

A Dab of Fantasy for a Comedy of Manners

By MARGO JEFFERSON

Between years of television comedies and years of Woody Allen films, the winning vagaries of middle-class couples are an inexhaustible — and exhausting — subject. Writers who choose the form must find a new approach (a different kind of couple and setting) or a fresh take on an old approach (familiar elements in unexpected combinations).

Erin Courtney adds fantasy to a screwball-tinged comedy of manners in "Demon Baby," the Clubbed Thumb company's production at the Ohio Theater in SoHo through Jan. 31. The manners are those of successful young married couples. The comic tension? The longstanding one set off whenever eager, impulsive Americans meet imperiously confident English men and women. Here the Americans abroad are Art (Patrick McNulty) and Wren (Heidi Schreck). The move to London means a promotion for him, but her future is shakier. She writes children's books and has one elusive freelance assignment. As she weakly puts it, "I write things and draw."

They are in their stylishly sterile apartment, all pale tones, strict lines and window. "So American," Cat says in a harsh loud nasal voice that Nina Hellman makes both aggressive and languid.

Wren wears schoolgirl skirts and sweaters and an awkward cloche. She hunches her shoulders, nervously folds her arms, shuts herself out of the apartment and can't get back in without help from a construction worker even though the door isn't locked. "Be a good girl, then," he says, his voice like a growl.

That's exactly what she can't be. But she doesn't know how to be a bad girl either. And since she doesn't want to be in London at all, she quickly becomes agoraphobic. Art assures her that she once liked walks and museums. People stare, she answers; they know you don't belong here. He brings winning little gifts that she ignores. He wants her to feel better, but he's at work all day.

Ms. Courtney is deliberately updating a familiar struggle: the busy husband's efforts to smooth things over; the unhappy wife's refusal to be consoled. She supplies the right modern additions, too. Wren's editor, Alan, is all prig on the surface and a bit of a sybarite on the side. (This mix is nicely caught in both the dialogue and Gibson Frazier's performance.) The two young children of Sally and Charles (Polly Lee and Mark Shanahan) are clearly valued more as ideal photo images than as living creatures.

The playwright keeps Wren's desperation comic by making her a



Arne Jokela

Heidi Schreck and Glenn Fleshler during a scene in "Demon Baby."

DEMON BABY

By Erin Courtney; directed by Ken Rus Schmoll; set by David Evans Morris; lighting by Garin Marshall; costumes by Kirche Leigh Zeile; sound by Michael Newman; assistant director, David Myers; stage manager, Leigh Goldenberg; assistant stage manager, Kelly Blackwell. Presented by Clubbed Thumb. At the Ohio Theater, 66 Wooster Street, SoHo.

WITH: Heidi Schreck (Wren), Patrick McNulty (Art), Nina Hellman (Cat), Gibson Frazier (Alan), Leo Kittay (Workman), Polly Lee (Sally), Mark Shanahan (Charles) and Glenn Fleshler (Demon Baby).

The big guy in the pointy hat shakes up the status quo.

whimsical screwball heroine. Comedy swings into fantasy when we see Wren lying flat on her back with an enormous man in a voluminous red robe and a tall cone-shaped hat sitting on her chest. He looks like a garden gnome, she tells an unbelieving Alan.

He is the demon baby, and Glenn Fleshler makes him a mass of gleeful taunts and insinuation. His taunts are the voice of Wren's psyche. ("Get up," he orders. "We're going home." Oh, but what's that large

ugly mole on her face? "I can see your capillaries," he adds. His tales are those of a ghoulish child or of a children's book writer gone wrong.

The demon baby turns Wren loose in her small circle of power couples; she stops being a recluse and becomes a guided missile. If you remember the movie "Topper," the principle's the same: a supernatural character shakes up a status quo that is all routine and casual hypocrisy. Everyone comes out better for it despite a few injuries and losses.

Those injuries and losses are real. Emotionally, though, they don't signify much, and I think they're meant to as the play moves toward its close. That is when the well-wrought structure starts to wobble; the quick talk with its zany undertones doesn't accommodate the sudden moments of forthright seriousness. Ken Rus Schmoll's directing is swift but never rushed; he knows where to pause, slow the tempo down, let silence and physical action take over. Part of the problem lies in Wren's character: as written and played, she is too much like her name: fragile, cannily elusive, prone to flights of fancy. We are supposed to feel a bit too entranced by her, and we end up being somewhat wearied by her.

Nothing is harder for any writer than an ending, and this play's doesn't altogether hold. But most of what goes before does. It is a small, well-made, oddball comedy.

THEATER

London Sprawling

By JEREMY McCARTER

Anxiety sufferers will find much to admire in Erin Courtney's "Demon Baby," and not just anxiety sufferers. Wren, a young American, follows her husband Art to London, where he has taken a swank new finance job. Though she's supposed to explore the city and write and illustrate a relocation guide for children, she can't work up the nerve. Mostly she sits around the flat, eating cookies. That's when the Demon Baby arrives.

As depictions of anxiety go, you could do a lot worse than showing a woman lying flat on her back being straddled by a man-sized, goateed garden gnome in a red pointy hat. Wren says it's a nice day. "Bad things happen on nice days," he replies.

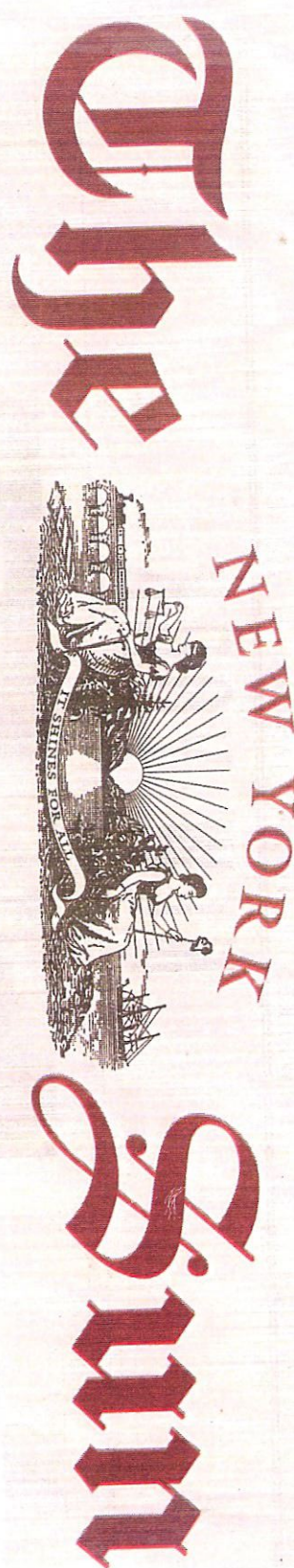
It's a credit to Ms. Courtney, and the production by the downtown company Clubbed Thumb, that you don't balk at these David Lynch tableaux. Unnerving notes can be heard from the first moment. Cat, a hard-charging co-worker of Art's who seems to hail from somewhere in Mitteleuropa, shows the couple around their new flat. (The splendid scenic design is by David Evans Morris.) At first the décor looks blandly tasteful, but doesn't that wall leaning over the sofa seem a little perilous? The curiously exotic skyline (more Istanbul than Islington) and the mélange of onstage accents make London seem a kind of Anglophone Babel. The cumulative effect, I assure you, is deeply weird.

As Wren, Heidi Schreck is affecting amid all the foreignness; she looks sad in her bones. In a particularly unhappy moment, she drapes everything in the flat in white linens, including herself. Art (Patrick McNulty) reacts with disbelief: "I had no idea we bought this many sheets." Wren, hurting for attention, decides to seduce her editor, Alan. The best strategy she can devise is delivering his gin-and-tonic stark naked. Unlucky girl: He'd rather sleep with her husband. And the Demon Baby keeps coming

For half an hour or so, the show could scarcely be better: It's stylish, darkly funny, and original. But as Wren loses her grip, so does the play. What had been a story about the solitary troubles of one anxious woman grows diffuse, less compelling. The Demon Baby starts to afflict other people, in other guises. None of these interactions have nearly the punch of Wren's. You wish director Ken Rus Schmoll could have reined in the play's wanderlust. Failing that, you wish he could have relieved it. There are some inspired moments in his staging, like a bit of pantomime on the apartment balcony, but the seduction scene is not the only one that seems incompletely realized.

Even in its wobbly final stretch, the show boasts a cast full of strong performances, particularly from Gibson Frazier as the sparkling Alan and Nina Hellman as the prowling Cat. Glenn Fleshler gives the Demon Baby a sprightly charm. He's the sort of character you'd enjoy chatting up from afar, where you could be sure he wouldn't pounce on your solar plexus.

As depictions of anxiety go, you could do a lot worse than showing a woman lying flat on her back as she's straddled by a garden gnome.



Time Out

New York

January 22-29, 2004

Demon Baby

By Erin Courtney. Dir. Ken Rus Schmoll. With ensemble cast. Ohio Theatre (see Off-Off Broadway).

The problem with so many plays aspiring to surrealism is that they're, well, too unrealistic. Not so Erin Courtney's *Demon Baby*, a wryly amusing tale of expats getting stranger in a strange land. Adrift after her husband's job lands them in an arid, elegant London flat, American-born writer-illustrator Wren (Heidi Schreck) is afflicted with an overwhelming reluctance to leave the apartment, despite the well-meant advice of her editor (Gibson Frazier), her husband (Patrick McNulty) and a motley crew of acquaintances. Just when she's reached the napping-on-the-floor stage, Wren's free-floating anxiety coalesces into an all-too-corporeal middle-aged man (Glenn Fleshler), inexplicably dressed like a garden gnome, who sits on her supine body looking like a refugee from a Richard Foreman play. The bizarre apparition querulously advises her: "He doesn't love you. Hit him. Leave him!"

Under Ken Rus Schmoll's deft direction, the play slides almost imperceptibly from sardonic comedy of manners to bizarre nightmare. Schreck combines seraphic prettiness with a plangent undercurrent of distress: She's a screwball beauty whose daffiness is a benign form of profound anomie. McNulty excels as the unexpectedly sympathetic breadwinner; Frazier's fickle editor may give metrosexuality a bad name; and



SCARE TACTICS Neurotic housewife Heidi Schreck gets a terrible fright.

Nina Hellman, as the braying, chain-smoking family friend, Cat, walks off with every scene she's in.

But it's Courtney's nuanced script that allows the actors to shine in this excellent Clubbed Thumb production. Her lighthearted dark comedy is powered not by tired truisms of a disaffected wife's psyche, but by seismic social disconnection. In the end, Wren's marriage may be based on nothing stronger than the uneasy bonds and unlikely friendships of the expat community, of being in the same place at the same time.—Jessica Branch

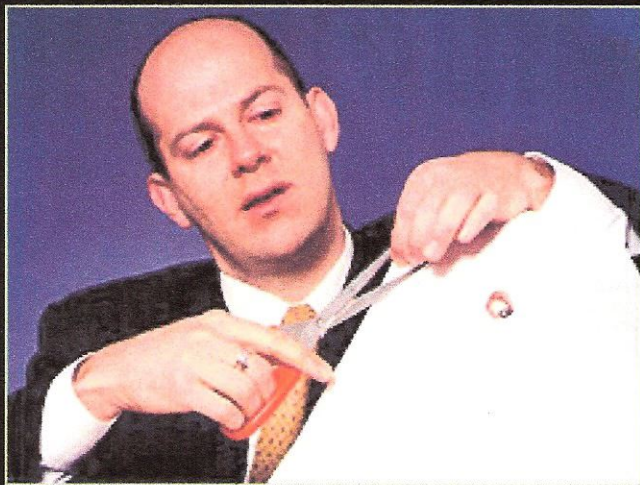


DEMON BABY

Clubbed Thumb's production of Erin Courtney's *Demon Baby* was such a charming surprise last year that they are bringing back "an enlarged version" for a three-week run. "It wasn't complete in the author's mind, so she continued the story," director Ken Rus Schmoll says.

"The previous ending is the center of the revised play." The eight-character comedy is about an American couple, transplanted to London because of the husband's job, who find themselves, in Schmoll's words, "out of the social milieu they're used to." Transition is necessary and the play is about how they handle the changes. "At first, the

husband is focused on his job and the wife doesn't have much to do and consequently she experiences a cultural shock which takes on a supernatural form," Schlom notes, hence, the title. Even though the play centers on a single couple, with the additional text incorporating the husband more into the play's journey, Courtney clearly is focusing on the painful/comic side of human truth with a larger scope. "The sense of the play is about when people are thrown into a different situation, questions of stability are thrown into relief," Schmoll feels. "Because of one's desire to grow, change is juxtaposed with one's desire to have some consistency in life." The Ohio Theatre, 66 Wooster St., (212) 802-8007. Jan. 9-31. Thurs.-Sun. 8 p.m. Mon., Jan. 19 & 26, 8 p.m. \$10 & \$15.



PATRICK McNULTY AND HEIDI SCHRECK

PHOTO BY NICK ANDREWS

the village VOICE

JANUARY 14–20, 2004

SIGHTLINES



Photograph by Nick Andrews

Expat in extremis: Heidi Schreck

DEMON BABY

By Erin Courtney
Ohio Theatre
66 Wooster Street
212.668.4444

Whether or not April's there, it is fine to be in England—particularly in the sun-drenched London loft to which your husband's work has brought you. But writer-illustrator Wren (the winning Heidi Schreck) can't adjust. She fears taking the tube and deems English money unfathomable. She stays indoors, pacing, brooding, eating "biscuits," and finds herself paralyzed by the titular *Demon Baby* (Glenn Fleshler), an outsize garden gnome who sits atop her chest.

Erin Courtney's superbly uneasy comedy physicalizes, most unusually, the anxiety of displacement. Wren's husband tries to explain

the *Demon Baby* away as a sleep disorder, but Wren knows better. Sleep disorders don't straddle your chest and whisper absurdities and suspicions. "Where's your passport?" murmurs the *Demon Baby* insinuatingly. "You have to leave." Whether Wren is mad or the *Demon Baby* exists is a pleasant conundrum.

The puzzle grows less enjoyable when, in the play's latter half, the *Demon Baby* loses its specificity, appearing to other characters as a sort of ventriloquist or passerby. Courtney seems to have lost control of her creature. This decentering—of metaphor, of theme, of tone—may be intentional, but it's also frustrating. If they're to improve the landscape, garden gnomes ought to stay where you put them. ALEXIS SOLOSKI

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NEW YORK

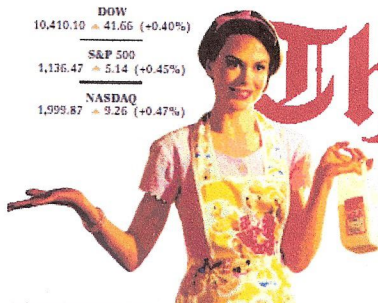
The Sun



TODAY
Sunny/cloudy. High 74°

SATURDAY
Sunny. High 74°

SUNDAY
Mostly sunny. High 74°



Pleasantly Bonkers
*'Stepford Wives' a
Loveable Bomb, p. 19*

Brilliant Brancusi
*The Great Sculptor
Receives His Due, p. 21*



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THEATER

Is There a Patient in The House?

By JEREMY M c CARTER

"I am awake in a dream." Try wrapping your brain around that one. The line pops up near the start of Rinne Groff's enigmatic new play, "Of a White Christmas." Diane has an unhappy life: a brittle bureaucrat husband, a druggie stepdaughter, some kind of environmental disaster ravaging the world outside. But in her dreams, she is an architect, building houses and cleaning up a ruined world.

The play runs this week as part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks series. At its best, it teases the line between dreams and consciousness, as when Diane defends her dream work to her husband: "Just because you can't experience it doesn't mean it doesn't exist." Trip Cullman sensitively directs a capable ensemble. Susan Pourfar is particularly strong as the hurting, sarcastic daughter.

The last few scenes don't cohere as well as the first few — there's a disconnected quality to them — but Ms. Groff has hit on a provocative way to treat this material. She is part of a wave of adventurous downtown playwrights — Melissa James Gibson, Anne Washburn, Erin Courtney — whose every show merits attention.

NEW YORK

JUNE 7, 2004

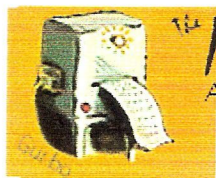
THEATER

EDITED BY BORIS KACHKA



OPENING GROFF OFF BROADWAY

Rinne Groff's plays—about mathematical theorems, air-traffic controllers, TV-set technology—are a good deal more research-intensive than your average downtown fare. But *Of a White Christmas*, the Groff work that opens the main stage for Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2004 on June 6, is both simpler and more surreal. "I was really interested in lucid dreaming—it's a skill you can develop," says Groff, whose study materials included *The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep*. In a sparse, environmentally degraded future, an unemployed suburban wife dreams herself, *Matrix*-like, into an alternate universe where she toils happily at sustainable architecture even though her husband (Ken Marks, pictured) works for polluters. "It's kind of a wacky play, as I'm sure you've gathered," says Groff. Though she co-founded the similarly wacky theater company Elevator Repair Service, it was Clubbed Thumb that first staged her work, and it was at the company's four-day New Play Boot Camp that Groff worked that line between wackiness and realism. The constant script revision, though, may have worked against Groff's environmental concerns: "They give you a director, a stage manager, and a printer, and the printer is really important." (See "Off-Off Broadway.")



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Advance News of What's Playing on New York's Stages

Theatre Dance Performance Art Music
Alternative and International Theatre

ROBERT HICKS

WHITE CHRISTMAS IN UZBEKISTAN

The Ohio Theatre, 66 Wooster St. between Spring and Broome Sts.

June 6-8, 10-12, 8:00 pm

\$16/ \$12 for students for mainstage productions. Thumbscrews is \$5 and all other Summerworks 2004 events are free.

SmartTix at (212) 868-4444 or go to www.smarttix.com. Or buy tickets at the box office at The Ohio Theatre, 66 Wooster St. For more information, go to www.clubbedthumb.org

Reviewed by Robert Hicks on June 7, 2004

Rinne Groff's new surreal comedy, "Of a White Christmas," imagines a futuristic domicile in which the only escape from toxins polluting the environment lies in one's ability to create a fantastical dream world.

Director Trip Cullman culls humor, menace and dreamy hope from the excellent Clubbed Thumb cast in this experimental, intellectual drama. Diane (Meg MacCary) is the dream architect married to Tom (Ken Marks), a practical businessman who secretly devises a Lakefront Toxic Management Plan. Tom's daughter Sallie (Susan Pourfar) enlists her Uzbek Muslim boyfriend Bahktiyor (Derek Lucci) to draw Diane's blood sample so she can pass her drug test to qualify for certified housing. Her dad threw her out due to her drug abuse. Now she lives in a squat with four drug users. "And that's how I'm supposed to stay clean," she tells Diane with a touch of irony. A psycho-sexual dream interlude finds Bahktiyor selling tranquilizers to Tom, becoming Diane's incubus and tackling the formidable responsibilities of landscape artist in her dream world. He feels empowered to reaffirm life.

Groff inventively employs humor and wacky dream sequences to draw a parallel between the horrors of an imbalanced ecosystem and the psychological turmoil of an unbalanced marriage and family life. Both threaten a healthy equilibrium and the preservation of life. Salvation lies in our capacity to imagine a different world. Human imagination taken to an extreme, though, can also destroy life.[Hicks]

Show Guide

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East
Off-Off Broadway July 01, 2004

Those Who Can, Do

Reviewed By Karl Levett

"Those Who Can, Do"

Theater: Ohio Theatre
Location: 66 Wooster St.,
NYC
Starts: June 20, 2004
Ends: June 26, 2004
Presented by: Clubbed
Thumb as part of
Summerworks 2004

The title of Brighde Mullins' play comes from the old putdown of teaching, one that originated with Bernard Shaw: "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." The play's heroine – and she is indeed that – is Ann Marie Burke (Maria Striar), who gives up her well-paid job in advertising to pursue teaching. Trailing poetry and ideals, she finds herself at Staten Island Community College declaring, "The mere act of teaching means wishing the world well." As she dispenses Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, disillusionment comes quickly, first in the form of her by-the-book supervisor, Marion (Irene McDonnell), and then via her real nemesis, Celia (Patricia Buckley), a mentally disturbed student who disrupts every class. The 90-minute, intermissionless drama soon dispenses with the general world of teaching as it spins into a haunted struggle between naive Ann Marie and idiot savant Celia.

Telling the story in multiple sound-bite scenes – some of alarming brevity – playwright Mullins displays a strong sense of characterization that makes all three protagonists convincingly real. Thus the conflict of characters commences most promisingly. The play's resolution, however, while it might echo reality, lacks dramatic structure, so that the events just dribble away to a didactic conclusion. The play is the final presentation of three mainstage productions in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2004, and here is being given its first airing. With tightening and a focused finale, it might give Mullins' positive talents a chance to shine.

The all-female cast, directed by Maria Mileaf, is deftly pleasing. With authority, Striar easily carries the piece, a rational being in a mad world. Buckley's Celia, with her crazily wise pronouncements, rings disarmingly true, while McDonnell is able to squeeze a touch of pathos into her uptight but amorous supervisor. In dual roles, Brienin Bryant and Pamela Gray do well, especially Gray's attractively nuanced psychiatrist.



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