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DENISE BLASOR

Peggy Goss, Rod McLachlan face a tough decision in "Emma's Child."

Real-Life Adoption Agony Inspires Drama

Theater Beat

A hard-hitting drama about one of the most agonizing ordeals any parent can face, Kristine Thatcher's "Emma's Child" at the Odyssey Theatre is a welcome respite from the melodramatic clichés surrounding birth defects. In Thatcher's play, the person most affected by the delivery of a hydrocephalic baby is not the birth mother, but a virtual stranger who had contracted through an agency to adopt the child.

Jean Farrell (Peggy Goss) could easily walk away from the situation, and her sensitive, well-meaning husband (Rod McLachlan) urges her to do just that. Instead, she not only visits the child in the hospital, but also decides to pursue the adoption, despite a hopeless prognosis for the baby.

As fiction, it's a tough premise to sell without schmaltz, but the story is drawn from Thatcher's experience, lending compelling authenticity to her insights and dialogue. Under Meryl Friedman's focused direction, a strong central performance from Goss makes Jean's odyssey of heartbreak and small victories believable.

McLachlan heads the capable supporting cast, with particularly notable performances from Kim Leigh Smith as Jean's best friend coping with domestic turmoil of her own, and Steve Totland and Alison Sie as sympathetic members of the hospital staff who rally behind Jean's efforts to buck the system that would condemn the child to bureaucratic oblivion. Kristen Brennan, Erin J. O'Brien and John Eric Montana round out the cast.

Less successful is the script's reliance on arbitrarily scrambled chronology, a trendy (and hopefully short-lived) device that adds nothing to a story that would be just as powerful told straight through from start to finish.

Philip Brandes