

CALENDAR

feature |

The Crazy Mother Love of *Emma's Child*

BY ROMI LASSALLY

After many frustrating years of trying to conceive a child of their own, Kristine Thatcher and her husband David were about to become parents. They eagerly anticipated the birth of their soon-to-be-adopted baby boy, and like most expectant parents prepared for their new addition. They decorated the nursery, lovingly washed and folded tiny baby clothes, and set out empty picture frames soon to be filled. But when the baby was born with a severe—and perhaps fatal—disability, all of their preconceptions of parenthood were challenged, and they struggled to understand the nature of the commitment they had made to the baby and to each other.

Thatcher shares much of this complex and heart-wrenching personal drama in her award-winning play, *Emma's Child*. The show, which premiered at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 1995, will make its Los Angeles debut the first week of November, coinciding with the beginning of National Adoption Month, a nationwide campaign to celebrate adoption as a positive way to build a family.

A good writer, according to Thatcher, "takes real life and embroiders it with imagination." And Thatcher does just that in *Emma's Child*, revealing many of the intimate details of her own experiences through the lives of her fictional creations, Jean and Henry Farrell and the newborn baby, Robin. Interweaving fact with fiction, Thatcher presents a play that broaches many of the complex emotional, moral and legal issues unique to adoption, while also telling a universal tale about the ferocity of a mother's love and the complicated negotiations that go on in a marriage.

Emma's Child, by Kristine Thatcher, is presented by No Title Productions. It will play at the Odyssey Theater Ensemble, 2055 S. Sepulveda Boulevard, from November 2 to December 16. Performances will be scheduled on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8pm and Sundays at 2pm. For reservations and information, call (310) 477-2055.

For more information about National Adoption Month, go to: www.adoptionmonth.calib.com and www.nacac.org.

For more information about hydrocephalus, go to www.hydrocephalus.org.

Story Rides an Emotional Roller Coaster

The story opens with the Farrells as they nervously prepare to meet a social worker planning to evaluate them as potential adoptive parents. The play then follows the Farrells' lives as they grapple with their shock, grief, and, later, fierce determination in the months following the baby's birth and his battle with a severe case of hydrocephalus—better known as water on the brain.

Before the Farrells actually meet the baby, the adoption agency urges the couple to let the baby go, and Henry, ever the pragmatist, agrees. Jean, however, much like Kristine, makes her way to the hospital at the urging of the birth mother and play's namesake, Emma.

"Like I was," confides Thatcher, "Jean is overwhelmed by her crazy mother love. She has waited so long to have a child of her own, and is so afraid that he might be the only child she has a chance to mother, that she doesn't want to waste a minute. Her heart is in the right place," says Thatcher. "She's just not thinking rationally. Henry, on the other hand, much like my husband, is more in touch with reality than his wife. He sees what raising a severely disabled child would mean to their marriage, to their finances, what their future could be like 7 to 10 years down the road."

Thatcher chooses to tell the story in a non-linear style and to carefully temper the sentimentality with her humor. "I wanted to reveal the story out of sequence so that the audience would be privy to certain information and know things before the characters do," says Thatcher. "In doing so, I hopefully create more dramatic tension."

And create more tension she does. The story shows Jean and Henry retreating further and further into their separate corners. Henry adamantly opposes the adoption—and even refuses to meet the child—and Jean becomes more and more attached to the baby, risking the pain of losing him if his condition doesn't improve and risking the possibility of losing her husband as well. The play, however,

reaches a heartbreaking yet hopeful conclusion without pushing husband or wife to make the Solomonic decision between the baby and their marriage.

In Real Life, A Happy Continuation

Without revealing too much of the play's ending, Thatcher does admit that the story concludes with events similar to her own. "In the end," she says, "the baby affected everyone who came into contact with him for the better. He helped all of us come to a greater understanding of ourselves and the nature of love. That was his greatest gift."

Today, Kristine has many other gifts in her life, both professionally and personally. She's acting in a new production in Chicago, working on a new play of her own, and excited that *Emma's Child*, now almost 10 years



Kristine and daughter, Kerry.

old, will be reaching new audiences here on the West Coast. Her life at home is more satisfying than she ever thought it would be, as the nursery is now the bedroom of her 9-year-old, adopted daughter Kerry, and the once empty picture frames are now full of the memories they've shared as a family. Nestled in the crowded bookshelves sits a special frame, one that holds a picture of a baby boy whom Kerry fondly refers to as the little brother she never met...Corey. ❧

Romi Lassally is a writer living in Los Angeles. She is a former film producer and mother of three.