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## Theater: "Olive and the Bitter Herbs"

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### OLIVE AND THE BITTER HERBS

\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

PRIMARY STAGES AT 59E59

Almost any show was certain to be a letdown after *The Divine Sister*, one of the best works in playwright/actor Charles Busch's career. And indeed it is. Yet when a regular theater-going friend asked if they should see *Olive and the Bitter Herbs*, I found myself defending it somewhat. Yes, it's just a boulevard comedy. But there's a certain pleasure to be had out of watching five pros make the most of a show. It's thin material but sturdily crafted nonetheless.

At the heart of the tale is Olive (Marcia Jean Kurtz). She's an elderly actress ensconced in her rent-controlled apartment in the East Thirties, bitching and barking at everyone in sight. Olive's claim to fame is a sausage commercial, but that was years ago. Now maybe a guest spot on a *Law & Order* type show (she plays a Holocaust survivor) could be just the thing to reignite interest in her career. Meanwhile there's her put-upon friend Wendy (Julie Halston) who seems like a paid care-giver but is instead just one of those people who takes on the burdens of others to distract from their own empty life.

Wendy tries to negotiate a truce between Olive and two gay neighbors who are driving her crazy (Dan Butler and David Garrison), though of course it's more accurate to say she's driving them crazy. In pops the father of yet another tenant, a sweet-natured elderly man (Richard Masur) and if anything is sure to set off Olive it's passivity and sweetness. Did I mention the ghost? A ghost keeps appearing in Olive's

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mirror and the show hinges on the possibility that all of them are connected to the ghost in one way or another.

This is Neil Simon territory and appropriately the show has two set pieces worthy of Simon at his best. One is a Passover celebration filled with bitterness and infighting. The other is a second act confrontation in which all the actors are gathered together and Busch cheekily piles on the coincidences one after another in linking them all to the ghost. It's amusing but mechanical.

The set by Anna Louizos is pitch-perfect... except for the mirror. Everyone keeps raving about how unusual and attractive the mirror is so I wish it had more of an air of mystery about it. I know Olive says she got it at Sears or some such place, but still. There's a ghost in it, everyone keeps raving about it, so a little more pizzazz would be nice.

As mentioned, the cast is top-notch up and down the line, from Kurtz refusing to sugarcoat Olive down to Butler's amusingly tart and inferior-feeling illustrator. Masur does the best work here, taking the challenging role of a nice guy and making him consistently interesting and watchable. Few challenges are harder for an actor than a passive guy and he delivers nicely. Director Mark Brokaw keeps things moving nicely. There just isn't very far for things to move. So *Olive and the Bitter Herbs* is a lesser effort from Busch, but one produced with care.

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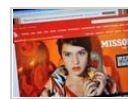
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**Note:** Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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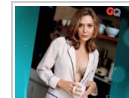
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