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## The 164-lb. guerrilla in the room

*By Arnold Wayne Jones Staff Writer  
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Marco Rodriguez goes back to his roots with 'Heaven Forbid(s)!', his first original play in two years

When Marco Rodriguez began his theater career in Dallas, he was too young and inexperienced to know he was doing everything the wrong way. You don't start your own two-member producing company in a new town. You don't — at age 28 — act in, direct, produce and write your own material. And you certainly don't start off doing politically incorrect plays about cross-dressers, illegal aliens, the mayor of Dallas and the like.

Lucky for us that Rodriguez didn't know any better.

Beginning in 2001, his troupe, Martice Enterprises, did niche theater on the fly: First in a carriage house along Swiss Avenue, then moving up to what could be called a real "facility" (albeit it one where the lights went out in mid-performance). He plied his trade in basements, community centers and, finally, a traditional 300-seat theater in the Latino Cultural Center.

But that last production — "Pico de Gallo: The Return of the Queen" — was more than two years ago. Where has Rodriguez been all that time? Busy, he insists — just not working on his own plays.

"I've gone to New York a couple of times to direct a few staged readings, done a couple of independent movies, one that shot in Dallas," he says. "There were even some projects that we were gonna do [through Martice] that fell through for various reasons."

But the real reason for the delay is that, as Rodriguez became a known quantity in Dallas, he was sought out for work in commercials and industrial films.

"The stuff that pays the bills," he says.

He also landed primo stage roles with other companies like Kitchen Dog Theater ("Cloud Tectonics") and Shakespeare Dallas (Oberon in the musical adaptation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"). All of which contributed to veering him away from his roots in guerrilla theater.

Now he's veering back. "Heaven Forbid(s)!", the first Martice production since 2005, opens today at the Ice House Cultural Center in Oak Cliff.

Rodriguez's early ambition turned out to be both a blessing and a curse. In a brief four-year period, he acted in, co-wrote and/or produced nearly a dozen productions, with each usually building on the scope of the previous one. He started to burn out.



“Return of the Queen’ was very draining,” he says. “We took it at a bigger scale where we had a set and actual good lights! It took a toll on us. I wanted to breath for a while and explore other things. Writing is such a bitch, man.”

Apparently he wasn’t suffering from writer’s block.

“I just had to put it together in my brain and my heart. It’s so personal. We put a lot of ourselves into our shows,” he says.

Part of the challenge was deciding not only what he wanted to say next, but how to say it. The plays he’s staged have made fun of race, culture, love, relationship and sex. The natural order of things for Rodriguez was to move on to God.

“Spirituality is such a deep, private thing that it took me a while to kind of relax into it,” he says. “Putting my ideas on paper took a while. I grew up in a hardcore Catholic family, so it took soul-searching and meditation classes until I could write about it without being harsh or heavy-handed. That’s why it took a while.”

Rodriguez estimates that “Heaven Forbid(s)!” took six to eight months to write, with the last four months being intensive writing of all the ideas that have been boiling since “The Return of the Queen.”

“Writing feels like you’re pregnant: You’re hormonal, bitchy, nasty, wonderful, you stay up late. I had so many ideas running around my head, and I wanted to attack issues but laugh about them at the same time,” he remembers.

So while he addresses heady issues like the existence of purgatory and what happens to humans when they die, Rodriguez does so with a host of characters that include a male pimp (played by actress Rhianna Mack) and a leggy woman (played by Rodriguez himself).

The production also goes back to the bare essentials where Martice started: A minimal set, ad hoc costumes, a small cast, serviceable but not elaborate lighting. Rodriguez has focused his main emphasis on the writing (local director Rene Moreno offered some notes on the script). The style is a series of monologues and mini-skits, closer perhaps to character-driven standup comedy than a full-fledged play.

“The production side of playwriting influenced the play — especially one like mine, run by only two people,” he jokes.

In true guerrilla fashion, it’s not about technical mastery but the bare bones of making entertainment.

“We just want to enchant people into having a good time,” he says.