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## Scenes from an Italian dinner

Saturday, March 31, 2007

**BRETT OPPEGAARD** *Columbian staff writer*Ridgefield man recalls N.Y. roots in  
interactive production

This scene Lou Pallotta recalls from his childhood in Brooklyn, N.Y.: It's a family dinner at a cheesy Italian restaurant. The kind of place where the owner sings a few tunes, backed by his kid banging on a piano. Only on this particular night, a coffin inexplicably shows up.

"More happens in one day to an Italian family than to most people in a lifetime," Pallotta says. "At least that's how I remember it."

The Ridgefield resident hopes by turning such strange events from his life into a piece of comical interactive theater called "Who Stole My Dead Husband?" his troupe can become another story in the mold of "Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding."

Pallotta's piece, being presented Friday and Saturday nights in the ballroom of Portland's Madison's Grill, has been gradually growing in popularity during the past few months. He sells out every Saturday and plans to add a Sunday matinee soon, continuing shows locally at least through the end of the year. He's also setting up satellite productions in other cities throughout the Northwest, including Seattle and Spokane.

He acknowledges trying to tap into the overflow of the international success of "Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding." That show, which puts audience members in the wedding party of a bizarre Italian nuptial, has been performed in more than 100 cities, including a two-year run in Portland in the late 1990s that drew more than 140,000 patrons. A variety of similar immersion pieces have been staged here since, ranging from "Late Night Catechism," a comedy about a Catholic-school class, to the "Eddie May Murder Mystery," which is like a live version of the board game "Clue," to "Queen of Bingo," in which the crowd takes part in a game with a couple of bingo-holics. But Pallotta's piece returns to the Italian family theme.

The 55-year-old left Brooklyn in his mid-20s, living in Texas and California before moving to Portland in 1991. He met his wife, Candi, and they moved to a 5-acre piece of property in Ridgefield a year later.

Pallotta has acted and sung for various area groups since, including performances with Oregon Symphony, Sylvia's Class Act Dinner Theatre and Heartland Theatre Productions.

This show started as a surprise birthday party for his boss at the Rose Quarter, where Pallotta serves as telecommunications manager. It originally was like an interactive episode of "The Sopranos," he says. The show has since evolved to become more satire and less gangster stereotypes through its development, which included a three-month stint at Portland Meadows, when the piece was called "Business as Usual."

At Madison's, patrons get served spaghetti dinner while an accordion player and Pallotta perform tunes and introduce the rest of the family. Then, the coffin shows up. Much of what happens from there depends on the audience.

Interactive theater relies heavily on the crowd and how wild it wants to be. That goes for each individual as well. Those who want to get involved in the show will have a much better time than those who just want to sit back and watch.

There are many opportunities to be part of the action. Performers circulate from table to table, chatting in character and helping to serve food. The procession of the coffin involves just about everyone in the room, and numerous storylines are intertwined throughout the setting.

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There's a waiter who owes the family money, but also is a relative of Frank Sinatra. He gets, umm, asked to pay off the debt one cover song at a time. Folk tunes and traditional songs are mixed into the entertainment, with bickering between family members as prevalent as meatballs.

Ultimately, the performance can be as funny or as humdrum as the audience makes it. That's the edge of this type of theater. When it's good, it gives thrills unlike any other type of entertainment. That's why there's an announcement made before each show suggesting that patrons never get too far away from the alcohol.

If you go

What: "Who Stole My Dead Husband?" a dinner-theater production created by Lou Pallotta of Ridgefield.

When: 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through December; doors open at 7 p.m. with a Chianti Club featuring complementary wine and a chance to get a "rump analysis."

Where: Madison's Grill, 1109 S.E. Madison St., Portland.

Cost: \$57 to \$67 and includes dinner.

Information: 800-966-8865; [whostolemydeadhusband.com](http://whostolemydeadhusband.com).