

SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

An Exotic World Premiere Production of Tanya Shaffer's *Baby Taj*

Also see Richard's reviews of [The Smuin Ballet's *Bluegrass/Slyde*](#) and [Ragtime](#)

TheatreWorks is currently presenting the world premiere of Tanya Shaffer's exotic comedy-drama *Baby Taj* with a predominantly Asian-Indian cast of ten outstanding talented actors. Tanya Shaffer has written a beautiful play about Rachel (Lesley Fera), an American travel writer with a very modern problem. She has had many failed relationships and it seems romance will never come to her. She craves a baby of her own, even through artificial insemination.



Lesley Fera and Sam Younis

In *Baby Taj's* opening scene, Rachel - who is straight and Jewish - is getting ready to have donor bank sperm inseminated by her pregnant Indian lesbian roommate Anjali (Sunita Param). These two have had a platonic relationship of seven years and Anjali has convinced Rachel this is best way to have a baby with "romance" out of the question. Rachel decides at the last minute to hold off the "basting" since she has had an offer from a travel magazine to go to India to write an article on the Taj Mahal. Anjali is disappointed and tells her best friend she can stay with her cousins in Agra. Most of the comedy drama takes place in home of Arustu (Indrajit Sarkar) and Chandra (Qurrat Ann Kadwani).

Rachel discovers new truths about love, family and herself in the city of the Taj

Mahal. The travel writer also finds romance with her guide Abhi (Sam Younis) as he describes the history of the famed site. Playwright Tanya Shaffer has brilliantly integrated theatricality through the story of Shan Jahan and his lovely bride Mumtaz Mahal on the building of this famous fairy palace with a classical art form performed by members of the cast. The couple also visits Itmad-ud-daulah, the beautiful tomb for Shah Jahan's father-in-law built entirely from white marble with precious stones throughout. The tomb is known as "the baby Taj" today because its design foretold the most famous of the Mughal buildings, including the Taj Mahal. The cast also performs vividly the story of the building in classical Indian style. The third story of India's past is acted by "shadow puppets," which gives an extrinsic feel to the production.

Lesley Fera (resident member of Pacific Resident Theatre in Los Angeles) brings a compelling blend of searching acumen to life. Qurrat Ann Kadwani (New York and television actress) is irresistible as Chandra, the highly fluctuating wife of Arustu. Indrajit Sarkar (Off Broadway *American Magic*, *SubUrbia*, *Songs of Joy*) gives an engaging performance as the teasing husband. Outstanding is Sam Younis (New York's *Tale of Allergist's Wife*, *Richard III*, *Salome*) as the travel guide Abhi. He is charismatic in the role and gives a winning performance as an Indian who is used to the old ways of Indian life. In contrast to his performance, Sunita Param (New York's *Sex in Other People's Houses* and *Merchant of Venice*) as Anjali gives us an insightful view of modern day India youth in America.

Anil Margasahayam, Kavita Matani, Rachel Rajput, Janak Ramachandran, Rashmi Rustagi, Rishi Skukla and Noel Wood effectively play various roles in the history of the two monuments. Domung Varma is delightful as the 10-year-old of Chandra and Arustu.

Joe Ragey has designed a multi-layer set that include flying gateways, a reflecting pool, a miniature tower where an emperor was imprisoned, a striking red orange desert scene with a blazing orange sun projected on the skyline and billowing silk covering the stage in act two to represent a sea of grass. Lighting by Pamila Gray is remarkable, giving the audience the illusion of India. Fumiko Bielefeldt's costumes are gorgeous, especially in the historical scenes.

Baby Taj plays at the Mountain View Performing Arts Center, 500 Castro Street, Mountain View through October 23rd. Tickets can be obtained by calling 650-903-6000 or visiting www.theatreworks.org.

TheatreWorks next presents an all new production of Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, opening at the Lucie Stern Theatre, Palo Alto on November 30th.

Photo: David Allen

Cheers - and be sure to Check the [lineup of great shows this season in the San Francisco area](#)

- [Richard Connema](#)

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