

Christine Lahti's "The Smile of Her"
by J. Peter Bergman



Christine Lahti is one of my favorite actresses. That needs to be said up-front. She is currently playing herself, and most of her large family, in a play she has written called "The Smile of Her" at the Unicorn Theatre in Stockbridge, a product of Berkshire Theatre Group directed by Robert H. Egan. It has not been made available for review, but I

feel the need to talk about it, to share it with my readers who definitely need to know about it. Putting it mildly, it's a knock-out!

She shares the stage with a young actress named Georgi James who does wonderful work playing Lahti as a child, playing the Lahti siblings and other characters. But the play, really, is all Christine Lahti. Her childhood was not the best; "Father Knows Best" with Robert Young and Jane Wyatt informed the Lahti's how family should behave and grow together. Her own father was not a Jim Anderson, the character played by Young. Instead he was a quiet monster, making the most of the power he had over his wife and children. Lahti grew up repressed, angry, confused and conflicted. All of this is explored in the play.

Her mother, it seems, was the willing subject of abuse. This set up Christine Lahti for a considerable amount of relationship failures in her own life. The play is decorated with many projections of the family of eight, all looking as happy as possible. She talks, in the show, of the pretensions of a family putting up a facade and she speaks about her efforts to escape from behind that intentional faking of a good life.

This is an intense experience for her and for the audience as well. There were moments when I thought she would break down, but her professionalism took over and she maintained the actress's role, playing the part. Toward the end of the evening a phone rang in the audience. It rang over and over and over until Lahti broke out of the play and asked the phone's owner to turn it off, a request made much earlier by Kate Maguire, CEO of Berkshire Theatre Group. When the woman finally left the theater, Lahti asked Egan if she should go on, or "wind back" and they took the latter course. Lahti and James restarted and finished the play with a flourish. I have only seen one other actress make such a move and it was a great moment to witness. As she stepped back into the role of Christine Lahti, Christine Lahti took a large step forward as an actress and a person who could behave professionally and keep her show alive and emotionally wrenching.

A fine production of a difficult work, very much worth seeing, it will play at the Unicorn through July 29. See it if you can.

+ 07/15/2023 +