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Sister Act, Mexican-Jewish Style

In 'Hermanas,' tacos, tushes and the 'mother of all madres.'

Ted Merwin

Special To The Jewish Week

A Jewish family by any other name ... is still a Jewish family.

In Monica Yudovich's "Hermanas" (Sisters), directed by Claudia Zelevansky at the Fringe Festival, two Texan Jewish sisters learn about life and love, Latin-style, when they compete for the affections of the same man. And who helps them sort everything out? The savvy Jewish mother, of course, who knows her daughters better than they know themselves.

Fringe Fest

The New York Times lists "Hermanas" as one of the Fringe selections that is "raising eyebrows," while the Daily Candy events Web site jokes that the reason to see "Hermanas" is that "they'll be serving plenty of tequila and Manischewitz."

The playwright was born in Houston of Mexican-American parentage. Her family belonged to the city's — and the continent's — largest Conservative synagogue, Beth Yeshurun, where she has returned in recent years to sing concerts with Cantor David Propis. She majored in musical theater at University of Michigan before moving to New York, where she quickly found work doing voice-overs for both Spanish and English-language commercials.

Yudovich herself plays the main character, Lisette Hernandez, who must cope with her wild sister, Claudia

(Adriana Gaviria), her dyslexic Latin ex-lover (Paolo Andino), her "mother of all madres"/Yiddishe mama (Kathryn Kates, the "Babka lady" from "Seinfeld") and a fast-talking, friendly farm girl from Waco (Bridget Moloney). The cast also features Denise Quinones, crowned Miss Universe in 2001, and Ryan Duncan, who created the role of Juan in the Off-Broadway show, "Altar Boyz."

Much of the humor derives from linguistic mix-ups, as when characters confuse "tacos" with "tuches" or "mistletoe" with "Mazel Tov." Zelevansky, who graduated from the Yale Drama School before spending two years as associate artistic director of the Dallas Theater Center, noted that many of the characters share both a "passion for language" and an "uncanny ability to misuse it."

Yet while the director called the play a "pleasure trip" that maintains an "effervescent" mood throughout, she said that it also shows the characters "struggling to find a way to love each other" and to understand the ways in which their multiple identities interrelate. Along the way, the characters learn that, as headstrong and quirky as they may be, the world has plenty of room for all of them. ■

"Hermanas" plays at the Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. Remaining performances are Thursday, Aug. 24 at 6:15 p.m., Friday, Aug. 25 at 10 p.m., and Sunday, Aug. 27 at noon. For tickets, \$15, call the Fringe Festival box office at (212) 279-4488 or visit www.fringenyc.org. For more information on the play, visit www.hermanastheplay.com.

HERMANAS

Part of the NYC Fringe Festival, this comedy sheds some much needed light on the issue of Jewish Mexican-Americans living in Texas. The playwright, Monica Yudovich, who also performs in the play, based the story on her own life after tiring of explaining to strangers why she speaks Spanish and Yiddish. — Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. (212) 279-4488. Thurs., Aug. 24, 6:15 p.m.; Fri., Aug. 25, 10 p.m.; Sun., Aug. 27, 12 p.m. \$15.

The Buzz