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Arts & Entertainment:

Central Works Stages Biting Biological Satire

By Ken Bullock, *Special to the Planet*
Thursday October 29, 2009

"I can't believe you'd use that ugly, demeaning term, biological!" snaps Jess (Kendra Lee Oberhauser)—"a walking case of nurture over nature" and the white-clad bride-to-be—at her mentor and self-adopted mother, Gender Studies Department Chair Dede (Gwen Loeb), who is, in fact, her biological mother. Dropping the ugly term again, Dede lets her own first-generation feminist Mom (Jan Zvaifler) have it: "You forgot to mention, biology is unfair!"

Such are the uproariously pathetic moments in *Blastosphere!*, Central Works' satiric staging of Aaron Loeb and Geetha Reddy's skewed tale of do-it-yourself social—and biological—engineering, in which the attempt to build "a four-headed family and baby makes five" brings a kind of coitus-free reworking of Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice to polymorphously perverse fruition.

After a funny three-part, arm-in-arm strut—or slither—down the aisle to give away Jess to Pachelbel, Dede and her very significant other, poet Carol (Cathleen Riddley), call a summit conference at Jess and Steve's (Mick Mize) wedding party to declare they intend "to have a baby with your genetic material before you have a chance to," employing a very personal donation from Carol's cousin, Michael Jordan, with notorious Dr. Pinto (Mick Mize again) candling Jess's egg.

In the background plays "Backdoor Man," "the Howlin' Wolf song currently being massacred by your wedding singer" (Jess opines it's really about "butt-sex"). As the good doctor floridly declares, invoking a sweeping, backhand vision of generation, "And you ask if you can carry your mother's child? You already have!"

The sharp, relentless script gives director Molly Aaronson-Gelb and the cast the opportunity to bring off scenes such as the "split-screen" that alternates between the two couples in a verbal and comedic pas de deux over the mothers' treatment plan, ending with a side-by-side, literally cheek-to-jowl pair of hip injections.

The players are droll in character—and out of sorts—as a dysfunctional, over-extended family of their own making, with dual roles by two members of the cast, Mize (Steve and Dr. Pinto) and Zvaifler (a funny triad, actually: a priest unctuously intoning Corinthians at the service, and Mom, as well as brusque, frosty Dr. Kylie), which give an air of farce to the mushrooming proceedings, medical, legal, economic and spiritual.

Archness is heaped upon archness with lines like: "Today is Embryo Christmas!" or "It's my egg; it's really none of your business!"—or Dede's enthusiastic picture of Jess: "She's not just the Ukraine, the ultimate breadbasket—she's the Walmart of fertility!"—all scathingly accompanied by Gregory Scharpen's demonic soundtrack, which pokes even more humor into the already cockeyed action. The action peaks over and over: Mom telling Dede, "You don't need eggs; you

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need to lose weight!" (and, presciently, "Just because you want it doesn't mean you deserve it.")—or with Dede enthusing to Jess, "It's the chance to have the daughter I've always wanted," and Jess replying, "Well ... I'm your daughter!"

Blastosphere! represents another facet of the success of Central Works' own collaborative system of developing plays, in which playwrights, cast and production team collaborate to build the whole show up from an original idea.

As always, fine stagecraft in the intimate Berkeley City Club salon-turned-theater makes the company's low prices and sliding scale an unbeatable deal, especially with such blisteringly hysterical satire at close range. Coming up on its 20th season, Central Works is a gem-like Berkeley institution that goes on renewing itself.

BLASTOSPHERE!

Central Works

Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m.

through Nov. 22

Berkeley City Club, 2315 Durant Ave. Tickets: \$25-\$14 sliding scale at the door, \$22 at www.centralworks.com

Pay-what-you-can, Oct. 29, Nov. 5.

Reservations 558-1381.

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