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Comedy Provider: Laughs are the benefit in 'Social Security'

By [LAWSON TAITTE](#) / Theater Critic

Plays about aging parents have the reputation of being depressing. Believe me, depressing is one thing that *Social Security* is not.

Andrew Bergman's 1986 Broadway hit is the sort of comedy they don't write anymore. Simultaneously sophisticated and silly, engaging and outrageous, it's the sort of thing you could call good, clean fun – if it weren't for all the dirty bits.

The production that Contemporary Theatre of Dallas opened Friday makes the most of all these elements. It's probably the most cheerful evening you can have at an area theater right now.

The excitement begins the moment you walk into the theater, thanks to the luscious, witty set designed by Randel Wright. We're in a New York apartment on the high-toned Upper East Side. Art gallery operators Barbara (Marcia Carroll) and David (Nye Cooper) are nervously awaiting the arrival of the in-laws, Trudy (Mary-Margaret Pyeatt) and Martin (Randy Pearlman). There's clearly a family crisis looming, and it involves the women's widowed mother, Sophie (Linda Comess). The cantankerous old woman moves in with Barbara and David, and the first crisis comes when Sophie refuses to change out of her dowdy housedress when a famous painter, Maurice Koenig (Harry Reinwald), is coming to dinner.

Mr. Bergman's screenplays for movies such as *The Freshman* and *Blazing Saddles* make him more famous for his screen work than for stage comedies like *Social Security*. The current script doesn't work overly hard at verisimilitude. It becomes downright farcical at several (quite hilarious) moments.

But *Social Security* is ultimately more positive and optimistic in tone than most Broadway comedies. The dialogue is probably a little more sexually explicit than some members of the target audience – middle-aged folks dealing with issues concerning parents – feel completely comfortable with. But the show will leave them feeling so good, they probably won't care.

Director Cheryl Denson has helped the actors hone their performances to such a glossy sheen that audiences will feel they've really been in glittery Manhattan. Ms. Carroll effects a beautiful transition between the worrywart of the earlier scenes to the radiant woman of the final ones. Ms. Comess makes the same kind of journey, albeit an even longer one. Except for the final moments of Act I, Ms. Comess avoids the temptation to ham up a role that is sketched out in the broadest strokes. But then, everyone is first-rate. They have even mastered the required accents, New York and German.

•Through Sept. 2 at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, 5601 Sears St. Runs 115 mins. \$27, discounts. 214-828-0094, www.contemporarytheatreofdallas.com.