

Event Brief: Over the River and Through the Woods

The Institute will attend *Over the River and Through the Woods*, a comedy by Joe DiPietro, at The Naples Players. The play follows Nick, a young man who spends every Sunday having dinner with his four Italian-American grandparents. When he accepts a job across the country, his grandparents must confront the possibility of losing their weekly tradition—and Nick must consider what he owes to the family that raised him.

About the Playwright

Joe DiPietro is an American playwright and lyricist whose work has been produced thousands of times around the world. A Rutgers graduate, he began writing plays while in college and later worked as a writer and producer for CBS Sports before pursuing playwrighting full-time. He has won two Tony Awards, a Drama Desk Award, and three Outer Critics Circle Awards. His work spans plays, musicals, and adaptations. *Over the River and Through the Woods* is among his most widely produced comedies.

What to Look For

I. Family as a Source of Identity

Notice how much of Nick's identity is tied to his family and their traditions. His Sunday dinners are more than a weekly meal; they are a way of maintaining relationships, passing on customs, and keeping generations connected. Consider what is gained when a family maintains traditions—and what can be lost when those traditions disappear.

II. Work and the Good Life

Nick's opportunity to move across the country presents a genuine conflict between professional ambition and family obligations. Pay attention to how the characters understand a good life differently. Consider what the play suggests about the relationship between work, success, family, and the places we call home.

III. The Demands of Love

The grandparents' love for Nick sometimes becomes controlling, while Nick's desire for independence can seem ungrateful. Notice how the play uses humor to explore the tension between loving someone and allowing them to choose their own life. Consider what we owe to the people who have sacrificed for us—and what love asks of us when those we love want something different from what we want for them.

Cultural Formation: Why Theater?

I. The Need for Cultural Formation

The Institute forms virtuous leaders for the marketplace and public square. This requires more than just professional skills; leaders must be formed with a deeper sense of meaning and an appreciation for truth, beauty, and goodness. Accordingly, education should “combine excellence in humanistic and cultural development with specialized professional training.”¹

To that end, The Institute provides a core suite of professional skills that all leaders need, personal formation to enable them to use those skills well, and cultural formation that cultivates the search for truth and forms “the human spirit...in such a way that there results a growth in its ability to wonder, to understand, and to contemplate...”²

II. Theater

Great works of theater allow us to encounter human life through the experiences of others. *Over the River and Through the Woods* uses an ordinary family conflict to raise larger questions about love, obligation, freedom, tradition, and the meaning of a good life. As you watch, resist the temptation to simply decide who is right. Instead, pay attention to the competing goods each character is trying to preserve and consider what the play reveals about the people we become through our families and relationships.

¹ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 23.

² *Ibid.*

