

Smudge

Syzygy Theatre Group at GTC Burbank

Reviewed by Neal Weaver
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This strange and unsettling play by Rachel Axler puts an oddly comic spin on a deadly serious subject. Young married couple Colby (Heather Fox) and Nicholas (Mark Thomsen) are delighted at the prospect of producing their first child, but when the baby, Cassandra, is born she is wildly deformed and totally unresponsive—a creature more like a smudge than a child.

Colby is immediately repulsed and resentful, particularly because her doctors seem to hold her responsible for giving birth to a blob. She responds by compulsively eating massive amounts of cheesecake. Meanwhile, Nicholas is determinedly optimistic, praising the child's beauty and its one blue eye, but he isn't eager to let his braggart, bullying brother Peter (Bart Tangredi) know her true nature. And his growing anxiety about Colby's refusal to even pretend to care about or relate to the baby renders him incapable of performing his job: delivering a report to the United Nations about the demographics of the U.S. census.

Nicholas' determined optimism is soon ground down, however, unmasking his anger and resentment, while Colby moves in the opposite direction, convincing herself that Cassandra is not only responding but communicating and creating music—and she sets out to teach the child to waltz. Peter, when he finally sees the baby, is stunned into total non-reaction.

It's hard to decide what Axler's purpose is, other than describing a horrendously painful situation. The introduction of an element of fantasy (Colby's or the playwright's?) further confuses things. The comic treatment is disconcerting, and the resolutely upbeat ending seems forced and unmotivated.

Director Darin Anthony gives the piece a faithful and sometimes eloquent production, and draws fine performances from his actors. Fox makes Colby's disenchantment, and her retreat into fantasy, thoroughly convincing. Thomsen's Nicholas is acutely touching as he desperately tries to cling to his optimism and somehow teach his hapless daughter. And, against the odds, Tangredi finds a degree of raw charm in the obnoxious brother.

*Presented by Syzygy Theatre Group at GTC Burbank, 1111-B Olive Ave., Burbank.
Jan. 15–Feb. 19. Fri.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. (Also Thu., 8 p.m. Feb. 3.)*