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Take an Exotic Journey with Baby Taj

By Tom W. Kelly

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For the armchair tourist, Baby Taj takes a sumptuous theatrical journey to India via the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts. This world premiere by Tanya Shaffer, produced by TheatreWorks, features both ancient myths, modern issues, and above all, unexpected romance. And as seen here, what unites us as a global community far outweighs our differences.

Single and straight Rachel (superbly played by Lesley Fera) and her closest girlfriend Anjali (passionate Sunita Param), a lesbian from India, both decide to both babies without husbands. "Never cross a lesbian with a turkey baster," warns the fiery best friend, "I've got sperm and I know how to use it!" But first, travel-writer Rachel goes to India to do a story, and she stays with Anjali's relatives (an enchanting Qurrat Ann Kadwani, clever Indrajit Sarkar, mischievous Oomung Varma, and matter-of-fact Rashmi Rustagi). She meets a shy male cousin named Abhi (the handsome Sam Younis) who becomes her guide to the Taj Majal and other local sites. And amidst the local legends, she learns much about herself as well as the people and customs of India, and several life-long dreams surprisingly come true.

Playwright Shaffer multitasks in life as writer, actress, world traveler, and more. As a performer, she thoroughly understands dialogue and character. Here, both are in brilliant abundance. Each character speaks with such a clear voice, succinctly expressing themselves, their wants, and their inner beauty. As a world traveler, Shaffer sees how all people have so very much in common as well as those fascinating cultural differences. The rich and diverse traditions of the Indian people meld with their ancient mythologies and histories. Grand writing. The only complaint is that this world premiere is still a bit overlong (at over 2-1/2 hours). Though it is all terrific text, it could be even better if 20 minutes were trimmed out of the script, leaving a crisp and more economical story.

Director Matt August excellently realizes the epic beauty of the story as well as the emotional honesty of the characterizations. Humanity is fully realized here. The pacing is solidly purposeful and always appropriate. Choreographer Sheetal Gandhi graces the show with traditional Indian movements and pictures. Both the scenic design by Joe Ragey and the costumes by Fumiko Bielefeldt sumptuously elicit Indian motifs with magnificent use of color and line. Gorgeous. Pamela Gray's lighting and sound design by Cliff Caruthers skillfully whisks the audience from present time to ancient days. All the technical aspects are wonderfully well done.

Take the journey to Mountain View and from there, to India in Baby Taj. It's a grand ride!

Baby Taj plays until Oct. 23 at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St. Tickets (\$20-\$54) are available by calling (650) 903-6000 or go to www.theatreworks.org



Abhi (Sam Younis) watches as the Prince (Anil Margasahayam) tries to bargain with Arjumand (Sunita Param) in Baby Taj.

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