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"Emma's Child"

Emma's Child
Odyssey Theatre Ensemble
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Though Dr. Laura and others of her ilk would certainly disagree, the traditional family unit (Mom, Dad and their natural offspring) is in a state of flux. The right to raise children is no longer the exclusive domain of heterosexual couples—nor even necessarily of two-parent households. Though Kristine Thatcher presents her semiautobiographical play "Emma's Child" in a heterosexual context, her poignant and ironically humorous tale paints a universally relevant portrait of the strong desire of some people to have children, with issues such as parental gender quite beside the point. Thatcher's absorbing work dramatizes the real-life turmoil that surfaced in her own marriage—as well as the moral dilemmas she faced—when she proceeded to adopt and raise a severely disabled baby boy. Employing a deftly told nonlin-

ear structure, the play introduces us to Jean (Peggy Goss) and her husband, Henry (Rod McLachlan), who have been frustrated in their inability to conceive a child naturally, and thus turn to an adoption agency. A troubled, unwed girl (Kristen Brennan) selects them as the parents of her unborn child. Things proceed smoothly until the child is born with the condition of hydrocephalus (water on the brain). Jean initially wonders whether the adoption should proceed, and Henry worries about the emotional and financial consequences, responding with an immediate "no." As Jean devotes herself to the hospital-ridden infant, the couple's marriage becomes severely strained, and it begins to look like Jean will have to decide between husband and child. Thatcher's intelligent dialogue probes multiple facets of the complex moral issues, with the central focus on Jean's unconditional love and the lessons everyone learns from the child's valiant fight for his life. Director Meryl Friedman leads a superb cast in relating this powerful, life-affirming story. Goss is sensitive and compelling in portraying Jean's desperation, strength, and vulnerability, with McLachlan providing effective balance as the voice of reason. The skillful supporting ensemble, portraying social workers, hospital attendants, friends and others, imbue the hard-hitting material with poignancy and delicate humor. This fine production tackles its painful yet important subject matter with grace, restraint and a solidly believable emotional core, providing for a gripping and resonant theatrical experience.

—L.S.