

Smudge



How to review a show whose point you missed entirely? That's the dilemma currently faced by this reviewer in writing about Rachel Axler's *Smudge*, the latest offering by Burbank's esteemed Syzygy Theatre Group.

Having purchased a copy of Axler's one-act and read the first half of it before seeing it staged, I would have thought myself better prepared than the average theatergoer to understand and appreciate the playwright's ideas, in addition to the work of the actors, the director, and the design team. Regretfully, I must admit to having failed to grasp the writer's intent. Here's how:

Smudge's back cover blurb, as published by Samuel French, describes it as "a dark comedy about the changing face of the American family and the limits of love and cheesecake, as a hopeful young couple gives birth to a smudge." The couple are Colby and Nick (Syzygy's Heather Fox and Mark Thomsen), expectant parents who are first seen examining a small printout of Colby's latest sonogram, one which reveals not a fully formed fetus but what looks to Colby like a gingerbread baby, leading her to conclude that perhaps the sonogram is "just ... smudged." A second scene reveals the two parents looking down at their just born child, one which looks to Colby's eyes "sort of like a jellyfish."

And here's where this well-educated and well-intentioned theatergoer missed the point. *Smudge* is not, as I wrongly assumed throughout its eighty minutes, a quirky science fiction tale about a woman and her baby jelly fish (or some other sci-fi-like creature). It's about what some have called a couple's worst fear, giving birth to a seriously handicapped child, and Cassandra (as Colby and Nick name the "smudge") is in fact a severely, some would say grotesquely deformed creature of real skin and real bones.

Now this is the point where someone with a superior attitude would look this reviewer in the face and utter a condescending "Duh..." as I smack my forehead with a look of utter shame.

In my defense, since I haven't ever seriously considered the possibility of becoming a parent, the extent of an expectant father or mother's fears regarding the child growing in its mother's womb has rarely crossed my mind. Add to that the playwright's description of Cassandra as "sort of like a jellyfish." and you end up with someone who watched what was happening on stage, enjoyed the performances, appreciated the director's vision and that of the design team, and laughed at the appropriate places, yet left the theater having no idea why Axler had written *Smudge*, and wondering if even she had had any idea of what she meant to say.

My bad.

What Axler is doing in *Smudge* is taking a surreal look at how two parents would react to a child born with a single eye, without limbs, with only "a point, like a tail, or like a talon, near the bottom." Mom Colby at first refuses to have anything to do with Cassie, while Dad Nick loves her to bits, oohing and aahing and cooing things like "There's a girl. There's a girl. Who's the prettiest of all?" Soon however, the tables start to turn, as Colby begins, if not to bond, at least to connect to the infant hidden from our eyes in an old-fashioned perambulator whose many life-sustaining tubes begin to light up and flash when baby has something to communicate to her mommy. Nick meanwhile buries himself in his work, his child inexplicably silent (and flashing-lights-free) whenever Daddy is around—to Mommy's extreme consternation.

The third character in *Smudge* is Nick's go-getter of a brother Pete (Bart Tangredi), who works with Nick for the Census Bureau, has three happy healthy sons, and is the louder, more extroverted older bro Nick has probably been overshadowed by all his life. It's Pete whom their mother turns to when Nick refuses to return her calls or email her a snapshot of her granddaughter, and Pete who pesters Nick on Mom's behalf. Later, when Nick adds his own questionnaire to the Census Bureau's official one, with questions like "Would you kill a pig? If yes, continue below," it's Pete who tries to beat some sense into younger brother's head, to no avail.

Playwright Axler has drawn fire from the disabled community, who argue she is demonizing them, pandering to "every parents' greatest fear," and denying even a "smudge" like Cassie her dignity. While their reaction is understandable, I'd venture to guess that, right or wrong, most expectant parents do fear welcoming a disabled child into the world, especially one as disabled as Cassandra.

I would have enjoyed *Smudge* a good deal more had I not kept wondering throughout, "What the heck is this all about?" Had I taken Colby and Nick's situation more seriously, I would have seen a completely different play.

That being said, there was never an iota of doubt or confusion about the excellent work being done on stage. Fox has been a StageSceneLA favorite since her performance in *Syzygy's My Thing Of Love*, and she once again does a terrific job, showing us all of Colby's conflicted emotions regarding not only her child, but her marriage to Nick as well. Thomsen matches her every step of the way, first as the overeager dad, then as the census taker gone a bit bonkers. Tangredi nails the voluble, back-slapping Pete to perfection.

Director Darin Anthony once again impresses, and working here with a topnotch design team, gives *Smudge* just the right surreal feel, setting it in a sort of smudged limbo quite in contrast to the New York production's apparently more literal scenic design. Here set designer Sara Ryung Clement, sound designer Joseph "Sloe" Slawinski, and lighting designer Jaymi Lee Smith create a sort of otherworldly world of hospital curtains and greenish-bluish lights and Beatles melodies played as if from a child's music box.

Smudge's West Coast premiere is produced by John Schumacher and stage managed by Rachel Levy. Katherine Bedoian is production manager.

Sadly, time restrictions do not permit me to check out *Smudge* a second time, this time with eyes wide open to its author's intent. My advice to anyone seeing it (and it *is* worth seeing) is simple. Take Colby and Pete's situation seriously, laugh as much as you like (because *Smudge* is a comedy, albeit a very dark one), and savor the work both onstage and off. You'll likely leave the theater considerably less confused and considerably more satisfied than did this misguided reviewer.

Syzygy Theatre Group at GTC Burbank, 1111-B West Olive Avenue, Burbank.

www.syzygytheatre.org

--Steven Stanley
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Photo: Katherine Bedoian