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TheatreWorks

A bouncing 'Baby Taj' for

Oakland Tribune , Oct 6, 2005 by Chad Jones, STAFF WRITER



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5 Answers: What's Your Biggest Weakness?

RACHEL HAS A PROBLEM, and it's not just that she's 37, single and desperate to have a baby. No, Rachel's problem is that she's essentially a romantic, which is a highly impractical thing to be in a harsh world.

The heroine of Tanya Shaffer's world-premiere play "Baby Taj" at Mountain View's TheatreWorks, Rachel wants to be practical, which is why she and her best friend, a lesbian, have agreed to be artificially inseminated by the same donor. They'll raise their children as siblings and create a family that, if it's unconventional, at least it's their own.

"Why not base a relationship on friendship, which lasts, rather than on romance, which doesn't?" Rachel asks.

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It's a good question, but not one that is answered in "Baby Taj," which opened last weekend at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts. Before Rachel and her friend can embark on their grand experiment, Rachel gets cold feet and does what she's done many times and in many ways before: She runs away.

Lucky for us she runs away to Agra, India, home of the Taj Mahal, one of the greatest monuments to love ever built.

This gives director Matt August and his team -- set designer Joe Ragey, costumer Fumiko Bielefeldt, lighting designer Pamila Gray and composer Rama -- the opportunity to create a sumptuous stage full of the sights and sounds of India.

Rich azure blues, fiery oranges and reds and deep greens combine with exotic patterns and hints of architecture to give us a sense of place without overwhelming the eye.

This is easily one of TheatreWorks' most strikingly beautiful shows in a while, but the design never distracts from the story. It only serves to enrich.

Albany writer Shaffer has created theater pieces about her world travels before, most notably in her solo show "Let My Enemy Live Long!" And like that show, "Baby Taj" is filled with a savvy traveler's enthusiasm for the cultural and historical rewards of her journey.

As we watch Rachel (an appealing Lesley Fera) settle in with her host family, the inevitable culture clash emerges in distinct differences toward marriage and family. Arustu (Indrajit Sarkar), the man of the house, and his wife, Chandra (the marvelous Qurrat Ann Kadwani), are both a little surprised that Rachel, at her "ripe" age, is not married.

They chalk it up to American pickiness and try to sell her on the Indian idea of arranged marriages.

Rachel's guide to the many monuments in Agra is Abhi (Sam Younis), a shy teacher of Hindi who also

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happens to be 1930s movie- star handsome.

We know what's going to happen long before Rachel does, but as they say, it's the journey, not the destination.

Before the inevitable love blossoms, we get Rachel imposing her feminist American ideals on Indian mythology as well as her attempts to explain an American woman's romantic freedom to a more traditional Indian man.

Along the way we're treated to tales of how and why the Taj Mahal was built as well as stories about smaller local monuments such as the Baby Taj, a less famous tomb that is said to have inspired its bigger cousin.

At two hours and 20 minutes, Shaffer's play is really too long for a play in which not a whole lot happens. But Shaffer is such an entertaining, intelligent writer, it's hard to complain, even when Rachel's self-absorption starts rising to chick-flick levels.

But just when you need it to, Shaffer's writing cuts through the whining with an acute observation.

When Abhi questions Rachel's decision to raise a child on her own, he wants to know how she can be so sure she wants a child. "The urge is physical," she replies. "It tugs at my body like gravity."

Happily Shaffer ends the play on her own terms. She doesn't give in to Rachel's so-called "bitter, cynical disenchantment." Nor does she settle for fairy tale happy endings. She allows reality and romance to coexist alongside a seized opportunity for personal growth.

Like all good stories, the end of "Baby Taj" is really a beginning, and as Abhi tells Rachel, "Let us leave the future to discover itself."

You can e-mail Chad Jones at cjones@angnewspapers.com or call (925) 416-4853.

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