In the confines of a rustic kitchen, these characters talk about everything from doing laundry to cooking, but their seemingly innocuous banter slowly evolves into painful revelations, charged face-offs and emotional eruptions that mirror the characters' inner lives and torments. Therein lies the undeniable dramatic punch of Kuruvilla's artfully crafted script. Timothy Ford Hannon has designed an evocative set, partially enclosing his kitchen with the ropes and posts of the "squared circle." But the success of this production is largely due to the work of the actors, who, under Tim Byron Owen's nuanced direction, perform with engaging passion and infectious vitality. Celtic Arts Center, 4843 Laurel Canyon Blvd., Studio City; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru June 11. (818) 760-8322. (Lovell Estell III)

GLORY PIE Watching Ellen Lawler's and director/co-writer John Lawler's new comedy is a lot like eating cotton candy—tasty, but one feels something substantial is missing. Paula (Alyssa Stec) and Jake (Brendan O'Malley) are having Paula's sister and her husband, Laney (Carla Capps) and Carl (Dan Kinsella), over for dinner to celebrate Laney and Carl's trip to China to adopt a little girl there. Then the wild next-door neighbors decide to crash. While the play is ostensibly about the dumb things people say when a couple is adopting, the real plot hangs on the rivalry between Paula and Laney, the former a dancer who insists on following her heart and the latter a duty-bound type who's always wanted, in vain, to have children. Unfortunately, amidst the drama and the clever wisecracking, the plot gets lost until the very end, and is never fully resolved. Director John Lawler keeps the pacing tight, but the performances on the night reviewed were about a nanosecond off, that hairsbreadth of timing that makes all the difference. Wes McBride's set is nicely realistic, which makes the decision to mime the food and wine (which play such a critical part in the play) a little odd. Coronet Theater, 366 N. La Cienega Blvd., W.L.A.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun. 3 & 7 p.m.; thru May 21. (310) 657-7377. (Anne Louise Bannon)

INTERNET DATING: The Musical This is like an un-

a rebel and budding feminist, is a far better match for Marcos. Further comedy is added by Fernanda's youngest daughter, feisty Irene (Yvette Ramirez), and the two aunts, puritanical Augusta (Sheila Korsi) and vulgar, free-spirited Concha (Luisa Chavez). This is predictable stuff, but the mostly Latino audience seemed to find the situations both recognizable and hilarious. Estela Scarlata's lavish set and Carlos Brown's costumes admirably capture the flavor of old Havana. Bilingual Foundation of the Arts, 421 N. Avenue 19, L.A.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., 4 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru May 21. (All further performances are in Spanish, with a slightly different cast.) (323) 225-4044. (Neal Weaver)

GO LITTLE EGYPT Celeste (Sara Rue) is a misfit egghead who returns from university to her mid-America hometown, where she meets her perfect match in sweet, dim-witted security guard Victor (French Stewart), but family and a cruel friendship complicate their romance. For the first half hour, this musical by playwright Lynn Siefert and composer Gregg Lee Henry seems just annoying and cloyingly offbeat with over-the-top trashy characters occasionally exiting their semi-reality to burst into rock songs. Then, almost without warning, the story becomes riveting in its weirdness as Stewart turns into a powerful tragic clown on par with Buster Keaton. Mere moments separate his uproarious physical comedy and devastating emotional breakdowns. Rue's brainiac innocence provides Stewart with an excellent foil as the pair tries to move past their shared social retardation. Misty Cotton and Henry are also very effective as Celeste's sister and Victor's dubious buddy, while Jenny O'Hara and John Apicella try to fill out two-dimensional roles as old folks. This extremely original production is completely frustrating in that there are so many dull patches in what is often a searing piece of theater. One hopes the writers and director Lisa James are looking at this world premiere as a workshop. Some play development would be a great investment. Matrix Theater, 7657 Melrose Ave., W. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru June 11. (323) 852-1445. (Tom Provenzano)

(M)ASKING QUESTION
Humanitas Persona This
and performed piece has ad
as a quirky metaphor for th
falls short of being anything
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cadences of academic arg
Long Beach; Tues.-Thurs., 7
perf Sat., May 13, 2 p.m.);
(Luis Reyes)

GO SHE ALWAYS TOLD
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dismissing insecurities a
over them with other fe
shows flounder when the
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(Anne Gregory, Rebecca J
be they single moms, pr
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five minutes each. These