

Turtle Creek News

"Social Security" at Contemporary Theatre delivers great farce in 80s comedy

Review by Martha Heimberg

"Ask not for whom the walker thumps, it thumps for me!" exclaims the freaked-out daughter at the approach of her grouchy old mother, as she straightens her sequined cocktail dress and runs to see what the old gal is up to this time. It's tough to be chic when your mom's clumping around your cool apartment in her pink housecoat and nightcap!

As a screenwriter, Andrew Bergman's gift is exploding popular American myths and monsters with the dynamite of satire -- and taking us along for the laughs. Witness *Blazing Saddles* and *Honeymoon In Vegas*.

Now Contemporary Theatre of Dallas is staging Bergman's nutty and charming farce, *Social Security*, a trip back in time to the art world of Manhattan in the 80s. Under the go-for-it direction of *Cheryl Denson*, we giggle and guffaw along with the visiting rube at the big "blank" paintings -- the huge seas of blue or speckled white canvases, all with escalating prices. (But note the texture!) Just think about the exhausting demands of looking chic and appearing witty at all times, particularly for those who own a Danish sofa that breaks into four parts, never mind the designer bar!

Most of the fun in *Social Security* rises from the attempt of David (*Nye Cooper*, pencil-thin in smart jackets and quick on the quip) and Barbara Kahn (*Marcia Carroll*, great body, brilliant tight smile and matching hair-do) a chic Jewish couple running a high-end art gallery to keep up the façade of sophistication in the face (and walker) of her bitchy, demanding mom whose just been "dropped off like a package from Altman's," as Sophie (*Linda Comess*, delivering two furious and funny versions of the versatile old gal) puts it.

The problem -- and the plot! -- bursts from conversation into hysterical action when the way-loud doorbell rings. Barbara's straight-laced sister Trudy (*Mary-Margaret Pyeatt*, prissy in ultra-unfashionable print and lace, no less!) and accountant brother-in-law Marvin (*Randy Pearlman*, plump and pissed-off about the "blank" art scene and grumbling about parking his Valiant) have journeyed from their suburban Long Island digs to "discuss something" with Barbara and David.

Marvin and Trudy have had it with Sophie. According to Marvin, Sophie's developed a real "mean streak," keeping them up all hours as she walks the halls and refuses to let Trudy get somebody to assist in her care. She leaves her half-eaten sour balls all over the house, has tantrums if her *People* magazine is late, and places lengthy long-distance calls

to whoever picks up the phone at 20th century Fox studios in Los Angeles. "Our phone bill was \$500 last month!" moans Marvin.

Moreover, the couple learned that their college-aged daughter is living with two guys in "some kind of menagerie!" as Marvin says. Now they're headed to Buffalo to "save" their daughter from this dreadful lifestyle. Turns out, Sophie is waiting in the car under the watchful eye of the doorman, and is about to "get delivered" to the care of Barbara and David. One of the show's most hilarious scenes occurs when the terrible truth sinks in, and Barbara collapses on the split sofa with a double scotch, cowering and shaking at the prospect! And small wonder! The first acts ends with the appearance of Sophie, a truly hideous handful in zippered housedress, head-wrap and slippers, scowling and ready to take on all comers!

But the play shifts gears in the second act, when our gallant gallery owners have bravely invited their most famous painter, a French legend nearing his hundredth birthday (*Harry Reinwald*, doddering and darling in cloak and tam), to come to dinner. And Sophie's coming, too! A great comic moment occurs at CTD when Barbara attempts to get her wayward mother out of the housecoat and into something nicer before the important occasion. Doors slam, closets rattle, hallways are locked and blocked and everybody is flying in all directions -- a scene worthy of the best British farce! Still, no one can anticipate what happens when the bitchy Jewish mother meets the famous French painter. This encounter may be the best bit of myth-busting in the show.

Randel Wright again does a terrific job with the elegant set, *Aaron Patrick Turner's* costumes are right-on -- especially Barbara's mini-skirts and shoulder-padded jackets! *Lowell Sargeant's* sound design evokes Manhattan, with liberal use of Cole Porter in appropriately various moods heard between scenes.

Social Security runs Thursdays through Sundays through September 2 at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, 5601 Sears (a block west of lower Greenville). Tickets are \$27 for adults and \$22 for students and seniors; for reservations, call 214-828-0094, or check www.contemporarytheatreofdallas.com.