

One-Woman Family At Play With Death

By PETER MARKS Published: November 20, 1996, Wednesday

Uh-oh. Cancer. The first time the disease is mentioned in "Julia Sweeney's 'God Said 'Ha!,' " " alarm bells go off in your head. Am I, you wonder nervously, going to have to sit through an alternately depressing and predictably uplifting evening about dreary hospital waiting rooms and unfeeling medical personnel?

The answer, if you're fortunate enough to be sitting in the Lyceum Theater and listening to the accomplished Ms. Sweeney spin her tales, is a resounding no. Ms. Sweeney, a former performer on "Saturday Night Live," has created a 90-minute work that only on the most superficial plane is about illness. On a deeper level, "God Said 'Ha!,' " her frequently hilarious, utterly human one-woman show, is a probe into a more complex and, unless perhaps you're an oncologist, more involving mystery: the heartstrings that bind parent to child, sister to brother.

There was nothing in Ms. Sweeney's four seasons on "Saturday Night Live" to suggest that she could pull this off. Mostly, she became known for her portrayal of Pat, the androgynous character whose one-joke premise wore thin long before Ms. Sweeney stopped playing her (him?). What is demonstrated by "God Said 'Ha!,' " which opened last night, is that she was woefully underused on late-night television.

"God Said 'Ha!,' " which Ms. Sweeney first performed in San Francisco and Los Angeles, was to be the basis this season for a sitcom in which she would star, but the pilot was not picked up. Maybe it was for the best. It's painful to imagine what the weekly sitcom machinery would do to Ms. Sweeney's truthful work. On the stage, she has found the showcase for her real calling: storytelling.

The stories Ms. Sweeney weaves are remarkably free of the pathos and egocentrism that could easily render the evening a self-stroking exercise in manipulation. She refers to herself, in fact, only because she has to. Two and a half years ago, newly divorced and seeking a fresh start, she left "Saturday Night Live" and moved to Hollywood, where she had bought a house. There, she would live out, as she describes it, her single-woman fantasy, "listening to Tchaikovsky and writing all those screenplays that are in my head."

Life was not to be so considerate. Her younger brother, Mike, in his early 30's and also living in Los Angeles, was diagnosed with an advanced case of lymphoma and promptly moved in with her. So, with funnier and more emotionally trying consequences, did her mother and father. They had dropped everything, arriving from Spokane, Wash., to nurse their son and drive their

daughter out of her mind.

In the tale of the tension of reassembling a typically fragmented American family under her roof, Ms. Sweeney finds her metier. Her mother and father -- who are, in the end, the surprise heroes of the piece -- are not about to give up a lifetime of habits and eccentricities just because they are house guests. They are like a two-character road company of "You Can't Take It With You," an old married couple who travel with their quirks along with their overnight bags.

Her father troops around the house with a Walkman, listening at all hours of the day to National Public Radio and chortling over its personalities: "Oh, that Cokie!" he declares. Her mother, a homemaker who never met a canned good she didn't like, refuses to meet her pasta-making, salsa-loving yuppified child halfway in the kitchen. Ms. Sweeney reports that when she tries to tell her mother about the chunk of parmesan cheese in the fridge and the cheese grater in the drawer, her mother rolls her eyes in despair. "Oh, Julia," she says, world-wearily, "You don't have to do all that!"

On a stage she shares with a minimalist set by Michael McGarty (and lighted with panache by Russell H. Champa), Ms. Sweeney just as vividly brings her brother to life. The Sweeneys are clearly a family in love with language, and Mike is a match for his sister. In her telling, his acidic wit gains in sharpness as he wastes away. In the Sweeney household, the only way to deal with catastrophic illness is to laugh.

A doctor, in an effort to sell Mike on the idea of surgically inserting a shunt to make easier the injection of medication, tells him that other patients who have undergone the procedure have loved their shunts. The absurd enthusiasm of the pitch strikes Mike and his sister as the perfect fodder for wisecracks. After undergoing the procedure himself, Mike would regularly gaze rapturously at Ms. Sweeney and shout, "I love my shunt!"

As Broadway theaters go, the smallish Lyceum is a welcoming house for Ms. Sweeney's intimate piece. Dressed in a burgundy pants suit, she begins the storytelling a bit tentatively. It may just be jitters, because as soon as she launches into her tales of Hollywood, Ms. Sweeney gains confidence, and the piece grows with the originality and the clarity of her observations.

By the time she gets to a devastating coup de grace -- the revelation that she, too, developed cancer ("sympathy cancer," in Mike's opinion) -- you are addicted to her story. It's a different kind of monologue from one, say, by Spalding Gray, who wants to dazzle you with his facility for assembling the extraneous details of his life in a marvelous jigsaw. Ms. Sweeney wants to share the powerful emotional current that has carried her through the terror.

What she learns, we learn, and not just about death and disease, but about family. Her parents are not merely the nudges who cause a daughter to revert to adolescence. At a time of crisis, they are also the stalwart shepherds of a tiny, valiant flock. JULIA SWEENEY'S 'GOD SAID "HA!" ' Written and performed

by Julia Sweeney; directed by Beth Milles; sets by Michael McGarty; lighting by Russell H. Champa; costumes by Connie Martin; sound by John Shivers; co-producers, Pachyderm Entertainment and On the Fly Entertainment. Presented by James B. Freydborg and Jon Steingart, Gavin Polone, Georgia Frontiere, F. O. J. Productions, Caralyn Fuld and Lifetime Television. At the Lyceum Theater, 149 West 45th Street, Manhattan.