

MOVIE REVIEW

The Boston Globe

One insane family. At a Seder. With drugs.

By Wesley Morris, Globe Staff | April 21, 2006

"When Do We Eat?" may be another sitcom disguised as a movie, but it does manage to find a new holiday -- Passover -- for the Holiday Dinner Fiasco. Yes, the Stuckmans are having their first Passover Seder since their last one ended in the angry destruction of dishware three years ago. But in the name of the Lord and for our amusement, they're giving it another try.

The family's eldest son, Ethan (Max Greenfield), lost his investment banking money and has turned to Hasidism in an evangelical sort of way. As a celebration of her son's showy new Orthodoxy, Peggy Stuckman (Lesley Ann Warren) has a traditional tent erected in the backyard of the family's Los Angeles home and invites to dinner her three other children and the secular macho Israeli (Mark Ivanir) who installed the tent. Ethan and his father, Ira (Michael Lerner), have been at each other's throats since Ethan chose God over running Ira's Christmas tree ornament business.

This being a Holiday Dinner Fiasco, dysfunction rules. The Stuckmans have a daughter (Shiri Appleby) who's a sex surrogate, one stoner son (Ben Feldman), and another boy (Adam Lamberg) who appears to be autistic. A publicist cousin (Mili Avital) is also invited. Ira also has a daughter (Meredith Scott Lynn) from a previous marriage, who's brought her black, shiksa girlfriend (Cynda Williams), and for wisdom's sake, there's raspy Jack Klugman as Ira's dad, a Holocaust survivor.

To further ensure there's never a dull moment, when Ira starts having an attack during the interminable pre-meal ceremony, the druggie son explains, "I slipped a tab of ecstasy in his antacid." Great, now pass the brisket!

Anyone who wished that last year's yuletide yukfeast "The Family Stone" kept kosher should make a beeline for "When Do We Eat?" The movie benefits from a marginally better script by Nina Davidovich and Salvador Litvak, who also directs with an eye toward the broadest possible gag. The movie's most distinctive feature is its cast, which has the fake lived-in comfort of a TV clan. Plus, its members know their way around schmaltz. In the movie's most complex piece of acting, Warren demonstrates that she also knows her way through it.

One of the user comments on the Internet Movie Database calls "When Do We Eat?" the "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" of this year. (No year is complete without one.) But "When Do We Eat?" has its own unique achievement. The film turns that stale old Seder into warmed-up dinner theater.

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