

Hilarity reigns in 'Heaven Forbid(s)!'

THEATER REVIEW: 'Heaven' so funny cultural message may be lost
01:38 PM CDT on Monday, August 6, 2007
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Heaven Forbid(s)! works so hard to make a point – several of them, actually. Yet it keeps getting carried away by sheer hilarity, so you tend to forget the message.



Martice Enterprises (in association with Grupo Vida Media) gave Marco Rodriguez's two-person comedy its world premiere at the Ice House Cultural Center in Oak Cliff on Friday. Mr. Rodriguez not only wrote the show, he co-produced, directed and stars in it.

Onstage, at least, he shares the limelight with generous impartiality. He and Rhianna Mack, separately or together, get equal minutes onstage and an equal number of uproarious laughs.

Both performers are on the floor as the lights go up. They realize that they are dead – but that the audience is with them in purgatory. Each wants to be clean enough to get into heaven, but no one can show the way.

After some lighting effects and a quick change of costumes, we are in the presence of the deity (Mr. Rodriguez) and the universe (Ms. Mack). He's a cigarette-smoking Latino tough with a cleanliness obsession. She's a flower child who's not quite with it.

The main thematic point is that God doesn't like anything dirty – especially not weird people. As a writer, Mr. Rodriguez is working out some of his own spiritual issues; as a director and performer, he keeps things bubbly enough that it's hard to take offense, even if you should disagree.

Ms. Mack launches the series of monologues as a woman who markets techniques for expressing grief when someone you won't really miss has died. Thereafter, the monologues come in pairs. Each of the performers gets one "dirty person" to portray. Mr. Rodriguez plays a transvestite hooker, Ms. Mack a philosophical pimp.

The language gets pretty raunchy, and a few unlucky audience members get called on to participate. Each character, though, surprisingly earns our sympathy, since we learn the misfortunes that shaped them. These monologues, particularly, could so easily turn maudlin and preachy – heaven forbid! They do not, thanks to the comic talent at work.

A different theme comes to the fore as Mr. Rodriguez portrays an immigrant fighting his obsession with American materialism. Ms. Mack segues into the funniest bit of the show – as a biracial Valley girl who studies books so she can act "blacker." Both performers are superb throughout – but Ms. Mack achieves a special poignancy as the pimp and has the audience in the palm of her hand as she slips back and forth between accents.

The theme of cultural assimilation never quite melds with the spiritual issues in Heaven Forbid(s)! Maybe there are actually the seeds of two shows here – but what we already have is very accomplished and loads of fun.