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Theater review: 'Baby Taj' -- Leisurely flow of beauty, legend

By Bryan Wiggin

Almanac Theater Critic

"Baby Taj," by Bay Area playwright Tanya Shaffer, is being given a lavish world-premiere production by TheatreWorks. At the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, this occasionally prolix story of self-discovery through cultural cross pollination flows by in leisurely beauty. In fact, the visual beauty of the production is its most impressive aspect.

Most of the play is set in the Indian city of Agra, site of the Taj Mahal, but it opens in San Francisco, where Rachel is about to be artificially inseminated -- with a turkey baster -- by her friend Anjali (Sunita Param), a lesbian who has already been basted and who conspicuously has turkey in the oven.

But Rachel backs out. She's an Internet travel writer, and she has, to Anjali's annoyance, one more irresistible assignment that justifies her postponement of producing her share of the next generation. (She's 37, so the clock is definitely ticking.)

She stays with Anjali's family; they know neither that Anjali is a lesbian nor that she is pregnant. Anjali's mother, Chandra, has a Ph.D. in chemistry, but Chandra's mother-in-law decreed that she will be only a wife and mother, and so she is. Rachel wonders that she doesn't rebel against this oppression, but Chandra accepts the inevitable and makes the best of it.

This is the first example of that cultural difference mentioned above: the Indian acceptance of one's destiny, as opposed to the American effort to create one's destiny -- and to feel cheated if one doesn't succeed.

Chandra and her husband, Arustu (Indrajit Sarkar), introduce Rachel to Anjali's cousin Abhi, a very handsome but shy young man, warmly and winningly done by Sam Younis. A student of local history, he fills her in on the facts and legends surrounding the Taj Mahal and the smaller, earlier Baby Taj.

There's a bit of complication involved in this, and I'll attempt no explication -- being, I confess, a little unsure of my ground. Unsurprisingly, cultural differences between the two are bridged and they fall in love.

The production is visually ravishing. The scenic designs of Joe Ragey have the floral intertwining of the Persian-influenced decorative art of India. Fabrics of vivid colors are used as screens behind which silhouetted figures act out the legends of the lords of India who built the Taj Mahal. Some of this is also done in plain sight, and particularly striking is the dance of Rachel Rajput in the flaring-headed costume of a cobra.

All of the acting is good, including that of young Oomung Varma as the son of Chandra and Arustu. Lesley Fera, as Rachel, is both feisty and spiteful about men in general, and bashful and unsure in her growing affection for Abhi.

But the best performance comes from Qurrat Ann Kadwani as Chandra. Tough, smart, wry, ironic, cynically self-aware, she is a spirited, commanding presence who dominates her scenes.

Director Matt August moves this production with beautiful fluidity and grace, with never an awkward pause. It's an impressive achievement. Applause to the costumes of Fumiko Bielefeldt, the very supportive lighting of Pamila Gray, the choreography of Sheetal Gandhi, the dialect coaching of Rashmi Rustagi, and, indeed, to everyone involved.

"Baby Taj" is not dramatically gripping, but it is engaging throughout its length of nearly two and one-half hours, and the applause at the end had the resonance of real appreciation. Mine was included.

INFORMATION

"Baby Taj," by Tanya Shaffer, is being presented by TheatreWorks at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts through October 23. For information, call 903-6000 or visit theatreworks.org.

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