

Second City road trip encounters some bumps

By Karen D'Souza, Mercury News

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Caution! Front-row seats to the Second City sketch comedy show now at San Jose Rep ought to come with a little warning. Nothing is off limits in this outrageous house of mirth.

Anyone with politically correct sensibilities and/or taste and decorum issues may be in for a shock during certain sketches that are not exactly, um, family friendly. At all. Folks seated in the cabaret tables at the front of the theater might also want to avail themselves of some serious cocktail action before the audience participation ensues. It's that kind of show, people. Think "South Park," only live and also somewhat uneven.

By the way, if you bring children to see Chicago's renowned pranksters, now in their 50th year of eliciting laughter with cheerfully raunchy one-liners and yikes-worthy sketches, be prepared to have some very uncomfortable little conversations on the way home. (Nuns discuss sexual positions. Mormons talk dirty. The pope makes an appearance. 'Nuff said.)

A comedy free-for-all in the manner of "Saturday Night Live" — which has drawn many of its icons from Second City, from John Belushi and Gilda Radner to Tina Fey — this troupe is nothing short of legendary. It's world famous as the holy grail of giggles, and that is, alas, a lot of pressure to live up to that may lead to a teeny bit of disappointment here and there.

This six-person touring ensemble is uniformly gifted and appealing, but not all of the comedy tickles the funny bone as hard as it should.

Some of the sketches, such as Dana Quercioli's thoroughly bizarre and highly erudite Emily Brontë standup routine and Mark Raterman and Tim Robinson's cogent analysis of Middle Eastern politics from the vantage point of mullet-wielding NASCAR fans, are both hysterically funny and utterly unexpected. Both bits hit the laugh riot mark.

The one about the pope and the space aliens, not so much. Other skits, such as an ad-libbed sequence about Valley girls on a desert isle or a song about a woman plotting to off her hubby, go nowhere fast. That's the nature of the beast, of course, as much of the show changes every night and the atmosphere of the audience deeply directs the flow of the evening. Tuesday night's show came off a little hit and miss and the encore dragged.

Directed by T.J. Shanoff, the show hits its highest notes when the jokes take us by surprise. At one point, they ask the audience for a topic and promptly start flying by the seat of their pants on the subject of cell phones. Niki Lindgren shows off her pitch-perfect impersonation of purring NPR commentators. Raterman reaches new depths of wackiness as a suicidal German composer whose most famous work is "Mein Cell Phone." There's no way to see the gag coming, and that's the magic.

If this touring company never quite reaches the level of sidesplitting, it's still an engaging and lively piece that's sure to hit the spot for audiences in need of a little break from reality right about now. Of course they had better be theatergoers who don't mind some truly tasteless jokes about senior citizens and pop star child molesters, but then perhaps that goes without saying. If you're eager to get your snicker on, this one's for you.

Oh, and if you live in Sunnyvale, watch your back.

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Second City

The upshot: The legendary comedy troupe pays a visit to San Jose Rep with amusing, if not sidesplitting, results.

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

Through: Sunday

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes (one intermission).

Tickets: \$17.50-\$60; 408-367-7255, www.sjrep.com