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Snake Eyes:
Rachel Rajput
uncoils her inner
cobra in 'Baby Taj.'

La Taj aux Folles

TheatreWorks goes easy for world premiere of 'Baby Taj'

By Marianne Messina

SOMETIMES, the most brilliant insights come not from depth of analysis but from keenness of observation. Tanya Shaffer's play *Baby Taj*, a world premiere at TheatreWorks, depicts the characters in all their contradictions and with such clarity that the humorous result is full of delicate reflections on caring and family.

American travel writer Rachel (Lesley Fera) is staying with a host family in Agra, India, while she writes about the Taj Mahal and tries to process her life ("I've dated enough loser jerks for the next thousand lifetimes"). For sounding boards, Rachel enlists her tour guide Abhi (Sam Younis), who tells her the legends of ancient star-matched lovers and her married Indian counterpart, Chandra.

In an exceptional performance, Qurrat Ann Kadwani's deliciously bright Chandra is as central to the play's humor of contradictions as Chandra is central to the family hierarchy of children, servant, husband, and mother-in-law. One moment she's melodically chatting Rachel up, and in a flash she's snapping out churlish orders to her maid Sunita (Kavita Matani). You find yourself waiting for her little surprises, like the wicked, surreptitious victory dance she does outside her mother-in-law's bedroom door to signify she's pulled one over on her.

Lesley Fera presents us with a surprisingly down-to-earth Rachel. Given the quirky premise of someone who's run off to India, abandoning her commitment to join her now-pregnant friend in mutual artificial insemination and child rearing, Rachel could be easily comic-typed. But Fera's Rachel is so Everygirl, you can't quite label her "progressive" or "scattered" or even "commitment-phobic."

As Rachel's love interest, Sam Younis transforms from nervous nerd to worthy suitor. Except for a bit of Ozification (Dorothy-to-Glinda revelations) in Rachel's "moment of truth" scene, the script is clean and lean, and director Matt August has tuned it to just the right combination of warmth, humanity and humor. Though at this performance the pacing

seemed to favor "quick and smooth" at the occasional expense of tonal transitions (say, leading up to the kiss), it will probably drop some speed, because the incredible ambience of this production wants to linger in the air and be drawn in like incense.

August has led TheatreWorks' top-notch production team to outdo itself in *Baby Taj*. All the visual elements maintain the ornate essence of Indian design with rich Persian influence, right down to a rosette-textured backdrop scrim. Detailed scrolls and swirls and florals characterize Fumiko Bielefeldt's copious, amazing historic costumes for each enacted legend. For example, the royal couple's matching turquoise bedazzles the eye with more tiny tassels and gems and barely glimpsed linings than can possibly be taken in. Legends are also narrated as masques, or as elaborate shadow puppet shows. And the cobra costume is a mechanical feat as well as beautiful.

Using an ingenious blend of scenic options, Joe Ragey's set design maintains the visual motifs without reproducing replicas--curves where Western architecture would use angles; teardrops, spirals, crescents. Composite structures, part painted drop, part fly, part set piece, help turn the Taj Mahal into a living room quicker than you can say, "Bollywood dance tunes" (which often accompanied scene changes, thanks to Cliff Caruthers' sound design). And so many creative uses of silks! A russet silk wall doubles as the shadow puppet screen; a hand-held green stretch of silk billows over the floor and undulates like a field of wind-blown grass. Pamila Gray's (lighting design) memorable skies, like her burnt-sun sky behind the silhouettes of actors, are labor-of-love stunning, right down to the swoosh of cirrus cloud that--if you look really hard--

actually moves. This is one culturally rich show that isn't explaining or cheerleading; it's a clear recollection that echoes the amusement and wonder of the opening voice, a mother addressing her newborn as "a tiny human voyager sleeping off the shock of migration."

Baby Taj, a TheatreWorks production, plays Tuesdays at 7:30pm (except Oct. 18), Wednesday-Friday at 8pm, Saturday 2 and 8pm (except Oct. 22, 8pm only) and Sunday at 2 and 7pm (except Oct. 16 and 23, 2pm only) at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St., Mountain View. Tickets are \$20-\$52. (650.903.6000)

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