, Jennifer (Meredith Scott Lynn), though her African-American girlfriend Grace (Cynda Williams) thinks the ceremonial stuff is cool.

Other guests include Ira's dismissive Old World father, Artur (Jack Klugman). He still hasn't forgiven his son's forsaking the family hat business to make baubles for goyim and carries a packed case everywhere, just in case the Nazis come after him again.



Lesley Ann Warren and Michael Lerner in "When Do We Eat?" (ThinkFilm)



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Then there's cousin Vanessa (Mili Avital), a cell phone-chained publicist Ethan had (reciprocated) hots for before he got religion and, oh hell, still does. Completing the table is Moshe Dayan macho-type Rafi (Mark Ivanir), the Israeli tent-maker that Peggy is quite inappropriately smitten with.

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Q: France is to Europe as China is to ____?

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Of course, everybody argues; about the only thing they agree on is Ira's a problem. Zeke hates him so much that he spikes the old man's antacid with a hit of Ecstasy. This leads to heart palpitations, but also to kooky Hebraic hallucinations that inspire Ira to, sort of like Moses, lead his loved ones out of their contentious, self-sabotaging emotional bondage. True to their nature, the Stuckmans won't let Dad pull this off easily.

Director Salvador Litvak and his wife, Nina Davidovich, who wrote "Eat?" together, stock most of the characters with surprising revelations and

secret justifications for their less-attractive facets (there's even a little sentimental sense behind Ira's career choice).

Forgiveness ranks high on the dessert menu, of course. Yet, redeemed or not, most of the folks at this particular celebration remain stubbornly difficult - or, to put it another way, recognizably quite human individuals, and consistently as smart as they are flawed.

Some cheesy special-effects sequences, pitched from tripping Ira's point of view, are good fun. But the real treat of "When Do We Eat?" is how it digs beneath the presentation of stereotypes and genre clichés and serves up the truly good stuff deep down.

WHEN DO WE EAT?

Our rating: ★★☆☆

(R: sex, language, drug use, mild violence)

Starring: Michael Lerner, Lesley Ann Warren, Max Greenfield, Ben Feldman, Shiri Appleby, Mili Avital, Meredith Scott Lynn, Cynda Williams, Jack Klugman, Adam Lambert, Mark Ivanir.

Director: Salvador Litvak.

Running time: 1 hr. 27 min.

Playing: Selected theaters.

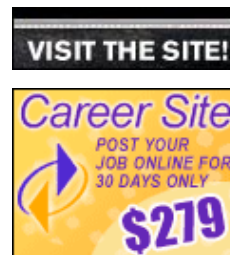
In a nutshell: Dysfunctional family holiday get-together, Passover Edition, has refreshingly hard-edged character confrontations, some real spiritual depth and a lot of hearty, well-earned laughs.

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