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'When Do We Eat?' is full of heart, both warmed and burned

By CRAIG OUTHIER
The Orange County Register

"When Do We Eat?" affords the viewer a rare glimpse of holiday-themed domestic dysfunction as it appears around a Jewish dinner table during Passover, and guess what? Looks pretty much the same as it always does.

Unleavened or no, *meshuga* is *meshuga*.

Not that the obvious similarity of "When Do We Eat?" to any number of zany melodramas about troubled families coming together ("The Family Stone" most immediately comes to mind) is such a bad thing - husband-wife screenwriters Salvador Litvak and Nina Davidovich have created a tapestry of human failing so lavish and inviting, it seems only right to use it for warmth.

Michael Lerner (the studio chief in "Barton Fink") is riotously nonplussed as Ira Stuckman, a harping Los Angeles-area patriarch whose ramshackle family causes him nothing but grief. His Holocaust-survivor father (Jack Klugman) keeps a packed suitcase with him at all times, certain the Fourth Reich is on the rise. Eldest son Ethan (Max Greenfield) is a bitter disappointment, having eschewed the family Christmas-ornament business for a life of Orthodox Judaism. In Ira's eyes, the rest of the family is similarly tainted: A pot-smoking son, a bitter lesbian daughter, another daughter who works as a sex surrogate and a wife (Lesley Ann Warren) to whom he remains firmly but unenthusiastically devoted.

Ira is no devout Jew - his passion in life is Christmas ornaments, after all - and expects Seder to be a disaster as always.

Stock characters all, but that's the charm, isn't it? The holiday-dinner dysfunction comedy has become Hollywood's answer to the Italian commedia dell'arte - highly formalized, yet seemingly improvised, variants of the narrative model. Except instead of the pro forma scheming shopkeeper, for example, there's the pro forma pothead kid.

By sticking to the outline, as it were, first-time director Litvak gets away with some really far-out embellishments. The Stuckman Seder is the debacle everyone expects - complete with accusations of incest and pained Haggadah readings - until Ira unwittingly ingests a monster hit of Ecstasy that blasts him off into touch-feely la-la-land, complete with dazzling visions of the Jewish exodus and dancing rabbis in technicolored coats.

To the bemusement of his family, Ira is transformed from a raging tyrant into a spiritual visionary determined to ferry his loved ones past a Red Sea of acrimony. Those drugs better be good.

Pill-popping on Passover? Oy vey. Still, the funniest thing about Ira's chemically induced change of heart is that the filmmakers don't really play it for laughs.

This is a sincere, if raucously irreverent, attempt to show how an extreme change of perspective can free the human heart.

We could cluck at Ira's drug follies, but there's a more meaningful angle to his story: that of a shielded, loveless man facing his own personal Pharaoh.

Produced by Salvador Litvak and Steven J. Wolfe, directed by Salvador Litvak, written by Nina Davidovich and Salvador Litvak, music by Mark Adler, distributed by ThinkFilm.

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