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REVIEW

What's love -- erotic, formally arranged, familial and maternal -- got to do with it?

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic

Tuesday, October 4, 2005

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Baby Taj: Drama. By Tanya Shaffer. Directed by Matt

August. (Through Oct. 23. TheatreWorks, Mountain

View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St., Mountain View. Two hours, 20 minutes. Tickets \$20-\$54. Call (650) 903-6000 or visit www.theatreworks.org).

Travel, it turns out, can broaden other parts of the anatomy besides the mind. Good travel writing, as Tanya Shaffer demonstrates in her delectable new play "Baby Taj," can be every bit as expansive, especially when combined with bright bits of Indian history, classical Indian art forms and cleverly integrated theatricality, all beguilingly set to the urgent pace of one woman's raging biological clock.

"Taj," which opened Saturday in a TheatreWorks world premiere at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, is a tribute to India and an exploration of the Taj Mahal wrapped within a desperate Berkeleyite's to-be-or-not-to-be quandary over the pros and cons of planned single-motherhood. It's a witty and probing culture clash between free-thinking modernity and long-established traditions that discovers degrees of freedom within cultural restrictions and incapacitating constraints in freedom.

Most of all, it's a captivating inquiry into love -- free, formally arranged, erotic, problematic, friendly, familial and especially maternal -- staged with inventive

eclecticism by Matt August in his TheatreWorks debut. Shaffer, a popular local performer and travel writer, has once again combined these talents to dramatically generous effect -- as she did in her long-running solo show "Let My Enemy Live Long!" -- this time for an ensemble of other actors.

Partly based on her travels in India and, more loosely, on her own wrestle with having a baby on her own when she began the play three years ago (Shaffer has since married and is the mother of a 2-year-old son), "Taj" is the story of Rachel (Lesley Fera), a single travel writer in her late 30s who longs (and fears) to have a child and has given up on ever finding Mr. Right. Or so she thinks. And then she's not so sure. Which is why she's having trouble going through with the mutual-pregnancy pact she's made with her best friend and roommate Anjali (Sunita Param).

The conflict between starry-eyed sentiment and cynical doubt is stated right at the outset. As seen at Sunday's matinee, "Taj" opens with a new mother cooing to her baby -- a vision in white against a, yes, star-bedecked sky -- and shifts immediately into broad comedy: Rachel retreating in indecisive disarray as Anjali wields a turkey baster: "I've got sperm and I'm not afraid to use it."

Anjali, a vital and decisive young lesbian in Param's sharp portrayal, is already visibly pregnant and more than a little suspicious that Rachel will renege on their

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pact. Rachel begs off for now on the grounds that she's got a hot assignment which entails visiting Agra, site of the Taj Mahal and the earlier, smaller marble monument known as the Baby Taj -- and the home of Anjali's family, with whom she ends up staying.

That, in turn, entails a complicated balancing act for Rachel, not only with the family's curiosity about her marital status and foreign sexual freedom but also about Anjali. Rachel is under strict orders not to reveal that Anjali is either a lesbian or pregnant.

The story develops cunningly from there, shifting between Rachel's tourism and interactions with the family members and, by phone, Anjali -- and between past and present. As Rachel gets ever more deeply engaged in searching conversations with Anjali's history-buff cousin -- Sam Younis as a quick-witted, unconsciously sexy and engagingly shy Abhi -- a very capable ensemble enacts Abhi's tales of the Mughal Empire and Shah Jahan's monument to his beloved wife, intercut with Rachel's stories about her mishaps in love.

August segues deftly between a bright array of styles, mixing in bits of Bollywood romance, kathakali (choreography by Sheetal Gandhi, with cobra-dancer Rachel Rajput) and beautifully designed shadow puppetry, to the invigorating sitar, tabla and flute score by composer Rama. Visions of the Taj Mahal are captivatingly

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REAL ESTATE



Sally Field lists Malibu home for \$6.95 million

It was amply established in her 1985 Oscar acceptance speech that we really, really like Sally Field . Now it's just a matter of finding...

suggested by the ornate flying gateways and fabric towers of Joe Ragey's multi-layered set, impressively lit by Pamila Gray. Fumiko Bielefeldt adorns the cast in a resplendent array of American and Indian costumes.

It's all framed as a mother's story to an inquisitive child, and Fera's Rachel -- a magnetic blend of questing intelligence, hope, regrets, courage and fear -- brings it to life. Her scenes with Younis and Param are electric with evolving layers of intimacy. An ebulliently mercurial Qurrat Ann Kadwani, breezy jokester Indrajit Sarkar, giggly maid Kavita Matani, formidable Rashmi Rustagi and bright-child Oomung Varma create a richly varied image of an ancient culture within a single household.

Through its reflection, "Taj" helps us understand our own better as well.

E-mail Robert Hurwitt at rhurwitt@sfchronicle.com.

This article appeared on page E - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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