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Reviews by Lovell Estell III, Martín Hernández, Miriam Jacobson, Deborah Klugman, Terry Morgan, Steven Leigh Morris, Tom Provenzano, Luis Reyes, Sandra Ross, Amy Schaumburg and Neal Weaver.

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ALGERIAN ROMANCE See New Reviews.

THE COCKTAIL HOUR In this production of A.R. Gurney's cruelly comic swipe at the genteel conventions, director Robert O'Reilly and his fine cast explore every nuance of Gurney's satire through exquisite character work. The four actors play together seamlessly — a great credit to O'Reilly's skill, since the performers come from distinct yet worthy styles. David Carey Foster is grounded in dead-on realism as John, a 40-ish NYC publisher who visits his upstate, uptight parents to announce he's written a play about the family's quirks. Beautifully playing off Foster is Chip Heller as Bradley, the family patriarch. Sandra Kinder is simply delightful in a blithely comic turn as Bradley's increasingly tipsy wife Ann. Finally, a bit of expert comic melodrama is added by Ruth Crawford, as John's sister Nina, who has grown tired of playing the "good daughter." Colony Theater, 555 N. Third St., Burbank; Tues.-Wed., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 7. (818) 558-7000. (TP)

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS Danny Scheie directs Shakespeare's farce about adult identical twins who were separated at birth. A Noise Within, 234 S. Brand Blvd., Glendale; opens Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; in rep, call for schedule; thru May 27. (323) 953-7795.

DAMN YANKEES What is it about George Abbott and Douglass Wallopp's Faustian musical tribute to the great American pastime that makes it so oddly charming? Maybe it's Richard Adler and Jerry Ross' easy-listening music and lyrics, or perhaps a sneaky wish we've all had to strike a bargain with ol' Belial for fame and riches. Here, director Gerry McIntyre ably manages his large ensemble and has injected some Fosse-like élan to the choreography. Weston Nathanson plays likable, cantankerous Joe Boyd, the hardcore baseball fan who barbers his soul to the devil to help his beloved team. Ann Peck turns in a sensitive portrayal as his wife, and Patrick Tiller brings boyish innocence to his role as the baseball phenom from Hannibal, Mo. Adam Miller is a formidable Mephistopheles, while Jaclyn Miller is truly bewitching as the seductive Lola. Golden Performing Arts Center at the Madrid Theater, 21622 Sherman Way, Canoga Park; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 & 7 p.m.; thru March 25. (818) 347-9938. (LE3)

EVITA Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's musical about the former first lady of Argentina. La Mirada Theater for the Performing

Arts, 14900 La Mirada Blvd.; opens Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; perfs Tues.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., 2:30 p.m. (no mat March 24; no eve perf March 25); thru April 8. (562) 944-9801.

FULLY COMMITTED *Note: Brian Beacock has assumed performance duties since review was written.* This one-man show, written by Becky Mode, earned strong reviews in New York, and one can easily understand why. This zippy, multicharacter comedy is set in a basement room where Sam takes phone reservations for a swanky restaurant. In addition to a plethora of demanding would-be diners and Sam's dim relatives, the restaurant's other employees include the sadistic chef-owner and a frequently discombobulated French maitre d'. Nicholas Martin's direction turns what might have proved a static affair into kinetic theater. Coronet Theater, 366 N. La Cienega Blvd.; Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 5 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 & 7 p.m.; thru April 1. (310) 657-7377. (David Mermelstein)

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM A cunning slave tries to win his freedom with wit, in Burt Shevelove, Larry Gelbart and Stephen Sondheim's musical. East West Players at the David Henry Hwang Theater, 120 N. Judge John Aiso St., dwntwn.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m. (no perfs March 24 & 31; additional perf April 1, 7 p.m.; sign-interpreted perf April 13); thru April 15. (800) 233-3123.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE Susan Clark stars in Tennessee Williams' drama about disillusionment. Rubicon Theater Company at the Laurel, 1006 E. Main St., Ventura; Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m.; thru March 25. (805) 667-2900.

JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT The story of Genesis forms the basis for Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's musical. Metropolitan Educational Theater Network at the Torrance Cultural Arts Center, 3330 Civic Center Dr.; Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; Sat., March 24, 7 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., March 24-25, 2 p.m. (310) 781-7171 or (310) 376-1740.

THE KING STAG Albert Bermel's translation of Carlo Gozzi's fairy tale features costumes, masks and puppetry by Julie Taymor. UCLA, Royce Hall, Wstwd.; Thurs.-Fri., March 29-30, 8 p.m.; Sat., March 31, 2 p.m. (310) 825-2101.

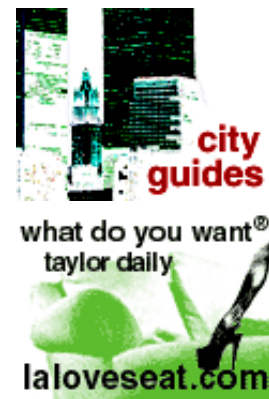
LATE NITE CATECHISM With both scripted material (co-written by Vicki Quade) and expertly delivered audience-inspired anecdotes, Maripat Donovan's solo performance is a mixture of fact and the kind of fiction that only organized religion can inspire. The Coronet's new upstairs theater works well as a grade-school classroom for Sister's adult catechism class. Since we are "required" to attend her course for a variety of reasons, Sister assumes that no one really wants to be here and provides prizes (glow-in-the-dark rosaries and key-chain crucifixes) as incentives for correct answers. On the night I attended, there were: the troublemaker, arriving late and unwrapping candies; giggling girls in the back row; and Matthew, Sister's golden-haired pet who sat front-and-center. Concluding with a rapid-fire Q&A session, Donovan ends the jollity on a well-placed, poignant note. Upstairs at the Coronet Theater, 366 La Cienega Blvd., W. Hlywd.; Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 5 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; indef. (877) 386-6968. (AS)

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LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES Christopher Hampton's adaptation of Choderlos de Laclos' tale of seduction and deceit. Pasadena Playhouse, 39 S. El Molino Ave.; Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 5 & 9 p.m.; Sun., 2 & 7 p.m.; thru April 22. (626) 356-PLAY.

THE LION KING Director Julie Taymor's visual splendor continually invigorates this show, whose book, by Roger Allers and Irene Mecchi, is a rather formulaic redemption lesson and whose music too often falls into the forgettable soft-rock category. The fable begins with the birth of a lion cub on the African veldt; perched atop Pride Rock, the reigning lion king, Mufasa (Rufus Bonds Jr.), looks forward to many more years before the sun will set on his realm and rise on his son Simba's. But guess who's not coming to dinner? Mufasa's swishy, usurping brother, Scar (John Vickery), whose absence at the celebration has been noted but not taken seriously enough by Mufasa. *The Lion King* unfolds and concludes between sunrises, but this tidy symbolism shouldn't alarm, as we quickly accept and even embrace the show's narrative familiarity. In fact, Simba's tale of regicide, exile and rebirth is a veritable safari through world mythologies, but the ricochet of Greek, Biblical, Shakespearean and other plots is synthesized with such seamless harmony that *Lion King* never becomes the confusing, clattering jumble it could have. Taymor and Michael Curry have designed a warehouse of masks, costumes and puppets, all perfectly complemented by Richard Hudson's mobile scenery and Steve C. Kennedy's crystalline sound. Although Taymor's characters wear costumes and masks, her actors' humanity still emerges because of the formfitting or transparent nature of these zoo suits and because the masks are worn as headgear, allowing us to see their wearers' faces beneath. *Cats* this ain't, but a smart presentation of human frailty, cunning and heroism shining through fur and hide. Pantages Theater, 6233 Hollywood Blvd.; Tues.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 6:30 p.m.; mats Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 1 p.m.; indef. (213) 365-5555 or (877) 498-KING. (Steven Mikulan)

THE LONESOME WEST See New Reviews.

THE MAD DANCERS The Hasidic tale "The Seven Beggars" is the inspiration for Yehuda Hyman's comedy about an IBM drone. San Diego Repertory Theater, 79 Horton Plaza, dwn. S.D.; previews Fri.-Sat., March 23-24, 8 p.m.; Sun., March 25, 2 & 7 p.m.; Tues., March 27, 7 p.m.; Wed.-Fri., March 28-30, 8 p.m.; opens Sat., March 31, 8 p.m.; perfs Tues., 7 p.m.; Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 & 7 p.m. (additional mats Wed., April 4 & 18, 2 p.m.; no eve perf April 22); thru April 22. (619) 231-3586.

MAMMA MIA! Seventies Swedish disco-pop group ABBA's glitzy, melodramatic songs are ready-made for this bubblegum extravaganza, based on Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus' lyrics and music, with book by Catherine Johnson. The spunky story, directed by Phyllida Lloyd, is not bad either: A 20-year-old fatherless bride-to-be, Sophie (Tina Maddigan), discovers that her free-spirited hippie mother, Donna (Louise Pitre), had flings with three men the week she was conceived. Sophie secretly invites the trio to her wedding. All three — Brit Harry (Lee MacDougall), Aussie Bill (David Mucci) and Yankee Sam (Gary Lynch) — show up the day before the wedding at the hotel, horrifying Donna. What happens next is no surprise. *Mamma Mia!* is goofy, unpretentious fun. The mostly strong cast of

singers does justice to harmony-laden tunes like "Dancing Queen" and "Super Trouper." Shubert Theater, 2020 Avenue of the Stars, Century City; Tues.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m.; thru May 12. (800) 447-7400. (MJ)

THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's 1939 screwball comedy benefits from David Rose's sleek direction. After a tumble on the ice, Sheridan Whiteside (Tom Dugan), an internationally famous radio broadcaster and theater critic, terrorizes the occupants of the suburban Ohio household where he is recuperating. Threatening Mr. and Mrs. Stanley (Charles Howerton and Peggy Billo) with a lawsuit, Whiteside commandeers most of their home, alienates them from their children and allows his wacky friends free run of the place. Whiteside then plots to derail the romance between his ultracompetent secretary Maggie Cutler (Denise Dillard) and local news reporter and aspiring playwright Bert Jefferson (Demetrio James). The comedy affords a number of star turns in supporting roles. Jodi Carlisle, Chad Borden and Nick DeGruccio deliver topnotch performances as a trio of Whiteside's luminary pals. Colony Studio Theater, 555 N. Third St., Burbank; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru April 8. (818) 558-7000. (SR)

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM High school students join professional actors in this production, which adapts Shakespeare's fairy world to Native American myth and sets the comedy in Sedona, Arizona. Will & Company at LATC, 514 S. Spring St., dwnwn.; Wed.-Fri., 10:30 a.m.; additional perfs Sat., March 24 & 31, 1 p.m.; Sat., April 7, 7 p.m.; thru April 7. (213) 239-8777.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING Director Mark Rucker has taken the Bard's ultimate relationship comedy and populated it with '30s Hollywood types and eye-popping musical numbers. The result is a stylistic tour de force. Standout cast members include the silver-tongued Benedick (an Errol Flynn-ish Douglas Sills); his nemesis/love interest Beatrice (Nike Doukas); Cagney-caricature Borachio (Michael Louden); and the delightfully eccentric Dogberry (Robert Dorfman). Under Rucker's direction, the fine ensemble handles the Elizabethan verbiage with ease, incorporating small asides of contemporary slang and 20th-century gestures that give this *Much Ado* a consistently playful looseness. Transitions between scenes are a seamless whirl, courtesy of Christine Jones' smart sets. Superb is the artful economy with which Christopher Akerlind lights the comedy, particularly the scene in which Claudio (Andrew Heffernan) is told of the infidelities of his betrothed, Hero (Julia Coffey). South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Dr., Costa Mesa; Tues.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., 2:30 p.m.; thru April 1. (714) 708-5555. (Andrew Lentz)

QED Alan Alda stars as Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman, in Peter Parnell's play, which draws inspiration from Feynman's writings and Ralph Leighton's book *Tuva or Bust!* Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., dwnwn.; Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., 2:30 p.m. (no mat March 24; 7:30 p.m. perf replaces April 29 mat; additional perf Tues., May 8, 8 p.m.); thru May 13. (213) 628-2772; TDD: (213) 680-4017.

STOMP Created by Luke Cresswell and Steve McNicholas, this

theatrical-dance performance incorporates everyday objects like brooms and trash cans. Wilshire Theater, 8440 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills; opens Tues., March 27, 8 p.m.; perfs Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 5 & 9 p.m.; Sun., 2 & 7:30 p.m.; thru April 15. (213) 365-3500.

TITANIC See New Reviews.

THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES Eve Ensler's Obie Award-winning collection of biographical women's stories is both embarrassing and liberating in its unabashed celebration of female genitalia. Although many of the anecdotes are humorous, the show, directed by Joe Mantello, focuses largely on the alienation and shame women feel about their "down there." The rigid format, in which the actors remain seated while glancing at notes, doesn't detract too much from the conviction and passion of the stories: a poem by a Bosnian rape victim, a graphic description of a woman giving birth, and an account of a young girl's sexual coming of age. The emotional peaks are made lighter by snappy lists of slang terms and cute answers to silly questions such as "If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?" Canon Theater, 205 N. Cañon Dr., Beverly Hills; Tues.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; mats Sat., 5 p.m., & Sun., 3 p.m.; with Maria Conchita Alonso, Linda Gray and Lynn Whitfield thru March 25. (310) 859-2830. (MJ)

SMALLER THEATERS

Hollywood, Westside & Downtown

ACME "THE BODY" VENTURA In this tightly crafted evening of comic scenes, even the few clunkers clunk benignly. The Acme company seems determined to reverse the trend in contemporary sketch comedy from glib sexuality and cultural banalities to carefully developed characters and an attendant interest in their humanity. Though the result is less edgy than skits propelled by rim shots, it's also a richer, more reflective experience that still provides plenty of laughs. The masterpiece here is Earlene Davis' "The R.V.," in which she and Ashley Clark portray an aging couple setting out on a cross-country drive in a huge recreational vehicle. What begins as an easy laugh at the couple's expense turns into a detailed exploration of a complicated relationship. The entire cast, under M.D. Sweeney's direction, understands the distinction between broad characterization and burlesque, and usually opts for the former with surprisingly fresh results. Acme Comedy Theater, 135 N. La Brea Ave.; Sat., 8 p.m.; indef. (323) 525-0202. (TP)

ADIEU, JACQUES See New Reviews.

ADVICE FROM A CATERPILLAR The New York art scene circa 1988 is the setting for Douglas Carter Beane's comedy about a double love triangle. Art Share, 801 E. Fourth Pl., dwntwn.; opens Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; perfs Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru April 1. (213) 687-4ART.

ALL IN THE TIMING/MERE MORALS See New Reviews.

AUSTIN RAY AND THE TEASERS See New Reviews.

BARRIO SPEEDWAGON See New Reviews.

BEAT FOR SPARROWS Karen Schuler and Richard Miller's adaptation of Charlie Leeds' stories about jazz, love and drugs. Buffalo River Productions at the Ivy Substation, 9070 Venice Blvd., Culver City; previews Thurs.-Fri., March 29-30, 8 p.m.; opens Sat., March 31, 8 p.m.; perfs Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru May 6. (323) 655-TKTS.

BEER. SHARK. MICE. *Note: The following review is of a production that opened earlier at this same venue:* Or rock, paper, scissors. It doesn't matter what you call them, this long-improv group from Chicago by any other name is still funny. Regulars Neil Flynn, Michael Coleman and Peter Hulne — are wild, wacky and blisteringly fast on their feet. Whereas most improv groups are dependant on a constant flow of suggestions, and hopefully good ones, from the audience, these comedians are off and running with a single suggested scenario. Where that trail will lead is anybody's guess. Quick character switches and setups make this hourlong show rip by, with Flynn serving as the primary traffic cop to shift the action. And Coleman — what can you say about this guy? He's twisted and seriously in need of some help . . . absolutely perfect for comedy. Improv Olympic West, 6468 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Sat., 9 p.m.; indef. (323) 962-7560. (Jim Crogan)

BITTEN BY A FLY Colin Mitchell's play is performed at Theatre/Theater, Fourth Floor, 6425 Hollywood Blvd.; Thurs.-Sun., 8 p.m. (no perf March 25); thru April 1. (323) 871-9433.

A BLACK TRILOGY 2001 Director Spencer Scott seamlessly directs three antebellum tales of sorrow and pain. The most poignant piece of the evening is P.J. Gibson's *The Taking Circle*, a stylized look at slave birthing rituals. As Shula (Jenna Z. Wilson) narrates, we see four slave women gather around the pregnant Japera (Regina Crisp) as she is about to give birth. The birthing, rendered in an artful, slow motion-styled dance, reveals an act of supreme defiance as the women call for Mahdia (Trina Price), an African goddess, to carry away the newborn's spirit to the netherworld. In *Call Out My Name*, a piece adapted by director Scott from historical materials, a onetime slave, William Wells Brown (Christopher Carrington), meets his younger self. And finally, in Bill Harris' *He Who Endures*, we are introduced to the internecine political and philosophical battles fought by Frederick Douglass (Ben Tyler), a defiant Rev. Henry Garnet (Joe Thornton Jr.) and the fervent John Brown (Stephan Early). Unity Players Ensemble at the Complex Theater, 6476 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru March 25. (323) 860-3208. (Jim Crogan)

BLADE TO THE HEAT The boxing ring is the setting for Oliver Mayer's drama about homophobia. Coast Playhouse, 8325 Santa Monica Blvd., W. Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 1. (323) 655-8587.

BUDDY'S GIFT An homage to his father's life and afterlife, Jack Simmons' one-person show gets off to a meandering start under

Candy Kaniecki (Herman)'s languid direction. Simmons' tale isn't exceptional at first. His father, Buddy, struggled to raise eight children with wife June on a New York City fireman's salary. At age 73, Buddy found himself in the hospital with a diagnosis of liver cancer. However, his father's passing, as Simmons tells it, "was not a wonderful death, but a death full of wonder," as shortly after his father was laid to rest, "signs" from the afterlife began occurring. A skeptical Simmons agreed to join his family in meeting with medium John Edward. The most engaging portion of this production comes in the final minutes, as Simmons, perched on a barstool under a few bare bulbs, relates with humble grace his father's afterlife contact. Coronet Studio Theater, 366 N. La Cienega Blvd., W. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 p.m.; thru April 1. (213) 365-3500. (AS)

CALLING UP PAPI Looking something like Rosie Perez but with cheekbones, writer-performer Lydia Nicole was born to a black mother and a Puerto Rican father, which means, she tells us, that "in Florida I'm Cuban, in New York I'm Puerto Rican, in California I'm Mexican, and in Mississippi I'm dead." In her rich monologue, Nicole pulls no punches: She tells us that her father was a pimp and her mother a prostitute. One of her mother's many boyfriends, known as Frito Bandito, repeatedly attempted to molest her, and a transvestite prostitute named Fifi became her mentor/protector. In a narrative sweep ranging from 1964 to the present, Nicole conveys what it was like growing up in Spanish Harlem. Though her pantomime skills are sometimes sketchy, she exudes high energy, good humor and an enjoyment of both her characters and her audience. Comedy Store, Belly Room, 8433 Sunset Blvd., W. Hlywd.; Thurs., 7:30 p.m.; thru May 24. (818) 731-3518. (NW)

CALL WAITING . . . A PAINFUL COMEDY Caroline Aaron and Joanna Gleason star in Dori Fram's comedy about a bedridden writer. Tiffany Theater, 8532 W. Sunset Blvd., W. Hlywd.; previews Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; Sat., March 24, 5 & 8 p.m.; Sun., March 25, 3 & 7 p.m.; Tues.-Fri., March 27-30, 8 p.m.; Sat., March 31, 5 & 8 p.m.; Sun., April 1, 3 p.m.; opens Sun., April 1, 7 p.m.; perfs Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 5 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 & 7 p.m.; indef. (310) 289-2999.

CASTLES IN THE AIR The life of Henry David Thoreau is the inspiration for Patrick Vest's solo performance. McCadden Place Theater, 1157 N. McCadden Pl., Hlywd.; Thurs., 8 p.m.; thru March 29. (818) 769-2179.

C-CUP Playwright Doug Field spins his disappointingly pedestrian farce around the angst of a breast-cancer survivor named Jana (Julie Sanford) whose husband (Don Paul) strays into the arms of amply bosomed neighbor Sally Ann (Alana Stewart). Longtime workout buddies and chums, these women are a ditzzy but mean-spirited duo. As they powwow over plans for the upcoming wedding of Jana's daughter Sarah Beth (Jennifer Manley), Sally Ann snidely peppers Jana about her single-boob status and damaged allure. No dulcet-toned victim, Jana can be just as bitchy, habitually taunting her stout, plain-featured progeny about her weight. But unlike his last play, *Down South*, which made telling points about traditional male attitudes toward sex, this one, studded with boob and blubber jokes more suitable to third-rate standup, merely rehashes stale riffs. Inspired performances might have salvaged the piece, but Richard

Hochberg directs a caricature-entombed ensemble. The Complex, 6476 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru April 7. (323) 957-9009. (DK)

CHIQUITA PERO PICOSA Carlos Alfaro's adaptation of Roberto Romero's comedy about an Angeleno actress. Celebrity Center, 5930 Franklin Ave., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m. (no perfs March 24 & 31); thru April 7. (818) 902-5653. *Note: All perfs in Spanish.*

CLOUDCUCKOOLAND Jane McEaney's mythic play incorporates storytelling, dancing and chanting. M.Y.E. Theater Company at the Gascon Center Theater, 8737 Washington Blvd., Culver City; opens Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; perfs Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru April 28. (310) 322-3142.

THE COMIC OZZIES Even when improv is funny, it often relies on juvenile "hubba-hubba" humor. But not the Comic Ozzies, a mixed-gender troupe with a decidedly gay sensibility. Like a lot of improv companies, the Ozzies ask for audience tips, and while the crowd on the night I attended shouted out all sorts of silly suggestions, at least they were literate suggestions. (The company's request for examples of theater styles from which to jam resulted in a scene that moved from kabuki to Shakespeare to Mamet.) Bob Koherr acts as ringmaster, with an appealing leather-daddy mien. The actors excel at fast responses, and none of the scenes goes on too long. The other Comic Ozzies are Jeff Bader, Kevin Bishop, Jennifer Glickman, Laura James, Erin McLaughlin, Bryan Moore, Derek Voy, Adam Watts and Michelle Yahn. Spaceland, 1717 Silver Lake Blvd., Silver Lake; every other Wed., 8 p.m.; indef.; free. (323) 851-8848. (SR)

THE COMING OUT PARTY John Michael Caffey's adaptation of his award-winning novel is set in West Hollywood during the 1970s. Hudson Mainstage Theater, 6539 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; previews Wed.-Thurs., March 28-29, 8 p.m.; opens Fri., March 30, 8 p.m.; perfs Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; indef. (310) 289-2999.

A COMMON THREAD See New Reviews.

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (ABRIDGED) *Note: This review is of a production at this same venue that has reopened after a brief hiatus.* Originally produced by the Reduced Shakespeare Company in 1990, Adam Long, Daniel Singer and Jess Winfield's Elizabethan lampoon incorporate all 37 of the Bard's plays, if only as passing references. This version wraps up in under an hour, yet without excising much of the scripted material. Seth Gorelik, Jennifer Marsala and Ernie Sanchez charge through with wit and grace, under Stan Harrington's clean direction. Hysterical Marsala spins the original's all-male casting, bringing sexual tension and a diva complex to the innocently nervous façade. Gorelik and Sanchez back her up well, doctoring the script with topical jokes. Xristos Productions at the Stella Adler Theater, 6773 Hollywood Blvd.; Fri., 8 p.m.; thru March 23. (323) 465-4446. (LR)

COUPLING UP Comprised of five sketches about the severely misguided relationships of less-than-desirable characters in their pursuit of sex, love and wisdom, *Coupling Up* opens with "The Funeral," as Nancy (Paige Baxter) asks Richard (Terry Hart) to join

her dating service while he stands over his late wife's coffin. Video segments of Nancy's clients segue the coming scenes while tying them together. Though writers Baxter and Hart craft simple and concise vignettes about romantic misunderstandings and the stereotypes behind them, their skits actually exploit the very clichés they aim to expose. Through the flagging humor, often riding on passé vulgarity, the production tries to see just how much it can get away with rather than what it can reveal: A giant dildo makes an appearance in the third scene, "D'yadoit?" Meagerly satisfying stuff, it just doesn't make your belly roll. Empty Stage, 2372 Veteran Ave., Wstwd.; Sat., 10 p.m.; Sun., 8 p.m.; indef. (310) 470-3560. (Scotte Rupp)

CRIME SCENE! A serial comedy spoofing the detective genre. Sacred Fools Theater, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hlywd.; Sat., 11 p.m.; indef. (310) 281-8337.

CYRANO DE BERGERAC Sarah Brown and Chad Brannon star in Edmond Rostand's comedy. Knightsbridge Theater, 1944 Riverside Dr., Silver Lake; Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 5 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru May 6. (626) 440-0821.

THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett's adaptation of Anne Frank's journal entries, here re-adapted by Wendy Kesselman, dramatizes the doomed efforts of the adolescent girl and her German-Jewish family to hide from Nazi persecution. This is a well-crafted piece — almost too well-crafted in some respects — but as shamelessly manipulative as any old-fashioned Hollywood movie. Nevertheless, it resonates powerfully. Director Richard Israel gives it a meticulous, solid production, though not a brilliant one. The ambience is more American than European, and Israel embraces the script's conventional and heartwarming aspects rather than resisting them. Actor Kristina Bartlett is better at suggesting Anne's irrepressibility than illuminating any vulnerability, but Angela DeCicco and Larry Lederman, as members of the Franks' bickering host family, provide a welcome touch of grit. West Coast Ensemble, 522 N. La Brea Ave., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru March 25. (323) 525-0022. (NW)

DRIVING WHILE BLACK IN BEVERLY HILLS Though the play's title suggests some connection to the notorious practice of racial profiling, instead playwright Frank Jenkins and director Lynn Hamilton offer a retro tale of racism and police brutality. The setting is Beverly Hills, circa 1970, years removed from the Rodney King debacle, a context as effete as it is confusing. Anthony Nash (Felton Perry) is a black man who has "made it" and has earned all the trappings of middle-class success. But his comfortable existence is shaken when he's beaten by two cops after a traffic stop and arrested, along with his son Paul (Robert Blake Marshall) and a Black Panther (Gilbert Glenn Brown). The incident forces Nash to gradually re-evaluate what it means to be "black." Nash's clunky transformation from smug, self-satisfied Negro to black activist is too egregiously vacuous to be engaging. Matrix Theater, 7657 Melrose Ave., W. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 & 7 p.m.; thru March 25. (323) 655-TKTS. (LE3)

EMOTIONALLY UNAVAILABLE The romantic aftermath of a one-

night stand between a Republican television producer and a tattooed political activist is the subject of Caren McDonald's comedy. Hudson Avenue Theater, 6537 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 22. (323) 930-9304.

FEET Padraic Duffy's comedy follows the antics of a bizarre group of youngsters. Sacred Fools Theater, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru April 15. (310) 281-8337.

FIFTH & SPRING The rave scene is the setting for Alyson Croft's dark look at underemployed Angeleno 20-somethings. When heroin-addicted ex-con Tony (Ronnie Walsh) misses his connection at a downtown rave party, he hooks up with Sandy (playwright Croft) and her pals. She offers him Ecstasy, and they take him to another party in the desert. Ziggy (Joel West) plies the thuggish jailbird with nitrous to mellow him out after Tony attempts to strangle Westside princess Lindsay (Anna Bocci). But Sandy and Tony's tenuous connection evaporates after returning to the city. Sandy's mother (Peggy Mannix) is a compulsive gambler. Tony lives with Mark (director Anthony Barnao), who encourages him to hawk forged celebrity photos as an honest alternative to street fighting. The ensemble is focused, and Barnao's direction is fine, but too many short scenes add up to a rather choppy narrative. Nevertheless, there's much to recommend here. Blue Sphere Alliance at the Lex, 6760 Lexington Ave., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru April 7. (818) 906-0675. (SR)

FORTINBRAS Playwright Lee Blessing has written a satirical sequel to *Hamlet*, centered on Norwegian prince Fortinbras, who arrives immediately after the violent deaths of Hamlet and all his relations. Loyal Horatio (Keith A. Brush) is determined to tell the story truthfully, but Fortinbras (Chuck Rose) wants to transform it into propaganda glorifying himself. At first it seems that Blessing is pursuing some real meta-theatrical purpose: He's deconstructing Shakespeare while examining the conflicts between truth and spin, between the contemplative man (Hamlet) and the ruthless man of action (Fortinbras). But the action soon devolves into crude farce as the ghosts of the Danish royal family return, bent on little more than lechery and disruption. Though there are occasional flashes of wit, provocative ideas, engaging performances and crowd-pleasing sexual hijinks, the plot becomes increasingly arbitrary and pointless. In the hands of director Kate Bridges, *Fortinbras* seems like an intriguing idea hamstrung by faulty execution. Company of Angels, 2106 Hyperion Ave., Silver Lake; Thurs.-Fri., 8 p.m.; thru March 23. (323) 883-1717. (NW)

FRIDA KAHLO Ruben Amavizca's "Kahlo-eidoscope" examines the myths and realities of the iconic Mexican artist. Grupo de Teatro SINERGIA at the Teatro Frida Kahlo Theater, 2332 W. Fourth St.; opens Thurs., March 29, 8 p.m.; perfs Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru June 3. (213) 382-8133. *Note: Perfs alternate in English and Spanish.*

THE GINGERBREAD LADY An alcoholic former lounge singer copes with sobriety, in Neil Simon's comedy. Theater District at the Cast, 804 N. El Centro Ave., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 15. (323) 957-2343.

GIRL UNDER GRAIN Playwright Karen Hartman's allegorical drama is loosely based on the Old Testament's Book of Ruth, updated to the dust bowl, filtered through a feminist screen and jam-packed with lesbian tongue kisses and baby swapping. Sadly, this description makes the play sound much more interesting than it actually is: Hartman's sometimes poetic writing is frustratingly dense, and the characters are poorly defined. And director Laura Stribling's staging is too meandering to sustain interest for the show's duration. The play concerns a blind, widowed and destitute mother, Sugar (Cathy Carlton), who wanders down a country road with her two widowed daughters-in-law, Ruth (Katherine Gibson) and Orpah (Dorie Barton). Orpah can't stand the misery and discomfort, but Ruth remains devoted to Sugar, whom she realizes she loves in a woman-woman way. Carlton's embittered and pragmatic Sugar and Gibson's dutiful but increasingly resentful Ruth are both strikingly multidimensional acting turns. Theater of NOTE, 1517 Cahuenga Blvd., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru March 31. (323) 856-8611. (Paul Birchall)

HEAVEN SCENT A delectable premise can't redeem Hilary Tyler's comedy from inconsistent direction, uneven acting and general vagueness. Set in small-town USA, the action — or lack thereof — takes place at the childhood home of investigative reporter Cecily Nugent (M. Darlene Hunt). Her mother, Isabelle (Sarah Lilly), is an aging ex-flower child who's shackled up with a man (Robert L. Williams) she believes to be an angel. Cecily's nosy childhood friend-cum-real estate agent, Margaret (Brigid Ryan), learns that Isabelle's houseguest is attempting to concoct mind-altering scents with the help of a nerdy chemist (Richard Zaynor). The comedic mix includes Cecily's policeman love interest (David Randal), the mailman (Kevin Fabian) and one bad guy (Timothy Di Pri). Under Sean Galuszka's direction, cast members (with the exception of Ryan and Di Pri) mug and exaggerate, rarely pausing to react. Stella Adler Theater, 6773 Hollywood Blvd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru March 25. (323) 462-2180. (Diedre Johnson)

HEROINE ADDICTS See Theater Pick.

HEY, Y'ALL James Dean Jay Bird and Steven Cheslik-DeMeyer perform songs and stories in the tradition of early vaudeville. Sierra Stage, 1444 Sierra Bonita Ave., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., March 23-24, 7 p.m. (818) 247-2884.

IMAGINING BRAD In playwright Peter Hedges' intermittently poignant but ultimately obvious dramedy, two Nashville women strike up an unlikely friendship. Gossipy Dana Sue (Elizabeth Greer) talks the ear off a recent arrival in town, a younger girl (Elise Ballard) who always appears at functions without her husband. As the women's conversation continues, Dana Sue begins to suspect that her friend's husband may not even be real. Yet, the affection that the mysterious husband apparently has for his wife is shockingly contrasted with Dana Sue's own miserable marriage. Unhappily, both the presentation of the play's themes and their resolution are handled in an orthodox manner that feels pat and predictable. Director Louis R. Plante's staging offers an at times touching intimacy, but the performances possess a superficial quality that recalls the artifice of so many network sitcoms. Masquers Cabaret, 8334 W. Third St.; Tues., 7:30 p.m. (no perf April 3); thru April 17. (310) 712-1601. (Paul

Birchall)

LADY MACBETH GETS A DIVORCE A rich uncle and his sexy companion disturb an unhappily married couple, in John Menkes' comedy. Beverly Hills Playhouse, 254 S. Robertson Blvd.; opens Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; perfs Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 & 7 p.m.; thru April 29. (323) 655-TKTS.

THE LINE THAT PICKED UP 1,000 BABES (AND HOW IT CAN WORK FOR YOU) *Note: The following review is of a production that appeared earlier at a different venue:* Playwright Eric Berlin's cheerful if lightweight comedy concerns a group of singles searching for love, and director Kristen Hensley brings ironic creativity to this imaginative production. Berlin's play concerns groovy young Benny (Matthew Pohlson), a surprisingly sweet sleazoid, who brings his own copy of a "How To" pickup book to a bar in hopes of getting some action. Benny's target: attractive secretary Ellen (Hensley), who has dragged her cynical friend Fran (Michelle Allen) out for her birthday. Meanwhile, sultry bar gal Diane (Stephanie Deaver) — as malicious as she's gorgeous — plays a mean trick on heartsick hopeful Charlie (Jason Landau). Berlin provides few earth-shattering truths about romance, but director Hensley constructs a quick-paced and commendably glib mood that feels both hip and realistic. The Working Stage, 1516 N. Gardner St., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru April 28. (818) 486-3521. (Paul Birchall)

LIQUID RADIO PLAYERS really swings. Under Stan Morse's helm, the Liquid Radio Players comedy troupe's weekly presentation of an entirely improvised '40s-style radio serial is a study in acting agility and wit. With the help of the MC/narrator (Craig Tollifson), audience members are asked to think up genre, characters, plot — even advertisers. Then various members of the troupe (Kevin Berntson, Brian Breiter, Jennifer Byrnes, Brian Habicht, Kimberly Lewis, Lisa Malone, Holly Mandel, Travis Oates, Gary Rae, David Rasner, Benjamin Taxy, Gary Anthony Williams) assume the roles. One has to appreciate the actors' efforts to keep up with the improvisational whims of the narrator. Although actors in a jam sometimes resorted to wordplay to get out of jokes going nowhere, the salvation lay in their cruel attempts, while improvising, to crack up their fellow thespians. Acme Comedy Theater, 135 N. La Brea Ave.; Thurs., 8 p.m.; indef. (323) 525-0202. (Diedre Johnson)

LIVE! LIVE! NEWS! NEWS! Although this scattershot gag-filled newscast sometimes limps down the well-traveled path of cliché, some of the vignettes demonstrate sardonic wit — and the ensemble performs with vitality and precision, even when the material itself is only hit-and-miss. The show's mocking setup and execution suggest a slightly raunchier but ultimately recycled version of the weekly *SNL* news parody, hosted by robotic he-bimbo and banal she-bimbo anchors (Jason Rohrer and Ken Cosby in drag). A number of goofy commercials are peppered with humor suggesting an adolescent's desire to shock through the use of profanity and sex talk. While the show is unable to evade a warmed-over mood, the ensemble is clever and spirited. The producers promise a different show every month, so there's hope for something more scintillating down the line. Jewel Box Theater Center, 1951-1959 Cahuenga Blvd., Hlywd.; call theater for schedule; indef. (323) 469-4434. (Paul Birchall)

LOVES AND LOSSES A program of one-acts performed by Theater Neo at the Hudson Avenue Theater, 6537 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; opens Tues., March 27, 8 p.m.; perfs Tues., 8 p.m.; thru May 8. (323) 769-5858.

THE MAIDS Two sisters contemplate murdering their employer, in Jean Genet's drama. Theater Pangaea at the Elephant Off Main in the Lillian Theater, 6324 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; additional perfs Sat., 10:30 p.m.; thru April 7. (323) 953-3576.

MENACE TO HIGH SOCIETY In his one-man show, John Marshall Jones takes his audience on an often raucous tour of Detroit street life, recounted through a batch of zany characters. There's the voluble grandma — a torrential talker, who spreads gossip about the goings-on in her neighborhood. Jones does a scary take on singer-poet Gil Scott-Heron, in which he addresses weightier matters of police brutality and racism. Then there's the risible lounge singer Ozell Bodét — whose freaky mien and lyrics complement his outrageous wig and dental work — and a hardcore homie, looking for some respect and steady work. Jones draws out plenty of laughs through these diverse shards of humanity and only falls short because some of his other material comes off as a test run. Still, the show has plenty of heart and also features Andre Roberson's superb sax playing — among the evening's many pleasant surprises. Masquers Cabaret, 8334 W. Third St.; Mon., 7:30 p.m.; thru March 26. (323) 653-4848. (LE3)

MILLIE WARNBURTON PRESENTS: Bits and Pieces In lesser hands, the caricature of an aging show-biz biddy would wear thin quickly, but in this comedy troupe's creation, Aliza Murrieta's carefully crafted Millie Warnburton charms throughout this evening of monologues and standup. Millie is a landlady and impresario who claims to be showcasing the talents of her tenants so they will be discovered and finally make enough cash to pay their rent on time. The conceit is a gentle thematic device that holds seven otherwise unrelated bits together with great humor. The most amusing entrées are strongly developed character bits, most notably Christine Schoenwald's "Peppermint," in which the comic portrays a crazy, overweight woman annoying everyone in line at the bank. Dagny Kerr's "Runaway" is a frighteningly spot-on interpretation of a teenage punk-goth poet shyly reciting her latest violence-laced ode. Bennett Jones is hilarious as a trashy French rocker deigning to perform for us. Bang, 457 N. Fairfax Ave., Hlywd.; Sun., 8 p.m.; thru April 29. (323) 653-6886. (TP)

THE MIRACLE WORKER *Note: The following review is of a production that appeared earlier at a different venue:* William Gibson's dramatization of Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan's relationship doesn't score high for originality or imagination but tells a sweet, if somewhat sentimentally indulgent, story of human triumph. Still, under director Amanda Karr's sure hand, the production approaches magic. Seamless and well-choreographed scene changes enhance the play's themes of human perception. As Sullivan, director Karr leads a strong cast, which occasionally veers toward melodrama. She stumbles over awkward scenes which depict Sullivan battling with echoes from the past (more a fault of Gibson's text). Captain Keller (Robert Craig) is overly enigmatic, more a

spineless charlatan than tyrannical patriarch, which weakens his heated confrontations with Sullivan. But the core of the drama stems from Annie's relationship with Helen, scenes that 11-year-old actress Anna C. Peloso pulls off with aplomb. Knightsbridge Theater, 1944 Riverside Dr., Silver Lake; Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 6 p.m.; thru May 6. (626) 440-0821. (LR)

THE NIGHT OF THE IGUANA Tennessee Williams admitted that dramatic structure was not his strong suit, an opinion verified by his 1961 play. Though stifled freedom is clearly emblemized by an iguana tied by the throat to a leash under the porch, themes of repressed desire, loneliness, aging, art, commerce and human cruelty come to resemble a tangled ball of string. The story concerns a "defrocked" Episcopal reverend (Larry Poindexter) trying to redeem himself by leading a tour of women teachers through the Mexican hinterlands. Redemption, however, stays on the horizon, as he's inexorably drawn to teenage girls and rum cocktails — abandoning his party for a brief respite at the Costa Verde Hotel. During this interlude, the brash, widowed hotel owner (Karen Kondazian) tries to ensnare him, fuming jealously at a beautiful rival (the riveting Jacquelin Schultz). Director Simon Levy has wisely excised a scene of German visitors in this occasionally overwrought but generally magnificent production. Fountain Theater, 5060 Fountain Ave., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru April 14. (323) 663-1525. (SLM)

NOSFERATU . . . ANGEL OF THE FINAL HOUR Blending expressionism and farce with almost miraculous economy, Kaaren J. Luker's musical focuses on the blurry lines between fantasy and reality that fueled silent-film director F.W. Murnau's cinematic vision. You don't need to have seen his movies to enjoy *Nosferatu's* dizzying warp of pun-filled dialogue, physical comedy and cabaret numbers. Under Jon Kellam's carefully considered direction, the nonlinear spectacle shifts between the false conviviality of club life and the dreamlike sequences of *Nosferatu* lurking in the misty gloom of his castle. (*Nosferatu* only occasionally closes in on the everyday business of moviemaking, in scenes depicting the tension between Murnau [D. Morris] and his producer William Fox [Antony Sandoval]). Overall, it's the campy-yet-sensuously-gothic score of the live house band (led by Jef Bek) and Brian Frette's air-tight choreography of the cast that make *Nosferatu* so hugely entertaining. Zoo District at the Evidence Room, 2220 Beverly Blvd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 22. (323) 769-5674. (Andrew Lentz)

OLEANNA Long before his screen adaptation of *Hannibal*, David Mamet solidified his reputation as a misogynist with *Oleanna*, a ridiculously one-sided play about sexual harassment in which a sincere student comes off as a plotting feminazi. Thankfully, director Carey Eidel is aware of the two-person play's moral disparity and, while faithful overall to the original, renders both characters equally despicable. Teacher John (Sam Ross) is every bit as condescending as pupil Carol (Stephanie Cotton) is insecure and vindictive. As his carefully built life starts to crumble, we can't help but root for John — that is, until he lashes out in a sudden loss of scholarly composure. Eidel's judicious treatment of the characters helps us to get at the shifting power relationships. Kudos to Burris Jackes' stage design, which realistically depicts the musty air of rote pedantry in Everyprof's office. Kudzu Productions at the Court Theater, 722 N. La

Cienega Blvd., W. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 1. (323) 692-6908. (Andrew Lentz)

THE PAGES OF MY DIARY I'D RATHER NOT READ *Note: This review is of a production that appeared earlier at a different venue:* Eydie Faye's raunchy, intelligent comedy offers further proof that the failed relationships, screwy families and career missteps of *other people* can be outrageously funny. Like their more glamorous sisters on *Sex and the City*, Faye's trio of gals are looking for success (romantic and otherwise) in New York. Resembling something between a fugue and a chorus, the three parallel narratives "comment" on each other, heightening the irony and increasing the dramatic resonance of the more serious moments. Faye's comedy succeeds, in part, because the characters experience epiphanies, learn something and change. As the trio, Betsie Devan, Marissa Manzanaras and playwright Faye are well served by Richard Hess' crisp direction. Much of the material has a distinctly feminist tilt, with the humor angling toward the subversive — Faye leaves no sacred cow un milked. 3dp Productions at the Hudson Backstage, 1110 N. Hudson Ave., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 15. (323) 930-9304. (SR)

PARTING GIFTS Four female friends reunite to bid farewell to one of their own, in Rideaux Baldwin's drama. Jewel Box Theater Center, 1951-1959 Cahuenga Blvd., Hlywd.; in rep with *Servants of a Post-Apocalyptic White House*; call for schedule; thru April 8. (323) 469-4434.

PERFUCT Momma stars in Steve Silverman's dramedy about a woman looking for perfection. Egyptian Arena Theater, 1625 N. Las Palmas Ave., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m. (mat Sun., March 25, 2 p.m.); indef. (323) 243-4488.

THE PERKS: Everybody in Trashbags Paige Baxter, Kay Christianson, Michelle Durnell, Terry Hart, Christopher Hutson and Lincoln Myerson are a hilarious improv troupe whose offbeat looks, bizarre voices and abundant acting skills make for a spirited evening of comedy. On the night I attended, Baxter, Christianson and Myerson took audience suggestions to create a macabre murder-mystery play involving a woman returning from the dead and actors who forget their lines. When the actors called for lines, however, it was an audience member who provided them. In another piece, Hart and Durnell played siblings plotting their parents' demise, and Hutson, the family attorney. The twist was that Hart's voice was provided by Hutson, Durnell's by Hart, and Hutson's by Durnell. Musical director Allen Simpson provided appropriate tunes for the bizarre happenings, in an assortment of musical styles. Empty Stage Theater, 2372 Veteran Ave., W.L.A.; Fri., 9 p.m.; indef. (310) 470-3560. (MH)

PRAYING WITH THE ENEMY Luis Santeiro's biting, tongue-in-cheek comedy is set in 1998 Cuba, the week that two historic events happened simultaneously. Pope John Paul II's momentous visit coupled with the breaking of the Monica Lewinsky scandal set into motion first a massive influx then an exit of reporters from Fidel's island nation. Curiously, one of the few journalists who remained was lifestyle/food reporter Martha Stewart, here named Cynthia Wallace

and played with delightful manic intensity by sultry understudy Veronica Stocker. Wallace's cooking/lifestyle show is transported to Cuba for the papal visit, where it runs head-on into a Cuban cooking show hosted by Cuqui Conde (Gloria Laino). Add to the mix a Cuban official (Ray Michaels Quiroga) reduced to driving a taxi; the Condes' hustler son, Lenny (Alberto Henriquez); and some anti-Fidelista exiles (Ernesto Miyares and Goretí Da Silva). Thanks to Margarita Galban's stylish staging, what could have been a stock farce is here rendered as complex political satire. Bilingual Foundation of the Arts, 421 North Avenue 19, E.L.A.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru March 25. (323) 225-4044. (Jim Crogan) *Note: Perfs alternate in English and Spanish.*

RACK OF MULE (IN A LIGHT CRANBERRY SAUCE) This assortment of sketch comedy from Wenches and Wrenches comedy troupe runs the gamut from mediocre to entertaining. The clever stuff doesn't happen until midway into the show and the best involves comic clichés and themes that demand our suspension of disbelief. For example, a financially failing private eye spouts off amusingly, as though in a bad 1940s noir film; a burned-out Russian rat exterminator hunts for a mythical, human-size rat; and a high school French teacher from Arkansas meets a pair of Parisians. However, others, such as a juvenile presenter at an awards ceremony, come off as silly and flat. The enthusiastic cast (Josephine Angelini, Bob Wheeler, Leigh Hall, Michael Roberts, Paul Bunch and Beth Shea) exploits whatever comedic opportunities crop up, even though a cramped stage and time-consuming setups between sketches stifle the momentum. Hudson Guild Theater, 6539 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Tues., 8 p.m.; thru April 17. (213) 617-1961. (Diedre Johnson)

RUNNING FROM PARADISE See New Reviews.

SELLING BREASTS A wannabe actress lands a job selling an herbal breast-enhancement product, in Sally Stover and Jennifer Leach's dark comedy, which is based on a true story. St. Genesius Theater, 1049 N. Havenhurst Ave., W. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 29. (800) 965-4827.

SERVANTS IN A POST-APOCALYPTIC WHITE HOUSE If your tastes run to infantile fart and piss humor, adolescent sex jokes, puerile sado-masochism, goofy racial stereotyping and over-articulated bad accents, this may be the play for you. Everyone else will be dumbfounded that so many people could invest their energy in a piece of theater that starts badly and, over two hours, gets steadily worse. Playwright Ken Cosby has written himself a role as a superstud counterrevolutionary who comes to the post-apocalyptic White House to help the serving staff save the world from the shenanigans of President Kachus (Richard Meese), a right-wing dictator whose family does nothing but take drugs and grope for sexual partners. Handed what Cosby terms a farce, director Nick D'Abruzzo sets out to fill every moment with visual humor, but the sloppiness of the text just leads to messy staging. Jewel Box Theater, 1951-1959 Cahuenga Blvd., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 6 p.m. (no perfs Thurs.-Fri., April 5-6); thru April 8. (323) 469-4434. (TP)

SIRENA, QUEEN OF THE TANGO Guillermo Reyes' episodic comedy focuses on the adventures of an Argentine gender

illusionist, a noir-ish femme fatale played with campy good humor by Douglas Steindorff. In the first episode, reluctant murder witness Sirena casts her spell over a cop (David Shofner) with a vanilla sex life. The second interlude, "Now, Voyager of the Damned," finds Sirena obligated to entertain a cruise ship of geriatric bachelors. In the third episode, Alison Arngrim plays a high-powered district attorney (with white-trash roots) prosecuting Sirena for the murder of her sixth husband. There's lots of fun, not the least of which is hearing Arngrim "accidentally" slip into heavy Appalachian dialect while watching a glamorous transvestite steal her man. Andy Steinlen puts in a star turn as a bratty Britney Spears wannabe. Director Mark Bringleston keeps the action brisk, particularly in the first two episodes. Celebration Theater, 7051-B Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 5 p.m.; thru April 1. (323) 289-2999. (SR)

THE SIZEMORE INTERVIEWS Playwright-director Glen Merzer's themes are disturbing. To think any broadcast producer would be foolhardy enough to repeatedly fake eyewitness reports of the U.S. invasion of Panama seems beyond the pale. But if Brian Seifert's account, as scripted by Merzer, is to be believed, that's exactly what happened. Of course, there is little that wasn't duplicitous about the Panama invasion, the deadliest pink slip ever delivered to an American employee: former strongman Manuel Noriega. Although there is much to like about this production — Merzer's witty script and good performances by Brett Thacher (as Brian Seifert/Roger Sizemore) and Tina Morasco (as Brian's estranged wife, Cindy) foremost — the problems, although eminently fixable, are still there. Terribly miscast as NBC producer Kayla, Lili Nadja Barsha simply doesn't have the chops to pull off the smarmy deceitfulness needed to make her central character believable. Hudson Guild Theater, 6539 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 8. (323) 930-9304. (Jim Crogan)

SOCIAL EXTORTION See New Reviews.

SOUTHERN BAPTIST SISSIES Texas-born writer-director Del Shores proves once again he can be both serious and very funny as he explores his passionate love/hate relationship with his Southern Baptist heritage. He traces the plight of four gay boys who have grown up with a religious background, all riddled with a self-hatred that the church's rabidly anti-gay stance has indoctrinated into them. Benny (Michael Taylor Gray) rebels and becomes a lip-synching drag entertainer. T.J. (Tate Taylor) can't take the moral heat and embraces pious hypocrisy in an attempt to deny his homosexuality. Mark (Robert Lewis Stephenson), finding his love for T.J. rejected and scorned, becomes a gay militant. And Andrew (Sam A. McConkey) is broken and destroyed by guilt and shame. The real richness of the play is rooted in the fact that it grudgingly respects, loves and even admires the Baptist tradition it condemns. Delane Productions at Zephyr Theater, 7456 Melrose Ave.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 29. (310) 289-2999. (NW)

STIGMATA AND OTHER SYMPTOMS An anorexic teenage girl battles her father, in Adam Davidson's tragedy. Lee Strasberg Creative Center, Marilyn Monroe Theater, 7936 Santa Monica Blvd., W. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 22. (323) 650-7777.

SUNDAY SHOW BROCKOVICH Imagine Andy Warhol (Oscar Mitt) and a few of his old Factory gang (Michael Wynsen, Chris Mackenzie, Maz Jobrani and Jesse Burch) driving to his gallery opening in the rural South. Or an urban hip-hop aficionado (Jason Boggs) discussing Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, or a '70s-style brother-sister disco dance act (Katy Dougherty and Jobrani) staying alive in the 21st century. These are among the 17 new Acme Theater Bravo Company skits that have absolutely nothing to do with the eponymous activist/movie subject. Instead, the troupe and its director, Todd Rohrbacher, continue in Acme's hilarious tradition of sketch comedy. Still, not all is perfect. Some of the pieces start with a clever premise before falling into senseless disarray. Timing is also sometimes off, with some scenes going on way too long. This isn't the company's best work, but the sections that do sparkle are most inspired. Acme Comedy Theater, 135 N. La Brea Ave.; Sun., 7:30 p.m.; indef. (323) 525-0202. (Diedre Johnson)

THEY CALL ME MISTER FRY *Note: The following review is of a production that opened earlier at this same venue:* There are all the usual platitudes about teaching in Jack "Mr. Fry" Freiburger's autobiographical solo play, but what raises it above others of its ilk is his Shakespearean acting training. Freiburger also watched a lot of Walt Disney flicks as a child, during which *Excalibur* took a strong hold of his imagination, and he wins over his audience (and his real-life students) with his Camelot shtick. He's at his weakest playing himself as a pathetic guy full of self-doubt, whose girlfriend views him as a loser. His most endearing character is King Arthur, who acts as his conscience, and Freiburger also masterfully portrays two problem students in his South-Central fifth-grade classroom who teach him a thing or two about life and death. However, the lengthy production suffers from director Mark W. Travis' sluggish pacing. Lex Theater, 6760 Lexington Ave., Hlywd.; Sun., 3 p.m. (additional perf Sat., March 24, 2 p.m.); thru April 8. (818) 906-0675. (MJ)

THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON'T THEY? Rick Sparks and Gary Carter's adaptation of Horace McCoy's novella about a grueling dance marathon at the Santa Monica Pier. Greenway Court Theater, 544 N. Fairfax Ave.; opens Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; perfs Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru April 28. (323) 930-9304.

THREE DAYS OF RAIN Pamela Gordon directs Richard Greenberg's drama about siblings attempting to unravel a mysterious family history. Evidence Room, 2220 Beverly Blvd.; opens Wed., March 28, 8 p.m.; perfs Mon.-Wed., 8 p.m.; thru April 25. (213) 381-7118.

TISSUE refers to the cancerous lump belonging to 33-year-old Sally (an excessively perky Julie Shimer), whose diagnosis and consequent mastectomy upend her life. Sidling from past to present, Louise Page's 1978 one-act depicts its plucky heroine's anguished experience: her discovery of the lump, her search for a doctor, her post-op awakening to a raw wound, and, finally, her painful groping for a return to a normal existence. Tinged with black humor, the rhythmic, image-laced narrative also scans Sally's recollections of her puritanical mom and her prepubescent fascination with breasts. Though the material — with its underlay of gender politics — is familiar, the writing is honest, and its message to women enduringly powerful. The execution here is another matter: Director Anthony

Barnao's stylized rendering is more notable for its clipped pacing than its profundity. Surprisingly, few lighting changes highlight the numerous scene shifts, lending a sameness to the production. Blue Sphere Alliance at the Lex, 6760 Lexington Ave., Hlywd.; perfs in rep, call for schedule; thru April 11. (818) 906-0675. (DK)

TO BITTER AND BACK Angelenos may remember writer-performer-songwriter David Pevsner as a sexy centaur in *When Pigs Fly*. Here, however, he begins his slick, clever one-man musical as a gay, Jewish Oblomov — too demoralized to haul himself out of bed, particularly when he discovers that the only item in his date-book is "buy shoestrings." But his self-deprecating wit and infectious good nature are galvanic, and soon he's regaling us with stories, rhymes and songs. Pevsner derives malicious satisfaction from sending computer viruses to ex-lovers in Christmas e-mails and satirizes his own ineptitude at playing the dating game. Yet his most surprising — and touching — interlude is a meditation on the death of the elderly baby sitter. Pevsner is a performer of rare talent and charm, wielding his authority with casual ease — fully supported by Randy Brenner's impeccable, discreet direction and musical director Jamie Forsyth's smooth accompaniment and expert musical punctuation. Tamarind Theater, 5919 Franklin Ave., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 1. (323) 960-4430. (NW)

TOTALLY L.A. Seven short plays about Angeleno life. Hudson Backstage Theater, 6537 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Mon., 8 p.m.; thru April 9. (323) 930-9304.

TOTALLY MUSICAL Several short musical-theater pieces, including Kevin Murphy and Dan Studney's *Sex Toy Story*. Hudson Backstage Theater, 6537 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Tues., 8 p.m.; thru April 10. (323) 930-9304.

TOTALLY BY SURPRISE Short plays by, among others, Asaari Karh and Fia Perera. Hudson Backstage Theater, 6537 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Wed., 8 p.m.; thru April 11. (323) 930-9304.

TRACERS In 1980, director John DiFusco, a Vietnam vet, presided over the creation of this scattershot collection of impressionistic wartime anecdotes, which featured a cast of former soldiers who used the production of the play to make peace with their past. As an adrenaline-rich and politically charged event, DiFusco's 20th anniversary production operates both as a period piece and as an environmental portrait of the surreal state of war. Flashing back and forth in time, the kaleidoscopic plot concerns six young recruits who are shipped overseas to be cannon-fodder grunts. Once in 'Nam, things quickly turn nightmarish as we wait to see who will survive. The acting work is tight and dynamic, particularly Roberto Bacalski's rookie recruit Baby San, James Isaac Barryintellectually decomposing Professor, Richardo Antonio Chavira's spacey Doc and Vaughn Armstrong's brutal drill sergeant. The material possesses an artfulness and immediacy that has to be seen to be adequately understood. Odyssey Theater Ensemble, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., W.L.A.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru March 31. (310) 477-2055. (Paul Birchall)

TRAIN OF THOUGHT A young woman looks for answers during a cross-country journey, in Jane Edith Wilson's comic drama. Tamarind

Theater, 5919 Franklin Ave., Hlywd.; Mon.-Wed., 8 p.m.; thru April 4. (323) 930-9304.

TRILOGY OF WOMEN: Women of Vision and Courage Three one-acts — Louise Page's "Tissue," Arlene Malinowski's "What Does the Sun Sound Like?" and Tricia Dong's "Gunpowder Man" — are performed in repertory. Blue Sphere Alliance at the Lex, 6760 Lexington Ave., Hlywd.; in rep, call for schedule; thru April 12. (818) 906-0675.

TRUE WEST Two estranged brothers quarrel anew, in Sam Shepard's dark comedy. Circus Theatricals at the Odyssey Theater, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., W.L.A.; opens Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; perfs Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m. (2 p.m. mat replaces eve perfs March 25, April 22 & May 6; no perf March 28); thru May 13. (310) 477-2055.

THE VERY WORST OF VARLA JEAN MERMAN Varla Jean Merman, the self-proclaimed love child of Ethel Merman and Ernest Borgnine, is here to teach us a thing or two, in writer performer Jeffrey Roberson's camp comedy. Hudson Avenue Theater, 6537 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 15. (323) 930-9304. (TM)

WAIT UNTIL DARK In Frederick Knott's 1966 thriller, seemingly helpless blind woman Susy (Lisa Renee Pitts) is forced to rely on her wits as she desperately battles a trio of villainous thugs (Bruce Ladd, Scott Damian, Jarret LeMaster) who are after a smack-filled doll which they believe is in her possession. Director Thom Babbes strives to infuse some freshness into Knott's mechanically structured and dated drama through the use of some marginally intriguing innovations — the villains wear nose rings and chin piercings, and a supporting character who's a child in the original work is now inexplicably portrayed as a handicapped middle-aged woman. These alterations are inadequate in overcoming a fusty atmosphere and a contrived narrative. The blocking is flatfooted and occasionally unintentionally comic, as when a villain is forced to leap a ludicrous 20 feet across the stage to "surprise" the blind heroine. Actors Co-Op, 1760 N. Gower St., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 p.m.; thru April 22. (323) 462-8460. (Paul Birchall)

WATERBRAINS/THE TRANSFORMERS Under the discerning eye of former Groundlings director Stan Wells, Waterbrains and the Transformers work as companion companies in an evening of comic improvisation. Wells kicks off with suggestions culled from an eager audience. While not every creation was a gem, Waterbrains knew how to take advantage of comic circumstances (an audience member's annoying pager urged particularly inspired bits) and seemed to gel as the evening progressed, bringing characters created throughout the show together for a fast-paced finale. Even better in cohesion and style are the Transformers, whose hook is to take one idea and run a full 50 minutes, transforming the situation whenever they feel tempted to do so. Moreover, this group understands the value of quitting while ahead — while it's still funny. Empty Stage, 2372 Veteran Ave., Wstwd.; Sat., 8 p.m.; indef. (310) 470-3560. (AS)

WAX ON, WHACKS OFF If sheer dedicated energy and strategic mayhem were all it took for sketch comedy to succeed, this rather

manic set of skits by the troupe Piso Mojado would be a four-star hoot: By the show's end, the stage is littered with freely flung remnants of raw potato, tomato juice, rags, vitamin pills and near-naked wrestlers. Meanwhile, shrieking jags and tasteless jokes about Asians, homosexuals and African-Americans have abounded. What's somewhat mitigating about all this is the pleasantly subversive and imaginative sensibility behind it. A vignette in which a man (Nathan Johnson) is interrupted in the midst of a masturbation session by superhero Super Sperm (Matt Yamashita), who comes — uh, shows up — with his assistant Pre-cum (Stephanie Sheh), demonstrates an inventively scabrous brashness. Unfortunately, many of the gags evidence a flimsiness that suggests the skits haven't been completely thought out. Dorie Theater at the Complex, 6476 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Wed., 8 p.m.; indef. (818) 501-4128. (Paul Birchall)

WEIGHTS Lynn Manning's autobiographical one-man play about sight and insight. Taper, Too at the Actors Gang, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; previews Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; Sat., March 24, 2 p.m.; opens Sat., March 24, 8 p.m.; perfs Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m. (additional perfs April 10 & 15, 8 p.m.); thru April 15. (213) 628-2772; TDD: (213) 680-4017.

WHEN GROUNDINGS ATTACK This latest offering from the city's premier comedy house doesn't have the zing of some of the troupe's past successes. One reason is that director Chris Ellis overrelies on gimmickry throughout. But this is, after all, the Groundlings, and they always manage to corral some laughs, especially during the masterfully performed improv segments. During the sketches, Amy Von Freymann scores with "Marci Makes Things," the story of a hooker who hosts an unusual cable TV show. Equally amusing is "New Rule," a sketch that includes Michael LoPrete and Nat Faxon bashing each other with a ball. "Girls, Girls, Girls" is a humorous twist on strip clubs, except here the dancers turn out to be men (the hilarious Sean Hogan and Jordan Black). "L.A. Love," in which Jennifer Coolidge and Jim Rash play a combative couple who pay a late-night call on their therapist (Brian Palermo), is a knee-slapper. Groundling Theater, 7307 Melrose Ave., W. Hlywd.; Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 8 & 10 p.m.; indef. (323) 934-9700. (LE3)

WHOSE LINE IS IT ANYWAY? Maybe Drew Carey was a little rusty after a two-month hiatus from his popular improv show, because the night we reviewed he was clearly struggling to keep up with his cohorts. Granted he has a brilliant pool of rotating talent, which on this night included regular Ryan Stiles and alternates Brad Sherwood and Shawn Masterson. The show got off to a rough start, with the comedians resorting to penis and gay jokes, but the skits quickly improved. (Carey makes a better host than participant, directing his comedians from behind a desk when the show is broadcast for TV.) As for entertainment value, it was fun to see a game Carey stumbling over his lines — he's lovable enough that he could get away with just standing silently, holding the audience in the palm of his hand. Hollywood Improv, 8162 Melrose Ave., W. Hlywd.; Thurs., 8 p.m.; indef. (323) 651-2583. (MJ)

THE WOMAN WHO FORGOT HER SWEATER O-Lan Jones' "grim" fairy tale of a woman drawn into an alternative universe

following the death of her mother. (Inside) the Ford, 2850 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Hlywd.; previews Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.; opens Sat., March 24, 8 p.m.; perfs Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 22. (323) G0 1-FORD.

THE WOODEN BREEKS A down-and-out 19th-century village experiences a panic caused by unearthed coffins, in Glen Berger's comic fairy tale. Open Fist Theater, 1625 N. La Brea Ave., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 21. (323) 882-6912.

YESTERDAY CAME TOO SOON . . . THE DOROTHY

DANDRIDGE STORY Becoming the first African-American woman to be nominated for an Academy Award in a leading role was just one of Dorothy Dandridge's (Sloan Robinson) accomplishments. Yet she was often rejected by the African-American community for seeming too ready to embrace the white culture around her. Her private life was tumultuous, including two failed marriages, the first of which produced a brain-damaged child. But in playwright Jamal Williams' overly long and rambling narrative, directed by Erma Elzy-Jones, Robinson is the Superglue holding the pieces together, even when the script completely gives out. Though Dandridge's story is certainly compelling, Williams' premise — a young reporter arriving in the performer's dressing room on the night of Dandridge's final show — grows stale quickly. Robinson, though, never falters, and powers through a role that fits her comfortably. Do It Yourself Productions at LATC, 514 S. Spring St., dwtwn.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 1. (213) 485-1681. (AS)

YOU BET YOUR HONKEY *Note: This review is of a production that appeared earlier at a different venue:* The seven-member improvisational group Houseful of Honkeys is not above trying to bribe audiences to see its latest offering. Since it is ostensibly a comedy game show, one lucky audience member walks away with the humongous \$54 jackpot burning a hole in his pocket. But the Honkeys don't need monetary incentives to please the crowd. Their innate comic ability and flair for the absurd make for an electric and eclectic show. On the night I attended, *You Bet Your Honkey* was a bit slow to start, and it was a shame that the performers inexplicably chose not to take a couple of the more sexually charged suggestions from the audience. However, by the third sketch, the Honkeys found their rhythm. The evening's highlight was a barbershop scene done in three different styles — as a silent movie, a Shakespearean play and a conga musical — during which Wayne Brady provided the most inspired, hilarious moment portraying a spinning barbershop pole that turns red and white. Acme Theater, 135 N. La Brea Ave., Hlywd.; Fri., 8:30 p.m.; indef. (323) 525-0202. (Kristan Ginther)

The Valleys

. . . BUT FIRST, SAMMY SHORE Vegas-style comedian Sammy Shore (Pauly Shore's dad) has been at it for 45 years. Though an almost-been, he's not bitter. The septuagenarian has played every major showroom in the country, sharing bills with Barbra Streisand, Sammy Davis Jr., Ann-Margret, Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope and Milton Berle, to name a few. He performs his one-man act on a stage that resembles the Comedy Store, which he opened in 1972. Shore opens

and closes the evening with a rippingly funny standup routine about aging, and in between he reveals his storytelling ability in a monologue about the ups and downs of his career. (He toured with Elvis Presley for five years and bombed on *The Ed Sullivan Show*). Shore's short and sweet show is co-written by Rudy Deluca and directed by Paul Linke. Two Roads Theater, 4348 Tujunga Ave., Studio City; Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 8. (818) 761-0704. (MJ)

CARNAL PEAKS L.A. TheaterSports puts a lively spin on TV soap operas, sending up the genre with improvised scenes among the goofy citizens of the mountain town of Carnal Peaks. The storyline lasts six weeks, and then begins again with a new premise. But don't worry about missing anything. Like all good soaps, there are abundant skeletons in the closet and most are hilariously revealed. Episode four finds greedy steel magnate Hunt Carlyle (Mark Tracy) attempting to take over the inn of amnesia victim Strawberry Greenfield (Katharine Mills). Meanwhile, Hector Flores (Robert Covarrubias), the inn's handyman, is hiding another secret for Strawberry, while his sultry and pregnant wife, Jonifer (Adrienne Corcoran), isn't sure if Hector's her baby's father. There's more, of course, and co-directors Covarrubias and Joseph Limbaugh keep the multiple scenarios moving briskly, while keyboardist Win Meyerson provides the appropriate tension-mounting score. L.A. TheaterSports at the Bitter Truth Theater, 11050 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Sat., 8 p.m.; indef. (818) 505-6406. (MH)

CRYING ROCKS There's no denying the inherent visceral drama in Edward Allan Baker's writing, but the continual seesawing from vicious bitchiness to hysterical misery could, in a lesser production, become a well-intentioned parody of itself. Luckily, director Jack Heller focuses in on the humor amidst the emotional bloodshed and benefits from an impressive cast. Sandra (Stephanie Ittleton) is enjoying a quiet Sunday afternoon when in barges her always-in-trouble sister Dolores (Charlotte Booker). Things are worse than usual this time as a terrified Dolores claims her husband is out to kill her. The situation intensifies with the arrivals of the two other sisters, the materialistic and antagonistic Mary Ann (Kara Pacino) and the sweetly stoned Kathy (Elizabeth Bauman). The group decides to take their plight to their bitter mother, Vera (Jacqueline Scott). Booker is thoroughly convincing as the selfish manipulator/helpless victim Dolores. Laurelgrove Theater, 12265 Ventura Blvd., Second Floor, Studio City; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 & 7 p.m.; thru April 22. (818) 760-8368. (TM)

DOGG'S HAMLET/CAHOOT'S MACBETH Tom Stoppard's absurdist experiments with language and the Bard get a spirited once-over in this pair of one-acts directed by Chris Covics. In *Dogg's Hamlet*, a troupe of gibberish-speaking schoolboys and their cryptic headmaster prepare to mount the tale of the Mad Dane. An English-speaking delivery man arrives, initiates some slapstick, followed by a now all-too-familiar "speed Shakespeare" version of *Hamlet*. The second piece begins as a more straightforward interpretation of *Macbeth*, performed by Cahoot and his ensemble in a living-room setting. When a police inspector (Aaron Cain) barges into the performance and begins interrogating cast and audience alike, it becomes apparent that we are participating in an example of illegal "Living Room Theater." While the pacing and the novelty of the

nonsense-speak grow threadbare, the rousing finale is almost enough to make one forget the piece's shortcomings. Knightsbridge Theater Pasadena, 35 S. Raymond Ave.; Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru March 25. (626) 440-0821. (Bryce P. Coleman)

DON'T DO THE CRIME IF YOU CAN'T DO THE TIME! See New Reviews.

EXTREME THEATERSPORTS may not be improv as blood sport, since, on the night I attended, the two teams of performers were competing for a Polly Pocket minipurse toy, but it's close — and the results were consistently funny. Three judges flashed scores for technique, narrative coherence and entertainment value, while the MC/ref encouraged audience participation, including vocal dissent over the judges' scoring. Although the judges possessed a horn to terminate boring scenes, they didn't need to use it much because the improvs were invariably hilarious. Team members adeptly performed a single scenario in multiple genres suggested by the audience. These guys were so slick, they turned the dumbest audience suggestions into gold. (Imagine yielding merriment from the dreary audience prompt "physics of snails.") One of the funniest sketches followed a mama's boy introducing his parasitic twin to a potential girlfriend. Los Angeles TheaterSports at the Bitter Truth Theater, 11050 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Fri., 10 p.m.; indef. (818) 505-6404. (SR)

FIGARO . . . PIGARO!, A BARNYARD MUSICAL Composer-lyricist-librettist-director Meryl Friedman has concocted a tender farmyard frolic for kids that follows the plight of a precocious young pig named Polly (Candace Lifson), who, hearing an aria from *Figaro* on the farmer's radio, suddenly fancies herself a singer-songwriter. Pigs aren't meant to sing, however, as any chicken, horse or cow will tell you. But the creatures on this farm — mostly tired and retired — *don't* tell Polly; rather, they plot strategies to send her to all corners of the yard where she can't be heard. Which makes *Pigaro* largely about the undefinable line between honesty and tact, and what it means to be a friend. The musical's midsection is a bit flabby, and this production tilts toward adult supporting players: Toni Morrell's diva cow Maureen; Michael A. Shepperd's practical-joking horse, Old Jack; and, my personal favorite, Colleen Kane as Ethel the chicken. Falcon Theater, 4252 Riverside Dr., Burbank; Sat., 1 & 3 p.m.; Sun., 1 p.m.; thru April 1. (818) 955-8101. (SLM)

FIGMENTS Billy St. John's comedy about a writer with an overactive imagination. Emmanuel Lutheran Actors Theater Ensemble at the Lincoln Stegman Theater, 6020 Radford Ave., N. Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru March 25. (818) 509-0882.

FROM I DO TO I DON'T! Interfering in-laws spell trouble for a Catholic lawyer and his Jewish bride, in Ben Mathews dramedy. Lion Star Theater, 12655 Ventura Blvd., Studio City; Sat., 8 p.m.; indef. (818) 786-8833.

FRONT STREET A postwar Italian-American ghetto is the setting for Anne Pie's drama about the dissipation of Old World traditions. American Renegade Theater, 11136 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 29. (818) 763-1834.

GOD, BRING ME A MIRACLE Art Shulman's slow-developing play on aging, illness, death and their repercussions on family is earnest and heartfelt, but this production has problems that also stem from Stan Mazin's uninspired direction and partly from Shulman's lackluster pivotal character, Mimi (Cynthia Bryant), the home nurse. She represents not only unbridled optimism but also the love interest of the Golden family's soon-to-be-divorced son, Jeff (Robert Axelrod). A crucial player in this family's drama, Mimi offers kindness to the lonely, wounded Jeff, as well as an emotional safe harbor for a family buffeted by terminal illness. Bryant does what she can with Shulman's cardboard creation, but her unswerving cheerfulness, even in the face of Jeff's temporary rejection, is simply not believable. A fine performance is turned in by Burt Goodman, playing an aging, sickly but lovable lug of a man. Group Repertory Theater, 10900 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; indef. (818) 769-7529. (Jim Crogan)

THE GODFATHER WORKOUT *Note: The following review is of a production that opened earlier at this same venue:* If you can imagine Stanley Tucci being five places at once, then you get some idea of the live-action cartoon that is *The Godfather Workout*. Acted and written by Seth Isler and directed by Susan O'Sullivan, this valentine to Buster Keaton and Francis Ford Coppola is pure slapstick thrills and scarily-good impersonations. All by his lonesome, Isler gets his eponymous workout playing Brando, Caan, Duvall, Keaton and Pacino by hopping over desks, sliding across tables and leapfrogging over chairs. As if this weren't enough, the painstakingly faithful sets from O'Sullivan, Isler, his brother Saul Isler and Adrienne Hampton bear witness to an obsession with detail. But what sets *The Godfather Workout* apart from other spoofs is the marvel of pulleys and other simple machinery complementing the riveting display of athleticism. Theater East, 12655 Ventura Blvd., Studio City; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru April 7. (323) 936-4055, Ext. 2. (Andrew Lentz)

THE GREAT AMERICAN LOUNGE ACT This kitschy revue is a cross between a serious homage to Vegas-style lounge singers and a marginally funny send-up of the same. As you might imagine, the intentions are at times unclear. Jimmy Casino (James Emerich) — complete with shiny, sequined, puff-sleeved shirt, à la Tom Jones circa 1979 — has the vocal talent. Sometimes he almost plays it straight before delving into an overly animated, antiquated move — and the magic, as they say, is gone, for the era's reality is parody enough. It gets a laugh though, as do a few of the probably unintentional dance missteps by backup singers Lana Starr (Susan Cardillo) and Velvet (Michelle Juhlin). Over-the-top singing, sight gags and cutesy banter take the trio through lounge-y versions of "C.C. Rider," "Knock Three Times" and "Macho Man." Queen Mary, 12449 Ventura Blvd., Studio City; Tues., 8:30 p.m.; indef. (818) 754-4229. (Diedre Johnson)

INSPIRATIONAL ETHICS A performance by the Pro-Active Ethics Council about the individual struggle for moral values. Two Roads Theater, 4348 Tujunga Ave., Studio City; Sun., 11 a.m.; indef. (818) 376-0477.

THE JEW OF MALTA Christopher Marlowe's revenge tragedy is

performed at Knightsbridge Theater, 35 S. Raymond Ave., Pasadena; opens Sat., March 24, 5 p.m.; Sat., 5 p.m.; Sun., 6 p.m.; thru April 29. (626) 440-0821.

JUBILEE Jack Riley stars in Lloyd J. Schwartz's musical comedy about the quest to restore a man's eyesight. American Renegade Theater, 11136 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hollywood; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 29. (818) 763-1834.

KILL SWITCH If Quentin Tarantino and Brian Friel together were to adapt the six o'clock news, they might come up with something resembling writer-director Christopher Joyce's play about a screenwriter driven to wit's end by a poisonous industry. However, Joyce lacks the snappy dialogue of Tarantino and the emotional tenderness of Friel, instead serving up a schizophrenic mix of parody, high-concept and melodramatic goo. Disgruntled artist Jared Dolan (Christopher Hoffman) bursts into an apartment, with cops in tow, and takes a young man (Daniel Getzoff) hostage. From this point the play flounders through a series of patchy flashbacks, in which a stripper/producer (Julia Fowler) robs him of his most personal script. Somewhere in the muck lie the pieces of a good story, but Joyce overwrites his drama while paying little mind to his headier themes. Ventura Court Theater, 12417 Ventura Ct., Studio City; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m. (2 p.m. mat replaces eve perf Sun., March 25); thru April 14. (818) 216-8387. (LR)

L.A. CONNECTION'S SKETCH IN THE CITY is fast and furious, expertly timed and put together with zeal. L.A. Connection, under founder Kent Skov's savvy direction, employs 12 talented performers (Joel Bryant, Alaine Kashian, Bret Kucera, Heather Provost, Robin Simms, Greg Spillman, Deven Green, Senoa Keefe, Josh Minnick, Hal Rudnick, Steve Prince and Cedric Yarbrough) who work their tails off in skits so swift, you might miss a punch line if you blink. Among the highlights on the night I attended: "The Blame Game," in which a married couple goes to extremes to explain who is responsible for their marital woes; "Clark Trio," a brief, wisdom-inducing piece about the stages of manhood; and "A Fine Romance," in which animals observe and eventually mimic people in the throes of love. L.A. Connection Comedy Theater, 13442 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks; Fri., 7:45 p.m.; thru May 18. (818) 784-1868 (Diedre Johnson)

L.A. CONNECTION'S 2001 — AN IMPROV ODYSSEY L.A. Connection's improv-ers' brain cells were moving at the speed of light the night I attended. The troupe (Deven Green, Dana Grooms, Kent Skov, Kelly Goodman, Peter McTomney and Greg Spillman) took exceedingly lame audience cues (can't people think of anything beyond current events and celebrities?) to concoct the bizarrest of narratives. In "Buzzerbell," Green either "buzzed" her co-actors to try again if their setup was too easy, or "belled" them ahead if the storyline was invitingly twisted. In a decidedly novel turn, "Boss" called upon Spandex employees Goodman, Grooms and McTomney to act out the audience-generated "brassiere shopping with Madonna." Even potential embarrassments — like when a cell phone rang — were forestalled by Goodman as she snatched the phone, integrated the subsequent phone conversation into the piece *and* took a message. L.A. Connection Comedy Theater, 13442 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks; Sat., 9 p.m.; indef. (818) 784-1868. (Andrew

Lentz)

LIFE IN A BOX See New Reviews.

THE LUCKY O'LEARYS Jim Brochu's comedy about a Brooklyn housewife who begs her patron saint for a lucky break. El Portal Center's Circle Theater, 5269 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m.; thru April 22. (818) 508-4200 or (800) 233-3123.

MACBETH Set in the upper floors of corporate America, director Michael Ordoña's staging of the Bard's Scottish play evades most of the pitfalls that arise from transplanting Shakespeare. Here, Macbeth is a cunning and powerful vice president with veiled ambitions to head multinational Scotland Inc. In his way stands smarmy president Duncan (David Rutter). The production's first half fails to unify the play's already disparate elements, and a vignette exposing a sexual affair between Duncan and Lady Macbeth (Jennifer Mack) distracts from the main action. However, when Ordoña's concept starts to manifest itself halfway through, the production settles into a style that absorbs the voltage of Shakespeare's metaphors. Bashir Abass Salahuddin deftly conveys Macbeth's ambivalence, and Damian Mooney delivers a touching Macduff. Aside from some certain cast members' melodramatic proclivities, the rest of the ensemble jives with Ordoña's vision. Quantum Theater Company at the Whitefire Theater, 13500 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 1. (818) 755-8850. (LR)

MAG MOR is a mythical island off the coast of Ireland inhabited by local dead souls and "where all feuds and quarrels are forgotten [with] no history to weigh us down." Yet for Colm (Jason Cramer), an IRA volunteer and bomber, the dead still haunt him. Forced to flee his homeland, Colm is smuggled to San Francisco in 1985 and ensconced in the apartment of Claire (Jena Blackman), a fellow expatriate. Here he struggles with their shared regret over his role in the deaths of his brothers and his lover. Playwright Megan Condit raises intriguing topics in her commentary on the "troubles," but since she tries to deal with them all, each gets short shrift. Still, under Kyle Knau's understated, effective direction, the excellent ensemble creates a credible world of tension. Action/Reaction Theater Company at the Chandler Studio, 12443 Chandler Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 15. (818) 908-4094. (MH)

MARGARITA ON THE ROCKS When excessive shopping and sunbathing turned Margaret Medina into "a spoiled Mexican-American princess" (her father's words), the teenager found herself in Mexico for an extended stay designed to teach her heritage and humility. Medina's autobiographical comedy (co-developed with Mark W. Travis) looks at one woman's attempt to reconcile two cultures. Returning to Los Angeles after the "lesson" in Mexico, Medina eagerly begins to put a new life plan into action. Her one-person narrative comes full circle with a tribute to the traditional grandmother who made Medina feel her unconventional choices were legitimate. Under Michael McGee's direction, this solo performance occasionally wanders off track, succeeding mainly because Medina is such an engaging personality. While the premise is interesting, the writing could be tighter. Creative Center, 11223 1/2 Magnolia Blvd., N.

Hlywd.; Sat., 8 p.m.; thru March 24. (818) 763-0323. (AS)

MESSIN' WITH DESTINY Predestination is the topic of Mitch Coleman's comedy. Actors Forum Theater, 10655 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. (no perfs April 7, 15 & May 13); thru May 12. (818) 506-0600.

THE MUSICAL COMEDY MURDERS OF 1940 One is tempted to compare such an outing with amateur or high school theater, but this correlation is not fair to those nonprofessionals, whose work is not expected to adhere to rigorous standards. However, when a professional company as long-standing as Lonny Chapman's Group Repertory Theater chooses such banal material and produces it with so little skill, one is struck with serious questions about the quality of small theater. The play in question is a tedious exercise attempting to cross-breed spoofs of both Agatha Christie murder mystery and George S. Kaufman backstage farce. Playwright John Bishop's text is a mass of stale jokes, made staler by Malcolm Atterbury Jr.'s listless direction that often relies on frantic gags. A few of the performers commit to their caricatures, but neither the generally weak ensemble nor the staged stasis supports them. Group Repertory Theater, 10900 Burbank Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 7. (818) 769-PLAY. (TP)

MY AMERICAN DREAM An autobiographical solo performance by Toni Morrell. Third Stage Theater, 2811 W. Magnolia Blvd., Burbank; Fri., March 23, 8 p.m. (818) 842-7572.

THE REALLY SPONTANEOUS THEATER COMPANY *Note: The following review is of a production that opened earlier at this same venue:* This troupe really lives up to its name. Utilizing only a title or first line suggested by the audience, the group creates a one-act play. Under the auspices of executive director Tamra Meskimen and director Tait Ruppert, the performance I saw was not only confident and funny but subtle as well. "Should've Turned Left" followed the travails of newly dead Patrick (Jim Meskimen), arguing his case before the Big Guy (Dan Jablons). Meskimen was quite effective, and the mordantly hilarious Jablons was consistently amusing. "It's a Boy" concerned two housebound daughters of a very protective Mafia boss. This was the strongest of the plays, with Jablons again excellent as the put-upon mobster and Ruppert outstanding as a surprised suitor. The last piece was an effective demonstration of the commedia dell'arte style, a display of how versatile and smart this company is. Third Stage, 2811 W. Magnolia Blvd., Burbank; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru March 25. (323) 969-4991. (TM)

THE SECOND-STORY MAN Richard Strand's comedy centers on Alex (Dave Florek), a small-time Chicago gangster who's decided to rob his boss. To do this he must rent an apartment in the boss's building then cut through the ceiling to gain access to his apartment, and download crucial information from his computer. This requires the assistance of his girlfriend, Kate (Susan Hull), who, though apparently a computer whiz, is a bit of a dingbat. Their bungling attempts at burglary are continually interrupted by the suicidal building manager (Rachel Griffin), a strange but softhearted waitress (Jane Lanier) and a baby bird that has fallen from its nest. If the dramatic premise were any sligher it would disappear, but Strand is

expert at making a little go a long way and ringing comic changes on a simple situation. Alan Brooks directs with easygoing authority, and the actors provide skill and panache. Interact Theater Company, 5215 Bakman Ave., N. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru March 25. (818) 773-7862. (NW)

SOUTHERN FRIED CHICKIE Backed by Patrick Weathers' excellent direction and the Southern chick's hilarious writing, Christy McBrayer's satisfying one-woman series of sketches is culled from real-life people in her family and small hometown of Saltillo, Mississippi (six miles from Elvis' birthplace of Tupelo, a recurring theme). The production, however, is not just a demonstration of impressive accents and colloquialisms. McBrayer deftly shows the humor and sensitivity in the way her characters have chosen to live their lives. It's hard not to identify with the widowed grandmother and family gossip. There's also the wealthy, aging socialite, the high school friend who never married, the high school friend who did and can't wait to wave her ring, the would-be country singer with abusive ex-boyfriends, and about half a dozen others. McBrayer is good with detail and doesn't miss an opportunity to slip in sly innuendo. El Portal Circle Theater, 5269 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Tues., 8 p.m.; thru March 27. (818) 508-4200. (Diedre Johnson)

THE SPLIT A ne'er-do-well is forced to share a fortune with undeserving family and friends, in P.G. Sturges' comedy. Kohl Players at Theater Unlimited, 10943 Camarillo St., N. Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru April 7. (310) 848-1501.

STAR GAZING: A Night of Three One-Acts Short plays by Bryan Goluboff, Lynn Martin and Frederick Stoppel. Secret Rose Theater, 11246 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 7:30 p.m. (all Thurs. perfs "pay what you can"); thru March 31. (818) 766-3691, Ext. 5.

SUMMERFOLK See Theater Pick.

SURVIVE-UH! No, it's not an isle of marooned Jewish mothers; *Survive-Uh!* is little more than watching folks play charades, which was surprisingly engaging on the night I attended. Director Marsha Meyers was smart to allow the audience to vote on cast members — judged solely on how germanely off-the-cuff and extemporaneous they appeared. The show got off to a rocky start, but the suspense factor kicked in as the island's inhabitants (loved and loathed) were quickly pared down. The linchpin was dashing born-to-be-a-host Jason Henson (doing his best Jeff Probst), whose liquid quips were the sole voice of reason. Standouts were Bob Bendick; Jaque Lynn Colton, displaying a bewitching combination of absurdist humor and book learning; the kinetic, dead-panning Texan, Dean Cudworth (who voted himself off); and the Lucille Ball-ish Pam Levin. Beverly Garland Center (behind the Beverly Garland Holiday Inn), 4222 N. Vineland Ave., N. Hlywd.; Mon., 8 p.m.; thru March 26. (818) 846-3559. (Andrew Lentz)

THREE SISTERS Anton Chekhov's drama about three sisters who yearn for Moscow. Knightsbridge Theater, 35 S. Raymond Ave., Pasadena; Fri., 8 p.m.; Sun., noon; thru April 1. (626) 440-0821.

TWELFTH NIGHT Shakespeare's comedy of separated-during-

shipwreck twins becomes an intelligent meringue in the capable hands of director Charles Currier, whose understated 1930s art deco set design fits nicely with the Bard's text. Dressed as a boy, Viola (Diana Harlin) is employed by the snooty Duke Orsino (Andrew Palmer) to pitch woo to the equally snooty Olivia (Leda Whyte). Of course, Olivia falls for the cross-dressing Viola, who's fallen hard for square-jawed Orsino. (The "natural" heterosexual order won't be restored until Viola's twin brother, Sebastian [Alex James], appears.) A subplot pits dissolute prankster Sir Toby Belch (Jerry Kernion) against stuffy steward Malvolio (Jerry Neill). Kevin P. Kern is superb as Olivia's "wise fool," as is Kacey Camp as a saucy servant. Most compelling in this production are the performances by the two female leads. Pasadena Shakespeare Company at the Fremont Theater Center, 1000 Fremont Ave., S. Pasadena; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 1. (626) 564-8564. (SR)

VIRTUAL DEVOTION Eric Coble's comedy begins as a promising satire on money-grubbing TV ministries, vindictive Christian fundamentalists and various religious nuts, and much of it is raucously funny. Jesus Christ (a Jim Morrison-ish Erik Adams) is universally ignored when he returns for His Second Coming — even by the president's spiritual counselor, Reverend Pete (Peter Husmann), who operates the lucrative TV crusade. Reclusive Ruth (Elizabeth Clift), who spends her days watching religious programming, achieves celebrity when she discovers the face of the Prophet Ezekiel in her tapioca pudding. Anne (Laurie Cole), a volunteer/employee at the Happy Halo Ministry for Children, precipitates a world financial crisis. But having found a brilliant premise, Coble can't find anything meaningful to do with it. Husmann delivers a spectacular performance as the intolerant, fire-and-brimstone preacher. The abortive script often thwarts commendable efforts by director Dana Marley-Kolb and her cast. El Portal Center, Studio Theater, 5269 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru April 14. (818) 508-4200. (NW)

VOICES See New Reviews.

WALT AND LILLIAN Francis Creighton's examination of Walt Disney and his spouse. Lionstar Theater (above Jerry's Famous Deli), 12655 Ventura Blvd., Studio City; Sun., 3 p.m. (proceeds benefit California Youth Theater); indef. (818) 346-6277.

THE WEIGHT IS OVER is comedian Eric Edward's autobiographical one-man performance about what it was like to be labeled "the funny fat guy" by Hollywood — and what happened to his career when he lost 210 pounds. Playhouse West Studio 2, 10634 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hlywd.; in rep, call for schedule; indef.; free. (818) 971-7191.

Beaches

EVIL TWIN A black comedy about a good twin whose life is turned upside down by a nasty sibling. Found Theater, 251 E. Seventh St., L.B.; Fri.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; thru May 12. (562) 433-3363.

FUNNY YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE A GRANDMOTHER is enjoyably old-fashioned without being creaky, a feel-good show that avoids

oversweetness: Focusing on the older generation, this revue-style musical is fun, sassy and smart. Lois Wyse & Sheilah Rae's book and lyrics combine with Robert Waldman's music in a production devoid of plot or narrative, neither of which are missed. The remarkable Jan Daley, Barbara Minkus and Zina Bethune (alternating with Evelyn Rudie) play modern-style grandmothers, running businesses, attending classes and adjusting to the golden years; Hank Adams is appealing as the Grandfather; Randy Kravis and Cindy Warden glow as the Son and Daughter. Songs range from the comic "In Law Outlaws" to melancholic ballads. Director Chris DeCarlo stages the couple dozen vignettes and songs to fit neatly in the small space. Santa Monica Playhouse, 1211 Fourth St.; Fri., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., 6 & 9 p.m.; Sun., 2 & 6 p.m.; thru May 27. (310) 394-9779, Ext. 1. (Constance Monaghan)

THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE Were it not for Joe Orton, Frank Marcus might be better known as a playwright than as a long-serving theater critic on London's *Sunday Telegraph*. But this play, despite its pretensions, is not Orton caliber — itself an overrated quality. June Buckridge, a.k.a. Sister George (Nancy Linehan Charles), is a mainstay of British television. She is also something of a monster, a butch lesbian who abuses her dim lover Alice, a.k.a. Childie (Francesca Adair). But when the BBC's Mrs. Mercy Croft (Clarinda Ross) comes to call, everyone knows it's curtains for Sister George, at least as far as her TV career is concerned. So why does it take Marcus two acts to get us there? And why can't director Daniel O'Connor make the journey more fun at least? Still, the experience might be bearable were it not for Charles' shrill carryings-on, compounded by her inability to sustain an accent. Adair and Ross do better, but they, too, strain believability. Pacific Resident Theater, 7051/2 Venice Blvd., Venice; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru April 8. (310) 822-8392. (David Mermelstein)

LAST TRAIN TO NIBROC A cross-country train at Christmas is the setting for Arlene Hutton's comedy about a chance meeting. Powerhouse Theater, 3116 Second St., S.M.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 6 p.m.; thru April 14. (310) 358-5956.

A MURDER IS ANNOUNCED Miss Marple hunts down a brazen murderer, in Agatha Christie's mystery. Long Beach Playhouse, 5021 E. Anaheim St.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru March 24. (562) 494-1014.

RUMORS A shooting mars a wedding-anniversary celebration, in Neil Simon's comedy. Long Beach Playhouse, 5021 E. Anaheim St.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., March 25 & April 8, 2 p.m.; thru April 21. (562) 494-1014.

THE SKRIKER Caryl Churchill's play blends traditional folklore and modern urban problems. City Garage, 1340 1/2 Fourth St. (enter from alley), Santa Monica; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 5:30 p.m. (all Sun. perfs "pay what you can"); thru April 15. (310) 319-9939. See Theater feature.

SPECIAL EVENTS

ALLAN MURRAY'S TALK SHOW FROM OUTER SPACE A group

of bored space aliens demands entertainment, in Allan Murray's comedy. Melrose Theater, 733 N. Seward St., Hlywd.; Wed.-Thurs., March 28-29, 7:30 p.m. (323) 993-6099.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS Dawn Choice-Reed's gospel dramedy. Refuge Christian Center at Pasadena City College, Harbershon Hall, 1570 E. Colorado Blvd.; Fri., March 23, 7:30 p.m.; Sat., March 24, 3 p.m. (626) 798-4011 or 398-3361.

THE BRADBURRY An upscale condo building is the setting for Julie Nicholson and Nicola McGillicuddy's comedy. Melrose Theater, 733 N. Seward St., Hlywd.; Tues., March 27, 7:30 p.m. (323) 993-6099.

CAN'TEEN: Letters to the Front A USO teen canteen in 1942 is the setting for Evelyn Rudie, Chris DeCarlo and M. Wrather's wartime musical. Santa Monica Playhouse, 1211 Fourth St.; Thurs., March 29, 6:30 p.m. (310) 394-9779, Ext. 1.

CIRCUS X SUPER STUPENDOUS SPECTACLE is a puppet-theater production performed at Margo Albert Theater, Plaza de la Raza, 3450 N. Mission Road; Sat.-Sun., March 24-25, 2 p.m. (323) 223-2475.

CRAZY FOR YOU A traveling production of the Tony Award-winning musical, with book by Ken Ludwig and music and lyrics by George and Ira Gershwin. El Camino College, 16007 Crenshaw Blvd., Torrance; Sun., March 25, 3 p.m. (310) 329-5345 or (800) 832-ARTS.

DEAFYWOOD Sketches by and about deaf Hollywood-based performers. Cal State Northridge, Performing Arts Center, 18111 Nordhoff St.; Fri., March 23, 8 p.m. (818) 677-3943.

FESTIVAL 2001: Breaking New Ground The eighth annual Los Angeles Women Theater Festival features an array of local and international performers, some of whom are male. LATC, 514 S. Spring St., dwntwn. (818) 760-0408.

Fri., March 23, 8 p.m.—*One Night Stand*.

Sat., March 24, 3 p.m.—*Children, Chocolate and Choices*.

8 p.m.—*First Person Plural*.

Fri., March 30, 8 p.m.—*Journey Back, Step Forward*.

Sat., March 31, 8 p.m.—*Kamchatka*.

MUD IN YOUR EYE Performance artist John Fleck gets down and dirty at Highways, 1651 18th St., Santa Monica; Sun., March 25, 8:30 p.m. (310) 315-1459.

LODESTONE OSCAR NIGHT BENEFIT Mini Elvis and Sheckie Wong host an Academy Awards party, with proceeds benefiting Lodestone Theater Company. Restaurant Oiwake, 122 Japanese Village Plaza Mall, dwntwn.; Sun., March 25, 5 p.m.-mid. (323) 993-7245.

THE SIMPLE STAGE One-acts and monologues with minimal

production requirements are performed at Trade City, 828 Pico Blvd. (alley entrance), Santa Monica; Thurs., 8 p.m.; indef. (310) 398-9065.

SOAR LIKE AN EAGLE A multimedia, youth-oriented performance about the accomplishments of women, in celebration of Women's History Month. Stella Adler Theater, Second Floor, 6773 Hollywood Blvd.; Sat., March 24 & 31, noon; free. (323) 465-4446.

12 FAMOUS MEN Iris Lord's "spoken word jazz opera" is performed at the Knitting Factory Hollywood, 7021 Hollywood Blvd.; Fri., March 23, 8:30 p.m. (323) 463-0204.

VICTORY DANCE *Note: The following review is of a production that opened earlier at this same venue:* In her hilarious and moving solo performance, writer-performer Jessica Litwak creates a portrait of misfits by exploring the relationships between a high schooler, her two best friends and her aging grandmother. In 1976 San Francisco, three longtime peers are stuck in a high school poetry class: self-hating Jewish Maya, English immigrant/closeted lesbian Luna, and Grace, a Shakespeare-quoting African-American. Looming above Maya's inner turmoil stands her cranky Russian Jewish bubbie, Masha, a woman perhaps more committed to Marxism than to her family. But a visit by a not so blithe spirit pushes Masha to face the possibility of making peace with her granddaughter. Litwak's knack for dialects allows her to coast easily from Luna's cockney to Grace's street patois in a performance further distinguished by Licia Perea's choreography. Director Sue Hamilton's superb staging allows free rein to Litwak's exuberant performance. Davidson/Valentini Theater at the Village at Ed Gould Plaza, 1125 N. McCadden Pl., Hlywd.; Mon., March 26, 7:30 p.m.; free, but resv. required. (323) 860-7300. (MH)

COMMUNITY THEATER

AIN'T MISBEHAVIN' Conceived by Dean Mora and Richard Potthoff, this musical revue looks at the life and work of Fats Waller. Kentwood Players at the Westchester Playhouse, 8301 Hindry Ave.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru April 8. (310) 645-5156.

BLEACHER BUMS Hardcore baseball fans are the subject of Joe Mantegna's comedy. Kentwood Players at the Westchester Playhouse, 8301 Hindry Ave.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; additional perfs Thurs., March 29, April 5 & 12, 8 p.m.; thru April 14. (310) 645-5156.

A CHORUS LINE Marvin Hamlisch, Edward Kleban, James Kirkwood and Nicholas Dante's musical is performed by the Santa Monica Theater Guild at the Morgan-Wixson Theater, 2627 Pico Blvd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru March 31. (310) 828-7519.

PARTY OF 13 A waitress offers a unique point of view in James Underdown's secular retelling of the Last Supper. Center for Inquiry-West, 5519 Grosvenor Blvd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; thru April 14. (310) 306-2847.

THE PHILADELPHIA STORY Two tabloid reporters crash a society wedding, in Philip Barry's romantic comedy. Sierra Madre Playhouse,

87 W. Sierra Madre Blvd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 p.m. (no mat April 15); thru April 21. (626) 355-4318.

THE SUNSHINE BOYS A cranky vaudeville team reunites, in Neil Simon's comedy. Palos Verdes Players Theater, 2433 Moreton St. (behind the P.V. Bowling Alley), Torrance; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., April 1, 2 p.m.; thru April 7. (310) 326-2287.

WEST SIDE STORY Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is the basis for Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents and Steven Sondheim's musical. Glendale Center Theater, 324 N. Orange St., Glendale; Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; mats Sat., 3 p.m.; thru March 31. (818) 244-8481.

STAGED READINGS

RADIO MAMBO: Culture Clash Invades Miami Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas and Herbert Siguenza perform their satirical take on various Miami subcultures, for future rebroadcast on KCRW. L.A. Theater Works at the Skirball Cultural Center, 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd.; Wed.-Sat., March 28-31, 8 p.m.; Sun., April 1, 4 & 7:30 p.m. (310) 827-0889.

—Compiled by Sandra Ross

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