

BACKSTAGE

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EMMA'S CHILD

at the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble

Reviewed by Dany Margolies

It's not perfect, but there's magic in this production. Through solid writing by Kristine Thatcher, imaginative direction by Meryl Friedman, and a skilled cast, we are shown a story rooted in dignity, respectful of the characters and the audience in its storytelling and presentation. Following a nonlinear plot about a couple desperate for a child, the ending holds not much in surprises, save one: its ability to touch even the most unsentimental of the atregoers. The play preaches nothing. It raises no arguments. It gently shows how each of us can rise to our potential if treated with humanity. Each character is sweetly faulty, a type Thatcher and Friedman have bent for interest and for realism, and each actor makes those faults into a fascinating whole person.

Henry and Jean are academics, looking into adoption after their 15 years of fertility treatments. Jean (Peggy Goss) is a softie in training; she tells the social worker (Erin J. O'Brien) she would take a child of any race, any sex, with perhaps a minor disability. Henry (Rod McLachlan) claims he's more practical; he wants only a healthy Caucasian

girl. But the baby they'd planned to adopt, as we soon discover through unfolding interwoven scenes that blend beautifully as the story zigzags through time, is hydrocephalic—born with fluid in the cranium that enlarges the skull and damages the brain. The nurse (Steve Totland), nurse's aide (Allison Sie), hospital administrator (Kim Leigh Smith), and physician (O'Brien) in their own ways bend even the most sensible rules for the greater good. A second couple (Smith, John Eric Montana) face their own battles over commitment to situations they, too, could never have predicted. And in the spirit of respect and dignity, the two mothers (Kristen Brennan) are never judged.

Jean and the hospital staff invest the baby boy with dignity; he replies by striving to do his best, even at a most basic level, which turns his rewards—from his smile to his struggle for life—into the most miraculous inventions of spirit or nature. To watch an actor clutch a clump of rags; not a sound or squirm coming therefrom, and still to believe for more than a moment that she's holding a baby is likewise a miracle of the theatre.

"Emma's Child," presented by No Title Productions at the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., W. Los Angeles. Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Nov. 2-Dec. 16. \$19.50-22.50. (323) 477-2055.