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Witty 'Baby'

New TheatreWorks play about a travel writer in India is provocative and true, laced with snappy dialogue

by **Jeanie Forte**

When the people at TheatreWorks produce a new play, they give it the full treatment in supporting its development and production values.

This fabulous approach is beautifully evident in its latest world premiere, "Baby Taj," a witty and provocative new play by Tanya Shaffer currently running at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts.

"Baby Taj" concerns Rachel (Lesley Fera), an American travel writer whose assignment to cover the Taj Mahal conveniently buys her time while she tries to decide whether to have a baby by herself. Having given up on romance, she made a deal with her lesbian roommate (Sunita Param) that they would each give birth and continue to live together to create their own style of family. But at the last minute, Rachel's resolve wavers. With the excuse of the job, she journeys to Agra and takes up a month's residence with her roommate's Indian family, who welcome her and share their culture and lives.

They introduce her to cousin Abhi (Sam Younis), a shy historian who becomes her guide and regales her with the improbable and romantic stories associated with the Taj Mahal and its smaller counterpart, the Baby Taj. As Rachel and Abhi become friends, each is indelibly changed by the other. Their travels together lead them to discover new truths about their cultures, their ideas of love, and themselves.

This all sounds too serious, though, for a play filled with delightful humor. Shaffer's writing is irreverently funny, laced with witticisms and snappy dialogue. Rachel's Indian hosts are especially amusing, particularly the wife, Chandra (Qurrat Ann Kadwani), who almost steals the show.

When Rachel first arrives in India, her host family comes across almost as caricatures, cultural stereotypes of the most obvious kind. But as Rachel becomes less of a tourist and more of a fellow traveler, as she learns more about the culture and the people she encounters, the layers peel away to reveal the family members as three-dimensional, multi-faceted beings.

Isn't that always the way? Held at a distance, a cultural group appears monolithic and invariable, easy to stereotype. Get closer, and the differences become visible, the messy deviations within a group that shine a light on our humanity, on our similarities across cultural lines.

As the play spirals deeper into the heart of Indian culture, so Rachel spins in giddy disorientation, casting off her protective armor and letting something new take its place.

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For a new play, "Baby Taj" is surprisingly coherent, a testament to the development process provided by TheatreWorks over the last year. The central device, a debate over whether to parent solo or to wait for true love, is really a springboard for the examination of fear: the more we learn about Rachel's failed romances, the more we understand about her fear of commitment, her fear of giving in to the risk of love.

Her fears are deftly contrasted with the compelling story of Emperor Shah Jahan and his all-consuming love for his beautiful wife. The intertwining of love stories from India's past with a very modern love story that flowers in present-day India makes for fascinating drama.

The acting ensemble is excellent. Fera manages to convey both earthiness and confusion at the same time, and brings a girl-next-door quality to the role that nicely contrasts with the character's sophisticated pose. Younis as Abhi is terrific as the quiet, shy bookworm with hidden passions.

Indrajit Sarkar plays the host husband, Arustu (Indian for "Aristotle"), with sunny good humor and dry wit, a perfect combination of cluelessness and patriarchal entitlement. Kadwani, as wife Chandra, has many of the best laugh lines in the show, and knows precisely how to deliver them for maximum humorous effect. She's a fantastic comedienne, but also capable of exposing her vulnerable side as we begin to see Chandra's true desires.

The rest of the cast shines as well, many of them performing multiple roles -- it's fun to see Noel Wood appearing in rapid succession as several different ex-boyfriends.

Joe Ragey's gorgeous, palatial sets and Fumiko Bielefeldt's magnificent costumes combine to create a sumptuous look, befitting the Indian setting. From fields of green silk to giant shadow puppets to towering Taj mosaic panels, Ragey captures a sense of India through color and pattern. Bielefeldt's fanciful renderings of 17th-century Indian dress add immensely to the exotic legends Abhi tells Rachel.

Director Matt August handles it all with commendable restraint, keeping the characters real and the pace lively.

Children might find the play too mature thematically, but adults will find it humorous and thought-provoking, and perhaps even sweet.

What: "Baby Taj," a play presented by TheatreWorks.

Where: Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St.

When: Through Oct. 23, with performances Wednesday through Sunday and on Tuesday, Oct. 11.

Cost: Tickets are \$20-\$54.

Info: Call (650) 903-6000 or go to www.theatreworks.org.

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