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## Swept away by 'Baby Taj'

*A witty story with a dollop of Indian royal history*

By **Julie O'Shea**

It's refreshing to come across a playwright who is able to write so honestly about life. Such artists are part of a dying breed. Given this, let's not let Tanya Shaffer out of our sight.

Shaffer, who has traveled extensively and often uses those experiences for inspiration, writes with a fluency rarely seen on stage. The local playwright's characters -- much like her travel essays and musings -- are witty, poignant and frequently funny. They remind us of our friends, our parents, ourselves. It's hard not to get swept away.

TheatreWorks wasted no time optioning Shaffer's latest script, "Baby Taj," which first landed at the company's New Works Festival in 2003 and then again this past June. The romantic comedy-drama, about a San Francisco-based travel writer whose assignment to India turns out to be more than what's bargained for, was so widely lauded that four months later it moved to the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts for its world premiere.

The end result is surprisingly good for a first run. But then, director Matt August, who also staged a 2003 reading of "Taj" in New York City, had a pretty engaging script to begin with. It doesn't hurt that the cast, filled with many newcomers to TheatreWorks, is pretty darn good, too.

This, of course, is not to say that the production is without flaws. For there are some petty ones -- opening night's sound system wasn't at its best, for example -- as well as some not-so-petty ones -- Shaffer's tendency to pen long, rambling tirades on India's royal history is a bit much, and her ending's rather abrupt. However, looking past those flaws, we can see the gleam of something wonderful.

While a trip that Shaffer took to India in 2001 provides the catalyst for "Taj," the playwright insists that much of the work is fiction.

Rachel (Lesley Fera) is 37, single, straight and living in San Francisco. She wants a baby but doesn't have so much as a boyfriend. Deciding that she can't wait for Mr. Right to show up, Rachel makes a pact with her best friend Anjali (Sunita Param), a lesbian from India who has the same yearnings for motherhood. The two agree to get artificially inseminated, then raise their children together.

But right before she's about to go through with the plan, Rachel gets cold feet, literally leaving a very pregnant Anjali with a baster full of sperm in her hand.

Rachel's editor offers her an assignment in India. And Rachel jumps at the chance.

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Anjali, a little less certain of the last-minute gig, warns Rachel not to have any transcontinental flings. Yeah, like that's not going to happen.

What unfolds is basically a love letter to Rachel's unborn baby, possibly the most important story she's ever told.

The rest of the show takes place in Agra, India, home to the famed Taj Mahal and Baby Taj. Rachel is staying with Anjali's relatives, who are perplexed as to why she is still single at her age. It's amazing that Rachel is able to keep her cool.

One cousin, Arustu (Indrajit Sarkar), and his wife, Chandra (Qurrat Ann Kadwani), are played by a pair of incredibly comedic actors who manage to get laughs just about every time they open their mouths.

And then there is the other cousin, Abhi (Sam Younis), who, in addition to being a royal hottie, manages to fill Rachel in on the love affairs of India's aristocrats.

The rest is, well, history.

What: TheatreWorks presents "Baby Taj," by Tanya Shaffer Where: Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St. When: Tuesdays at 7:30 p.m.; Wednesdays through Fridays 8 p.m. Saturdays at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.; 8 p.m. only Oct. 1 and 23; Sundays at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m.; 2 p.m. on Oct. 16 and 23; "Visual Voice" audio-described performances are available Oct. 21, 22 at 8 p.m. and Oct. 23 at 2 p.m.; show closes Oct. 23 Cost: \$20-\$52 Contact: (650) 903-6000 or visit [www.theatreworks.org](http://www.theatreworks.org)

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