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The Play About the Baby

Little is certain (not even the baby)

By Barry Pineo

Edward Albee is this country's greatest living playwright, and not simply because his works have won three Pulitzer prizes and assorted Tony Awards. Albee appropriated the absurdism that came to the fore in Europe in the Forties and Fifties and married it to the theme of family, thus giving it a uniquely American twist. While most of his plays are built around some kind of story, in Albee's work linear storytelling is secondary to thematic concerns and wry, witty word games – distinguishing characteristics that place Albee in the center of modern theatrical innovation but squarely outside the mainstream. Moreover, Albee's is a theatre of ideas, not a theatre of realism, making his work even less accessible to general audiences.

So kudos to the Coda Theater Project for bringing Albee's *The Play About the Baby* to Austin. This really is a play about the baby, but the baby, as such, never appears. In fact, I'm not even certain there *is* a baby. Sure, in the beginning the Girl tells the Boy that she's going to have the baby, and they both leave the stage, and it certainly sounds like someone's having a baby, and they come back with a bundle. And sure, the Boy and the Girl constantly discuss the baby, as do the Man and the Woman, who may or may not know the Boy and the Girl and may or may not want to take the baby (if there is a baby). Little is certain, except for this: It's a funny play, and in its evocation of a traumatic dream state, it's terribly, horribly frightening.

Coda is probably the biggest little company you may never have heard of. It's currently in its second season, but its first producing only at play! Theatre. "We were looking for a venue for *The House of Yes*, and Latifah Taormina at ACoT pointed us to play!," says Coda artistic director Kate Meehan, who helms this production. "We met Lisa Scheps [play!'s managing director], and she and I and our former board president Josie Collier totally hit it off. Lisa had just started culinary arts school, so she wasn't going to be using the theatre as often as she had originally thought. And she liked us." Scheps must have liked them a lot because she asked Coda to become the theatre's resident producing company.

As interesting as Albee's script is Coda's concept for the production's set design: an installation created collaboratively by a half-dozen visual artists. "One of our goals is to work with as many different artists as possible, to try and incorporate their work into our shows," Meehan says. "And this play is such a blank canvas artistically, [that] it's a great opportunity for a director, a great opportunity for actors, and a really great opportunity for some of these really talented artists that we keep running into."

And a great opportunity for Austin to see a play by an underproduced modern American master.

The Play About the Baby runs July 13-Aug. 5, Thursday-Saturday, 8pm, at play! Theatre, 1204 Cedar. For more information, visit www.codatheater.org.

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