

A BAY CITY NEWS SERVICE REVIEW: "BABY TAJ"

By KIM MILLER

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"Baby Taj" is a charming comedy that floats along on the playwright's lyrical phrases and the excellence of the actors and designers.

TheatreWorks' world premiere of Tanya Shaffer's latest work, which opened over the weekend at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, is a success on all counts.

The play derives its name from one of the lesser-known monuments of Agra, India -- the tomb of Itimad ud Daulah called the Baby Taj for its innovative use of white marble and inlay.

The comedy, a look at different cultures' take on love, sex, marriage and families, is set in both America and India. The cast of 10 is predominantly Asian-Indian. Many of the actors, who come from Broadway and television, are making their TheatreWorks debut.

The story is about a modern freelance writer named Rachel who is single and, after a series of disastrous relationships, has decided to have a baby on her own through artificial insemination. She and her best friend Anjali, an Indian lesbian, have made a pact to each have a baby and to raise the children as a family. Anjali (Sunita Param) is pregnant as the play begins.

Rachel, however, not quite ready for this drastic step, accepts an assignment to India to write about the Taj Mahal. While in Agra, she lives with Anjali's family and is introduced to Abhi, Anjali's cousin, who is to be her guide to the Taj Mahal.

It is here the work takes off as the two from different worlds try to understand each other in the context of India's ancient culture.

Lesley Fera is dynamic as Rachel -- all twitchy modernism, San Francisco style, and cynical about the legends behind the Taj Mahal.

As Abhi, Sam Younis is a delight -- calm of demeanor, inquisitive about this exotic creature he is escorting, sexy, and a great storyteller. Younis handles his intricate role beautifully.

The family Rachel stays with consists of Arustu and Chandra, husband and wife respectively, a baby, and the young boy Osho. These are the main comic elements in the play. Qurrat Ann Kadwani as Chandra is a superb comedienne. She tickles the audience because she is so straightforward in her questioning of Rachel and asks for such outrageous and personal information.

"We have no secrets in this house" is Chandra's mantra.

Her husband Arustu, well played by Indrajit Sarkar, is a strong believer in arranged marriages and announces he will advertise for a husband for Rachel. He also considers himself an astrologist but finds Rachel's answers too obscure for his readings.

The telling of the legends surrounding the Taj Mahal and the Baby Taj are done in a wonderful, fantasy/fairy tale way -- acted out in and

around the monuments they are telling about. When Rachel's cynicism gets in the way, the characters fade into the background until Abhi manages to bring Rachel around to the tale again.

Director Matt August has instilled a mythical atmosphere in the play, partly due to the input of Cultural Consultant Rashmi Rustagi and the many Indian actors, and partly due to the intricate scenic designs of Joe Ragey and the period costumes of Fumiko Bielefeldt.

Through all the comedy, this play rings true. This is partly due to the fact it was inspired by Shaffer's own time in India when she was contemplating having a baby and being a single mom.

"Baby Taj," a rewarding evening at the theater, will continue at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts through Oct. 23.