

New play mines humor from the pains and pleasures of childbirth: [METRO Edition]

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Director Nancy Bagshaw binds her talented cast to [Pamela Nettleton]'s zany purpose. She sets the irreverent tone from the opening moment as Ella Fitzgerald croons "I've Got You Under My Skin." [Molly Atwood] gives an appealing performance as [Martha], who spends much of her time on the phone communicating with her children at home. She is concerned that her husband, who has attended all her previous births, doesn't appear for this one. [Beth Gilleland] gives a wonderful performance as [Missy], a lovely airhead. [Susan Lynn Scott] is the least well-known member of the cast, but that shouldn't last long. She gives a delightful performance as [Chris], a tough yuppie with a no-nonsense view of life and birth. Osborne is appropriately nutty as Nurse.

FULL TEXT

Humor is where you find it, and in Pamela Nettleton's often hilarious, promising new play, "The Labor Room," you can find it in the most unlikely places.

For 90 minutes Nettleton takes her audience at Stage One Collaboration through the painful prebirth contractions of three women inhabiting a hospital room while a hypochondriacal nurse looks after their needs and her own.

The play, Nettleton's first, has plenty of flaws but it also reveals its author as a frequently deft purveyor of Simonesque one-line humor and a promising creator of distinct stage personalities. It certainly brought laughter on opening night as Nettleton mined an irreverent view of childbirth to considerable effect.

On their surfaces, the three laboring women are clearly distinguishable from one another. Martha, played by Molly Atwood, has already had five children and intends this to be her last. Missy (Beth Gilleland) and Chris (Susan Lynn Scott) are each having their first child, but that is where their similarities end. Missy is a happy homemaker, with a clean mouth, a prized husband and an inspirational view of the birth process. Chris is an upwardly mobile professional who only left her job when her day was interrupted by "a burst of water and a shriek of pain." Her vocabulary is scented with eau de lockerroom and she chose her child's father for his physical qualities, not her attachment to him.

While the children within them move inexorably closer to the external world, the women chatter, sharing their differences and similarities, slowly revealing problems, qualities and needs that were not originally visible. All the while the nurse, identified only as Nurse Nurse and played with antic enthusiasm by Merle Osborne, bumbles around complaining of bunions and backaches, occasionally breaking into song or dance.

Director Nancy Bagshaw binds her talented cast to Nettleton's zany purpose. She sets the irreverent tone from the opening moment as Ella Fitzgerald croons "I've Got You Under My Skin." Atwood gives an appealing performance as Martha, who spends much of her time on the phone communicating with her children at home. She is concerned

that her husband, who has attended all her previous births, doesn't appear for this one. Gilleland gives a wonderful performance as Missy, a lovely airhead. Scott is the least well-known member of the cast, but that shouldn't last long. She gives a delightful performance as Chris, a tough yuppie with a no-nonsense view of life and birth. Osborne is appropriately nutty as Nurse.

While Nettleton has a good ear for dialogue and bright humorous ripostes, she is also clearly a novice at the craft of playwriting. Structurally the play is a prisoner of its single-room setting and its limited number of characters. Two soon-to-be fathers wait outside the room and are occasionally addressed but never seen. These attempts at communication are awkward and unconvincing. There are also a couple of moments that don't fit the play's realistic mode and seem tossed in because the playwright didn't want a couple of gems to be lost. One is the Nurse's song and dance, which is indeed delightful but jarringly out of tune with what has gone before. Similarly, Chris' witty description of her first glimpse of childbirth is a fine moment, but delivering it as a monologue to the audience breaks the play's symmetry.

A more major fault is one you find every night if you watch sitcoms on TV. While the characters are distinct and clearly from different backgrounds, when they banter, the jokes come from a common well. It is Nettleton spilling out the one-liners, not her characters.

Stage One's performance space is a street-level room in First Trust Center, the restored Burlington Northern building in downtown St. Paul. The theater space is very workable, with a raised proscenium stage faced by about 120 seats set on risers from which it is easy to hear and see the stage activity.

Illustration

PHOTO

DETAILS

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