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## STAGE

### The sitcom as art form

By Arnold Wayne Jones Staff Writer

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### Three productions make situations silly, sappy and superb in turn

For a format that people lap up like cats with warm cream, the television sitcom doesn't garner a lot of respect. For years, the adjective "sitcomy" has been used as code for "sub-par." (It has since unfairly been replaced, thanks to Simon Cowell, by "cabaret.")

But good sitcoms deserve their props. There's nothing wrong with finding the humor in stock situations — assuming you know how to make them humorous.

At Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, director Cheryl Denson has taken the Andrew Bergman comedy *Social Security* and buffed it up with a sparkling new coat of Neil Simonize.

Barbara and David Kahn (Marcia Carroll and Nye Cooper) are sophisticated New Yorkers. Both run art galleries and live in a tony Upper East Side. For decades, Barbara's sister (Mary-Margaret Pyeatt) and her husband (Randy Pearlman) have tended their widowed battleaxe of a mother (Linda Comess), but now they have decided to dump her off on the Kahns.



If that doesn't sound like a typical half-hour comedy premise, then you've never seen

"Frasier." But the production is so warm and sincere — and with some unexpectedly ribald one-liners from Bergman's fine ear for dialogue — that it overcomes its contrivances. Wonderfully harried but droll performances from Carroll and Cooper are of immeasurable worth, as is Randel Wright's dazzling set.

*Vodka & Kisses* at the Stone Cottage in Addison also traffics in sitcom conventions, although less successfully than "*Social Security*." What it does have, though, is great promise from its playwright, 18-year-old Travis Mayo. 18! If only every playwright were as talented at his age.

Sabrina (Angel Davis) and Jo (Jessica Renee Russell) are college roommates who've been friends since high school, but when Jo announces she's getting married, Sabrina turns cold, even cruel, and starts drinking heavily between her pithy put-downs.

What's the cause of her personality switch? Anyone familiar with "The Jerry Springer Show" can see it coming: "I'm in love with my roommate — but she doesn't know I'm gay!"

"Vodka" is a cute 50-minute one-act needlessly stretched to 90 minutes (including intermission). It's smart and affecting, but needs to be punchier, especially in the redundant dialogue (no character ever says once or twice what she can say six times) and the scene transitions (all slow fades, no brisk blackouts).

But it's difficult not to get excited about what the young Mayo, a senior at Booker T. Washington High School, can do once he has a little experience under his belt. This is his first full-length play to be produced; I can't wait to see his second.

One playwright already head-and-shoulders above his contemporaries is Marco Rodriguez. Though not as young as Mayo — he's already in his early 30s! — Rodriguez's sense for his characters is astoundingly mature. He's the reason sitcomy often is an insult: Once you've seen someone skate along the outer edges

of smart comedy, it's difficult to take those safely in the middle quite so seriously.

His new play, *Heaven Forbid(s)!*, is a play only in the strictest sense: There are lights and chairs for the audience and costume changes. Barely a set. Hardly a stage. This is guerrilla theater as exciting and wise as anything Off Broadway tries.

It also happens to be hysterically funny. Two dead people (Rodriguez and Rhianna Mack) arise to find themselves in Purgatory. "I didn't even think this place existed," the man says. "So much for listening to Tom Cruise." Then for the next 85 minutes, the actors portray, ambitiously, God (Rodriguez), The Universe (Mack) and a procession of those in limbo: a pimp who died "of nut cancer;" a murdered transgender teen; a religious zealot.

No, really — hysterically funny.

Rodriguez packs in so many smart pop-culture references, it's akin listening to Dennis Miller, only without the endless smirking and sucking up to Sean Hannity. "I need to get pregnant so I can go on Maury Povich and find my baby dead," offers Secretia Bonita Syringe; "engineered" meat Spam is called "the Soy lent Green of our time;" God's love is for all mankind "except for the people in Duncanville — they piss me off!"

In nine monologues and two-character scenes, Rodriguez riffs on religion, sexuality, consumerism (called "the pinche gringo disease") and urban life with enviable skill; he and Mack perform the material just as adeptly, interacting with the audience better than professional improv comics. It's genius theater that doesn't rely on splash but on creativity for its boundless energy. Prepare to be wowed.

"Social Security," 5601 Sear St. Through Sept. 2. \$27. 214-828-0094.

"Vodka & Kisses," 10560 Addison Road, Addison, Through Aug. 25. \$16–\$21. MBSproductions.net.

"Heaven Forbid(s)!," 1004 W. Page St. Through Sept. 1. \$20. 214-750-7435.

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Marcia Carroll and Nye Cooper, above, cope with a hellish mother in "Social Security;" Rhianna Mack and Marco Rodriguez, below, cope with the meaning of life in "Heaven Forbid(s)!"