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CULTURAL FLIRTATIONS

'BABY TAJ' IS A SIZZLING COMEDY OF MARRIAGE, ERRORS

By Karen D'Souza

Mercury News

Huzzah! TheatreWorks gave birth over the weekend to ``Baby Taj," a new play about India, and it's a bundle of cross-cultural joy.

Tanya Shaffer's romantic comedy, making its world premiere in Mountain View, exposes the comedy of errors that is dating and mating, from arranged marriage to artificial insemination.

Rachel (Lesley Fera) is a travel writer from San Francisco, an artsy free-spirit distracted by her ticking biological clock. She is straight and her pal Anjali (Sunita Param) is gay. But neither has a life partner on the horizon, so they've decide to go the DIY route: Their plan is to get pregnant sans men and to help each other raise the children.

But Rachel bails on Anjali to take one last gig, because she can't resist getting paid to go to India to write stuff that's ``all attitudey and bloggy" (Shaffer's ear for mod-groovy lingo gives the play a to-die-for sparkle). The rub is that Rachel goes to stay with Anjali's family, who has no idea that Angali is gay, leave aside that she's about to have a baby out of wedlock.

As Rachel soon finds out, ``wedlock" is more than a figure of speech in India, where men and (especially) women really can feel fastened together in marriage. With spouses often chosen by parents, there's not a lot of room for matters of personal taste.

Shaffer (``Let My Enemy Live Long!") has nailed the rigid hierarchy of the traditional Indian household, where a mother-in-law (Rashmi Rustagi) bullies her daughter-in-law (a pitch-perfect Qurrat Ann Kadwani) who in turn picks on the

help. The daughter-in-law and her husband (Indrajit Sarkar) bicker through clenched smiles even as they implore Rachel to settle down herself. Really! Who would *want* to be single when married life looks like such a hoot?

It's all sort of like ``Everybody Loves Raymond," only with chai. In fact, it might all seem a little too sitcom-y if the domestic warfare wasn't so funny and the culture clashes weren't so on target.

Chandra, the wife played by Kadwani, is an ostensibly serene mother of two -- with a doctorate in chemistry she is not allowed to put to use. She's got secrets lurking beneath her uber-matriarch exterior of smiley put-downs and dismissive wrist-flicks, but they're all kept very hush-hush (until Act 2, when the eros hits the fan).

The Americans don't get off unscathed either. Rachel's hypocrisy is put under the microscope when she meets Abhi (Sam Younis), a sensitive Indian fellow unsettled by her history of serial relationship-hopping. She's a little *jungle* (wild and defiant) for him. He's a little proper for her.

In their flirtation, the playwright marries the breezy cynicism of the now with the eternal power of India -- a cultural tug-of-war that is the lot of many hyphenated-Americans. Fera and Younis etch each scene with a clarity that keeps the courtship from cloying, a refreshing departure for the romantic comedy genre.

As in any new work, some scenes still lack polish. ``Baby" sags in its flashbacks as snatches of history and mythology are summoned up during Rachel's tour of the Taj Mahal. Director Matt August has let these scenes veer from dreamy to precious, and a cobra dance lacks punch (though August's staging of the yuk-it-up artificial insemination scene -- involving a turkey baster, an annoyed lesbian and a peasant skirt -- crackles with borscht-belt comic timing.)

Also, Shaffer needs to deepen the connection between a back story involving the Emperor Shah Jahan and Rachel's narrative, or let it go. Luckily, there's already enough glittering wit and romance here to rival a Bollywood musical.

Cheeky *bhangra* beats, shimmering sari fashions and the elegant minimalism of Joe Ragey's scenery add even more shine to this sparkling world premiere. So get *jungle* with it already!

``Baby Taj'

By Tanya Shaffer, presented by TheatreWorks

The upshot: Get jungle with it! An American woman falls hard for India in this culture-clash romantic comedy.

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

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays; 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays

Through: Oct. 23

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes, with one intermission

Tickets: \$20-\$54; (650) 903-6000, www.theatreworks.org

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